

4 A “blind spot” – Reproduction of racism in educational landscapes

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Introduction

One of the strongest expressions of non-inclusive and discriminatory practices in education is in scholarly, often Anglo-Saxon research, formulated as different forms of racism. The fact that schools as an institution can be racist and reproduce racist patterns has long been discussed in research internationally (Connolly, 1994, 2002; Gillborn, 2015; Ladson Billings, 2012; Leonardo, 2015; Leonardo & Grubb, 2014; Mac an Ghail, 1988; Zinga & Gordon, 2016), but has struggled to gain a hearing in education and teacher education in for example the US (Gorski, 2016). This is also consistent with Swedish conditions (Hagström, 2018; Lundberg, 2015; Rosvall & Öhrn, 2014) where issues formulated in terms of race and racism are controversial and where the resistance to talk about race runs deep (Osanami Törngren, 2016; Sawyer, 2000).

This chapter is divided into five sections. The first section starts with a narrative from one of our research projects on inclusion and equality for newly arrived students in elementary schools, which was a case study in two municipalities in Sweden (Korp et al., 2019¹). This narrative will be used for discussion on race and racism in the following sections, both in a historical and in a contemporary perspective. As argued by Martin Eriksson, there is quite a lot of research on race and racism in Sweden during the time period 1900–45, but Eriksson looks for research that does not stop at the end of this period, and studies the continuity between current racism and racial intolerance and those of earlier periods (Eriksson 2016, p. 17). This is a discussion we want to contribute to, arguing that racist discourses are vicious social constructions which both live on as historical memories, as well as being constantly renewed (cf. Schierup, Ålund & Neergaard, 2018). The issues of race and racism discussed in this chapter were not at the front of our initial research questions, but came to be an important result in relation to inclusion and equality for newly arrived students in Swedish elementary schools (Korp et al., 2019). The chapter ends with a section on silencing racism in school and how this can be related to a strong welfare state. Reflections on education, racism and silences on racism conclude the chapter.

“There’s a lot of racism here!”

To begin with, we should inform the reader that the schools where we carried out ethnographic studies were selected on the basis of consent from newly arrived students before they had entered any of the municipal schools.² This is important to note, since it means that the headmaster was asked for permission to conduct research at the school only after the students and their parents had agreed to participate and after a first interview with the students had taken place. They may to some extent have felt obligated by this to accept the research taking place in their school. Before the start, headmasters were informed about the over-arching purpose and set-up of the study as well as of the planned research-activities on their schools. Initially, we had planned to make case-studies focused around individual students and capture their experiences and perspectives as newly arrived in the Swedish school system, and to supplement with case-studies of only some schools with noticeably different conditions and arrangements for receiving newly arrived students. For practical reasons, and since it turned out that the schools where our selected students eventually entered represented a broad spectrum of schools, we soon decided to ask consent to combine the two.

The following incident took place on the first day of fieldwork in the one school (a secondary school, year 7–9 where the students are between the ages of 13 and 16). On this day, the researcher who was assigned to follow a newly arrived student on her school start, was walking through the corridor while waiting for a meeting to end. As the researcher passed an open classroom door and glanced inside, one of students in the classroom called for her attention, and invited her to come in. The following account is reconstructed from the researcher’s field notes:

Four boys and one girl are sitting in the classroom, and their teacher is standing in the front. Unwilling to interrupt what looked like an ongoing lesson, I hesitantly enter after the teacher gives a sign that I am welcome. The boy who invited me asks who I am, so I briefly introduce myself, as a school researcher exploring how newly arrived students are received in Swedish schools and how their educational situation is and that the aim is to learn from that how things can be improved. The teacher looks interested and informs me that they just started a social studies lesson for newly arrived students, and she was a mother tongue tutor. She explains that the “actual lesson” is held by the social studies teacher in the next classroom, but that she teaches the students who need tutoring in mother tongue separately, since the teacher feels that the tutoring in mother tongue disturbs the lesson. The tutor is not a qualified teacher and has limited mastery of Swedish.

Upon this very brief introduction on both parts, the boy who first called for my attention says in an assertive tone: “You want to know? There is a lot of racism here!” The other students confirm by nodding and saying yeah, “You want to hear?” I look at the teacher and ask if it is OK to take up time from the lesson, and she says yes. The boy continues: “The Swedish kids don’t like us, they don’t want to talk with us or be with us. They go, ‘you only want to

play table-tennis with each other', but if we ask them, either they won't answer or they tell us 'shut up'. This is how it is. Lots of racism!" I get a bit perplexed by the whole situation, by the content and also by the intensity of what is said. The teacher (mother tongue tutor) listens to his outburst without commenting, and I ask the other students if this is their experience too. The boys agree emphatically, filling in for each other, saying that in their class no "Swedes" ever talk with them and that they never want to be with them if there is group-work. I ask if the same goes for the girls, turning to a girl to respond, but she shrugs and seems to not want to participate. The boys pick up again: "No, it's the same, no one wants to be with us, they hate us!"

