



Migration Students' Educational Biographies

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Abstract

We wish to highlight the Norwegian educational system in a multilingual and multicultural perspective, based on individual minority student's own experiences, thoughts and reflections. In the sample of students we have used the following criteria: We wanted to hear the stories of students from various parts of the world, students in various professional education programs, as well as students who moved to Norway at different times during their education. Some of the informants had to change languages repeatedly during their school history. The study uses material from semi-structured interviews/conversations with eight minority students at one university college. In the interviews, we focus on the following issues:

- *What are the challenges they have faced at various levels of education, and what factors do they experience as essential to their linguistic and educational journey through different school levels?*
 - *To what extent have they been able to utilize their previous linguistic, academic and cultural resources in their studies in Norway, and what are their reflections on their own multilingual and multicultural capital?*
 - *What experiences do they have with different teaching methods in higher education, and how do they think that the university college can facilitate the efforts of multilingual students in a better way?*
- In the lecture, we will present some of the educational biographies and discuss the factors that appear most important in terms of making it possible for migrant students to succeed in Norway. We also discuss to what extent such narratives can be a useful teaching tool, in the sense that teachers may use personal learning stories as a foundation for relevant teaching and good learning.*

1. The ideology of the Norwegian school system

For the last 150 years in Norway, politicians have used the school system as a political tool for shaping the society. The Norwegian school system has been through several reforms through which different groups of the population have merged by way of attending the same schools. First, the rich and the poor students – the «bourgeoisie» and the «common» people – were joined in a compulsory primary school. Then in the middle of the 1900s, students from rural communities were granted the same rights to education as students from the urban communities. Next, the process of giving boys and girls the same kind of education has been very long. Boys and girls have had the same rights to education, yet the last separate school for boys and girls in Norway did not close down until 1974. During the 1980s, the state-run system with separate schools responsible for special education was scaled back, and was formally abolished in 1992. One school for all children - the inclusive school - was born, with all its challenges for both students, teachers and parents. The law still gives each child or student in Norway the right to a learning situation that is suited to their abilities and their possibilities for development, and this type of education geared toward individual needs and abilities is to be offered at the nearest, local governmental school.

2. Immigration and education

The last twenty years globalization processes have led to new challenges in education in Norway. Many students have a cultural and linguistic background that is quite different from that of traditional Norwegian students. Educational attainment varies much according to country background. Immigrants aged 30-44 years from the Philippines, Poland, Russia, India, China and Iran, for instance, have on average a higher level of educational attainment than the average among all people in Norway. Russian immigrants have completed long tertiary education; this is more than three times as much as for ethnic Norwegians. A third of all Thais, Turks, and Pakistanis have only completed primary education (SSB). Many non-western women are not part of the education system. While women from western countries on average have a higher level of education than men, there is an opposite tendency among immigrants from some non-western countries; 42 percent of the women from The Philippines have tertiary education, but only 9.5 percent of the women from Thailand. The portion that has completed



primary and secondary education is close to the level among non-immigrants 16-24 years old (SSB). These figures draw a complex picture and indicate both large opportunities and challenges concerning immigrant students. To continue the history of using school as a means to develop equality and democracy, Norway has to succeed in creating a good, multicultural school.

3. Multilingual perspectives

In a linguistic perspective we might say that there is a gap between what researchers say about bilingualism and how educational policy authorities handle and facilitate the immigrant students' bilingual development. Since the 1960s, most research on bilingualism agree upon the linguistic and cognitive advantages of being bilingual (Cummins 2000, Baker 2006, Barac & Bialystok 2012), the importance of having a solid first language (L1) to develop the second language (L2) well, and the interdependence between first and second language skills (Cummins 2000). This is summarized and empirically explored by the large study of Thomas and Collier (2001) where they found that strong bilingual programs were the most effective way of educating language minority students, and the only way for minority students to catch up with the majority students' head start. Few policy makers have followed the invitations inherent in the conclusions of Thomas and Collier's study.

In Norway, few minority students are given opportunities to develop and receive instructions in their mother tongue. Albeit the national curriculum assigns a positive value to multilingualism, this value is only emphasized in terms of learning foreign languages. However, the curriculum is silent about the minority-language students' actual bilingualism in L1 and L2. Minority students' mother tongue skills have no autonomous value, and mother tongue support is nothing you can claim in order to preserve and develop the minority language. This support is only linked to missing skills in L2.

An essential part of the migration biography is that the student becomes aware of and retells the story of his or her bilingualism: how did the student acquire and learn L2, from what age, how and to what purposes does he use the different languages; is L2 acquired in addition to L1, or at the expense of L1; what are the benefits of speaking different languages; what is the best way of learning a language; with which language does he or she identify and so on. By working with these issues, we assume that minority students will be more aware (and proud) of their total language resources (and all that this entails), and that teachers will gain more knowledge about the same in order to use this in their planning, facilitating and scaffolding teaching.

4. Transnational identities

Where people earlier could experience a close connection between geography and their own culture, the globalized world brings along the development of a "transnational identity, where a person's picture of the world rests on the person's links to more than one place" (Kjelstadli, 2007).

The challenge for teachers will then be to contribute to a situation where the students, regardless of cultural background, are experiencing support in their efforts to put all their cultural capital in use to obtain the necessary social competence and knowledge to succeed in the process of learning and socialization in their new homeland. The foundation for creating a functional identity in this situation, is that the child meets respect for his/hers personal history, and is supported in the attempts to acquire the new cultural codes. The children must understand themselves before they can understand the world, the same way as the teacher must know the student's personal history in order to understand his/hers actions in the learning situation. Clandinine & Connelly (2000) claim that to study education means to study experience, and according to Dewey the study of education is the study of life.

5. The status of minority students in research

There has been done a lot of research on challenges for minority students at different educational levels in Norway, but this research has largely been problem-oriented, such as minority students with lower score on various tests, minority students struggling more with reading, math, science, different genres etc. In this perspective, the minority students have not normally been presented as autonomous subjects. This tendency has persisted, despite the fact that minority students in several ways are a very interesting and diverse group of students, with resources that probably can increase the quality of the learning environment for all students. The level of ambition and aspiration for minority students is significantly higher than what is normally expressed by majority students with the same background (Norwegian Official Report, NOR 2010: 7). Empirical studies tell us that minority students consistently spend more time on homework, and that they more often choose educational programs in upper secondary school which provide access to higher education. Moreover, minority students are more often encouraged by parents to seek higher education than majority students, and an increasing



proportion of students in higher education in Norway have a minority background. But here we of course find large differences, both among migration groups and individuals.

6. The biographies – some samples

In this study we want to highlight the Norwegian educational system in a multilingual and multicultural perspective, based on individual minority students' own experiences. Our study has eight participants, 2 male and 6 female. The age at arrival varied from 5 to 28 years, and they came from Albanian, Kurdistan (3), Afghanistan (2), Ukraine and Greece. One had done all his schooling in Norway while others met the Norwegian system in late primary or secondary school. Two participants had university studies in their homeland before attending university college in Norway.

For all the participants this was the first time their "educational biographies" had been presented cohesively. They were pleased to participate in the project, and to share their experiences and reflections on their migration and their way into the Norwegian educational system and language. In the conversations and by telling their stories, new thoughts, connections and ideas emerged. Some of them caught sight of recurring strategies and behavioral patterns in meeting new schools, new educational challenges and so on during the interviews. All of them were and had been very positive to learn and develop their second language, but their attitudes towards preserving and developing their mother tongue varied. All the participants use more than one language in daily life, but the dominant language use outside school depends largely on arrival age. The participants from Afghanistan and Kurdistan had shifted school language and dominant language two or three times. Participants who had arrived during primary and secondary school, had different experiences in the degree to which they could take advantage of schooling from their home country. One of them says: "I had no benefit from earlier schooling at all when I started in 5th grade in Norway. It had nothing to do with each other. It was a different world: the system itself is completely different". It is quite common that the participants that arrived early, had little or no benefit from earlier schooling. In addition, multilingual and multicultural competences from non-western countries have low status in the Norwegian society and education. Migration from non-western countries often has the consequence that the mother tongue becomes a private, oral, family language.

Stereotypes and fellow students' attitudes inhibit inclusion and progress, according to some of the participants. Some had problems with lower status in students' group work, or ethnic Norwegian students withdrawing from groups with two or three minority speaking students. Complaining and grumbling from majority speaking students were experienced as very demotivating.

It is not always necessary with large changes in the whole educational system to promote a more inclusive classroom for migration students. Several participants emphasized the importance of a caring teacher who sees the student as an individual, and not a representative of something, a teacher who has time to listen and talk, and responds to individual needs: *The teacher who saw who I am; here is a student who actually want to work hard, he will learn.* And then the teacher has to give support, or may be just rearrange a bit, change a test from written to oral and so on. The teacher is important, the participants say, but they also stress the necessity of having a strong will: *I will do this, I can do that, I shall learn that even if I have to work twice as hard as my fellow students.*

In this study we hope to have demonstrated that migration biographies might be a useful tool to increase quality in education, both for students, teachers and teacher educators. Students become aware of their linguistic and cultural resources, and when teachers and teacher educators also get to share this knowledge, this can promote a more inclusive multicultural school.

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