I ask if they had talked with their teachers, and one boy says: "The teachers are the same, they don't like us either ... but she is kind (he points at the tutor; she smiles a little, and doesn't object). The other boys agree and one fills in: "They think that we disturb, if we come late they ask loads of questions, but with Swedish students, they don't say anything. If we speak they throw us out; we're always the ones that don't act right!" I ask the students if they have talked with the headmaster about this. The boys answer that they have talked with their teachers, the headmaster and even the social services in the city. One boy says: "We have told it to them, but they don't do anything! But now, we fight back! We don't start a fight but if they fight us, we will hit back. This is how it is. That's why there's war in our country. There are different groups, they don't like each other, so they fight. But if they are good to us, we will show them that we are good. We want peace, not fight." The teacher (tutor) doesn't interrupt or try to adjust the boy's narrative, by her facial expression it looks as if she recognizes the essence of what they say and feels that it is legitimate that they share it with a visiting researcher who investigates the situation of newly arrived students. I ask the students what they think would need to be done to change the situation. They don't really know. One boy says that once they were assigned to write a note about who they are and who they want to be friends with; he suggests that this might be a good thing. Before I leave, the boys urge me to do something (in terms of getting it better in school).

The situation described above raises several questions about ethics and validity in the students' accounts about sensitive topics such as racism, but also about the role of the researcher. However, in the following we will concentrate on the students' talk about racism and leave out questions of the ethics of the researcher for this chapter. In the following sections we will discuss the concept of "race" and racism in both a historical and a contemporary perspective, with a special focus on the Swedish context, before coming back to the school situation again.

Conceptualizing racism

Race is one of the concepts that the philosopher W. B. Gallie (1964) has called "essentially contested concepts." Gallie writes about such concepts: "these are concepts which are essentially contested, concepts the proper use of which

inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper use on the part of their users” (Gallic, 1964, chapter 8; cf. von Brömssen, 2003, p. 16). Thus, race, like several other “essentially contested concepts” such as nation, religion and gender, has fuzzy boundaries and there are ongoing rival interpretations concerning its interpretation. A difficulty with “essentially contested concepts” is that they are both used as *analytical concepts* and what Bourdieu called *categories of practice*, which means a very close connection between first order concepts and second order concepts³ (Lorenz, 2008, pp. 30–31). Therefore, these types of concepts and their use are sometimes confused with one another and might lead to misunderstandings.

Moreover, these concepts are used as “codes of difference,” that is, they are used both as self-representations of what some people view as their collective identities, as well as representations of collective identities by others, for example by states when they ask their citizens of the state to define their “race”/ethnicity for example (Lorenz, 2008, p. 31). Another important issue in this context is the common development in discussion on these concepts from “essentialism” to “social constructionism” (Lorenz, 2008, p. 24). According to classical essentialism there are underlying true forms or essences and these true forms are constant over time. Social constructionism, on the other hand, rests on the belief that reality is socially constructed and emphasizes language as an important means by which we interpret experience. The social constructionist paradigm rests on work by Berger and Luckman (1966/1990), but also on work on the human experience by Mannheim, Schütz, Mead and Parsons (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998, p. 14). A social constructionist approach is essential for an understanding of the contemporary discussions on “essentially contested concepts.” Even though a social constructionist view is that the concept of race is socially constructed, race is socially real for some groups of people and “affect[s] their social life whether individual members of the races want it or not” (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, p. 473; Osanami Törngren, 2016, p. 128).

As pointed out by Chris Lorenz, “a key lies in the history of these concepts” (Lorenz, 2008, p. 33). So, let’s then explore and summarize the conceptualization of “race” and its use and emergence throughout history. In doing this, we will start as far back as Antiquity, as a historical perspective also helps in understanding today’s racisms.

The concept of race in a historical perspective

Was there a notion of race in Antiquity? This is debated, but in the work *The Invention of Race in Classical Antiquity* (2006) the author Benjamin Isaac argues that a form of rationalizing and systematically justifying various forms of prejudice was prevalent in Greek and Roman thinking (Isaac, 2006). What Isaac calls *proto-racism* took different forms from those encountered in the twentieth century and did not lead to systematic persecution, but this kind of thinking was influential at the time. Environmental determinism for example was pronounced in the classical world and mental traits of “foreign people” were fixed by climate and geography.

Also “mixed” ancestry was viewed as a source of degeneration. Such thinking, Isaac argues, deeply influenced later authors in the age of the Enlightenment and afterwards, who accepted these ideas together with others which they found in the Greek and Latin literature (Isaac, 2006).

However, many researchers argue that the first time a *social categorization* was introduced on biological basis was during the Reconquista period (711–1492) in medieval Spain and Portugal, leading to racial thinking and hierarchization (Lorenz, 2008, p. 38). During this time, a series of campaigns by Christian states to recapture territory from the Muslims (Moors), who had occupied most of the Iberian Peninsula in the early eighth century was organized. There, a distinction evolved between “Pure-blooded” Old Christians and converts to Christianity from Islam and Judaism who were viewed as “Impure-blooded” New Christians. As this categorization was located in the blood, and “Old Christians” said to belong to a biologically inferior kind, it was hereditary and impossible to alter, thus bringing about a type of segregation similar to racial laws proclaimed in the twentieth century by the Nazis and Fascists (Hutchinson & Smith, 1996, p. 259). Thus, the first racial categorization or “code of difference” is linked to a religious categorization, something that is a strong recurring theme of difference in the field of racial thinking, not least in relation to the history of anti-Semitism. The Jews were associated with the devil by the Christian Church and said to be secretly plotting the destruction of Christianity (Beller, 2015). In addition, many Christian thinkers upheld the view that white was the original colour of people and blackness or brownness a result of degeneration, as was also argued by Georges Louis Buffon (1707–1788), often credited with introducing the term “race” and the starting point for modern racism (Lorenz, 2008, p. 40).

Following these traces, interpretations of history in England and Germany from the sixteenth century onwards followed “blood and racial” lines with discourses in Britain on “Saxon blood” and in Germany on the “Germanic race.” During the eighteenth century this thinking expanded and explained human diversity using the concept of “race”: “people who look different belong to different races, and they are different because they belong to different races” (Lorenz, 2008, p. 39).

Most researchers today place the history of modern racism within the Age of Enlightenment where “a more logical description and classifications that ordered humankind in terms of psychological and mental criteria based on observable facts and tested evidence” (Hannaford, 1996, p. 187) was the way of viewing the world. Philosophers like René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes and Immanuel Kant all gave emphasis to rational thought based on observable facts. This ordering and categorization project had great influence on ordering human beings. The Swedish botanist Carl von Linné managed, as pointed out by Irene Molina, “perhaps the largest categorization project in history” (Molina, 2011, p. 26). von Linné not only worked on plants and botanical species, but also labelled and categorized human beings and was the first to apply the concept of “race” to human beings (Lorenz, 2008, p. 39; cf. Tesfahuney, 1999, p. 71). In the view of von Linné, “races” were linked to different geographical territories and later on skin colour mediated by the climate (Lorenz 2008, p. 39).

In the 1870s social Darwinism was established as “the science of race” (Lorenz, 2008, p. 40). Charles Darwin’s work on natural selection is of course important, interpreted by the social Darwinists as a system for justifying social engineering: eugenics (Spektorowski & Mizrahi, 2004, p. 335).

However, the popular application of Darwin’s ideas to social thought, comes not so much from Darwin himself as from the whole tradition of evolutionary thought, which is much older than Darwin (Freeman, 2000). Nevertheless, Darwin’s theory on natural selection became widely known with the publication of the *Origin of Species* (Darwin, 1859) and was a step towards modern eugenics. Francis Galton, mentioned as the founder of eugenics in 1907, was Darwin’s cousin and his son Leonard Darwin became the President of the Eugenics Education Society in Britain in the 1910s and 1920s (Paul, 2009). An obsession with “purity,” “pure” blood and “pure” ancestry was salient in Europe as well as in the US, and has over the years culminated in extinction of groups of people in different parts of the world

But, as this chapter deals with the local context of Sweden, what about the concept of “race” in a historical perspective in Sweden?

A Swedish historical context to the concept of race

In 2000, the cultural geographer Allan Pred wrote his seminal book *Even in Sweden: Racisms, Racialized Spaces, and the Popular Geographical Imagination* where he describes the intensifying cultural racism of the 1990s, the proliferation of negative ethnic stereotypes, and the spatial segregation of the non-Swedish in the society. Pred quotes in his book the newspaper *Daily News* which argues in relation to the Swedish idealized self-image: “It is high time that Sweden reconsider its self-image as the stronghold of tolerance and analyzes the strategies that allow people to maintain that self-image” (Pred, 2000, p. 287). This idealized self-image has appeared for a long time, just to take one example in the following quote from the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, who summed up in a Christmas speech back in 1965: “Democracy is firmly rooted in this country. We respect the fundamental freedoms and rights. Murky racial theories have never found a foothold here. We like to see ourselves as open-minded and tolerant.”⁴

It is interesting to consider whether this is a kind of rhetoric from the Prime Minister, especially as it is in a Christmas speech, or if he really thinks this is a kind of fair and relevant self-image of Sweden? The general knowledge at that time, 1965, about the Swedish state’s historical interest in racial biology and medical racial investigations was not very high as it has been hidden and downplayed in modern history in Sweden, not least in education, as shown by for example Danielsson Malmros (2012). Her research shows that Sweden’s history has been highlighted as neutral, for instance, in history textbooks. A clear example is that the authors of the history textbooks have anchored forced sterilizations with racism and Hitler’s Nazi Germany, and not acknowledged that sterilizations occurred also in Sweden (Danielsson Malmros, 2014, p. 214).

The idea of eugenics in Sweden was supported by a wide intellectual heritage, predominantly from medicine and biology. As stated by Björkman and Widmalm

(2010), the academic social networks aiming to legitimize and naturalize eugenics were situated among political and scientific elites. The Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography made studies of the Swedish population as early as 1882 in view of the marked changes due to migration. The advancement of genetics replaced this tradition with medical sciences. In 1909 the Swedish Society for Racial Hygiene was established and the first genetics association, the Mendel Institute, was formed in 1910 (Spektorowski & Mizrachi, 2004, p. 342). The Swedish eugenics network had intimate ties with the eugenics movement in Germany that shaped the Nazi biopolitics (Björkman & Widmalm, 2010).

In 1921, the parliament decided, without any votes against, to establish a National Institute for Racial Biology in Sweden (Ripenberg, 2019, p. 29). Behind this decision there was a Parliamentary Bill that had been submitted to the two chambers of Parliament, in 1920. The establishment of the racial biology institute had the strongest possible political support at that time in Sweden (Lundmark, 2007).

In 1936, Gunnar Dahlberg became head of the institute. The same year, Dahlberg also became professor of racial biology at Uppsala University. Under the direction of Dahlberg, the institute changed its focus from a lesser racial biology view to focus more on what was considered socially beneficial heredity research to strengthen public health, which came to contribute to the earlier mentioned sterilization laws in Sweden.

In line with these ideas, in 1936 Dahlberg broadcast on Swedish radio in favour of sterilizing people with disabilities and mentally illness. Forced sterilization in Sweden occurred between 1934 and 2013 with varying degrees of volunteerism. They were carried out partly under sterilization laws from 1934 and 1941, that regulated sterilizations up to 1975, and partly under a gender-related law that applied between 1972 and 2013 (Broberg, 1995; Broberg & Tydén, 2005; Hagerman, 2011). Between the years 1925 and 1975, 62,888 sterilizations were performed in Sweden (Spektorowski & Mizrachi, 2004, p. 333; Åsbrink, 2018, p. 157). Swedish policy of the time advocated eugenics and social engineering and Sweden was the only Nordic country profiling state eugenics (Broberg & Roll-Hansen, 1996). However, the issue of sterilizations was not unique for Sweden and the Nordic countries. Also in Denmark, Norway and Finland such laws were introduced; in Denmark in 1929, in Norway in 1934, in Finland in 1935 and in Iceland in 1937, but it was in Sweden that most people were sterilized (Åsbrink, 2018, p. 157). Åsbrink argues that this depended on the fact that doctors in Sweden were employed by the state and a “kind of science officials and executor of the state’s injunction” (Åsbrink, 2018, pp. 159–160), which was not the case in the other Nordic countries. This, in turn, can be linked to a strong welfare state and “the dream about an ideal society” (Åsbrink, 2018, pp. 159, 162–166).

The rather naïve self-image of a non-racist and tolerant Sweden that was depicted by the Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1965 was not a correct picture then, and not at the present time either. Currently there is even an ultranationalist party with roots in neo-Nazism as the country’s second largest party, the Swedish Democrats. The Swedish Democrats derive directly from the Swedish National

Socialist and Fascist movement, although it has, at least on the surface transformed itself to a right-wing populist party (Ekman & Poohl, 2010). The Swedish Democrats has migration as its core issue and has declared that it aims to bring down any government that refuses to drastically reduce immigration (cf. McEa-chrane, 2014). We can note that “race has been semantically conquered, but it remains deeply ingrained in the political imaginaries and practices of ‘the West’” (Lentin & Titley, 2011, p. 49).

The current conceptualisation of the concept of race

The concept of race became almost taboo in Europe after the Second World War and most people in Sweden gradually withdrew from the earlier racial ideas located in biology. We now know from modern genetics that there exists only one human race. It is worth underlining that there is greater variation within what people consider to be a “racial” group than there is systematic variation between two groups (Kungliga Vetenskapsakademien anser, 2000; cf. Smedley & Smedley, 2005).

Thus, race is nothing but a social construction, but still the concept of race is important as it forms ideologies and social practices. As an ideology it has received new topicality through right-wing discourses all over Europe, consisting of a combination of biological, religious and cultural arguments. Right-wing extremism in Europe today draws on the European history of “race” and shows itself in anti-Semitic, racist and fascist organizations (Mammone, Godin & Jenkins, 2012). And in Sweden, “the racial regime,” as argued by Mulinari and Nergaard (2017), is currently characterized by a continuation of historically rooted racism towards Jews, Roma and Sami, and, on the other hand, by racializations of migrants and their children (Hübinette & Tigervall, 2009), especially Muslims and Afro Swedes (Afrofobirapporten, 2014), again, reminding us of the work of Alan Pred (2000) who argues that racism, although intensified by globalization processes, is shaped and produced locally, involving ordinary people. Pred writes that it is through participation in particular locally situated practices that individuals and groups become racialized and that migrants, refugees and minorities have their racialization again and again reinforced, regardless of the differences in their biographical background or the diversity of their previous social experiences and subjective positions (Pred, 2000, p. 18).

Silencing racism in school

Now, back to the school where we as a research team started off in this chapter with the student who asked for attention:

“You want to know? There is a lot of racism here!” [...] “The Swedish kids don’t like us, they don’t want to talk with us or be with us. They go, ‘you only want to play table-tennis with each other’, but if we ask them, either they won’t answer or they tell us ‘shut up’. This is how it is. Lots of racism!”

As a research team we asked ourselves several questions in relation to the students' talk: How could the validity of students' statements in a situation like this be assessed? Were the students in fact subjected to discrimination by peers and staff in the school, based on their immigrant background? Were they victims of racism, and had their teachers and headmaster actually neglected their obligation to safeguard these children's rights to be included, and to have their opinions heard and respected? The researcher could not know, as it was her first day in the school. But as an adult person who did not belong to the school staff, she had been alerted by the fact that children with a vulnerable position felt that their rights in school were violated on a daily basis. Moreover, they had explicitly asked her to do something. So, what did she do and what happened?

Troubled and a bit overwhelmed with this call, the researcher responded to the students that she had no position to actually change things in the schools she visits as a researcher; her job was to find out how newly arrived students fare in different schools, what is important for them and how schools work to accommodate their needs. She said that she thus found what the students had said very important, although sad and upsetting, and that she would be happy to interview them later to learn more from them, but that she then needed written consent (this was before the headmaster had rejected broadening the study). The researcher also said that the headmaster is the one who is responsible for the school and for that all students are respected and included, and she asked if she could inform the headmaster what the students had said and offer to discuss the problem and possible solutions. The boys looked disappointed and said that she could talk with the headmaster, but it would be pointless – they had indeed tried, but only been rejected and mistrusted. However, when the researcher came up with the idea to suggest to the headmaster to invite a social pedagogue that the students knew from the newcomer-reception unit to work with the class, they thought this was a good idea – he was a person that they trusted. On this positive note, the researcher left the students. She later looked into the headmaster's office, but the headmaster was not available.

The next day, the headmaster called on the researcher to reprimand her for having unduly entered a classroom and interrupted a lesson, and for talking with students from whom she had not obtained written consent. As responsible before custodians for the children's safety, the headmaster could not tolerate such action. The researcher objected to this definition of the situation, saying that the students had asked her in and taken the initiative to speak, and the teacher had approved, and it was her decision to allow the students time within the lesson to talk about these issues that obviously were of great concern to them. The headmaster responded that the adult present was not a teacher, but only a mother-tongue tutor and in no position to take that kind of decision. The researcher then said that she had promised the students to bring the issue to the headmaster who is responsible and can help work things out. She suggested that the research-team could be a resource in analysing the problems and discussing possible solutions based on research, and that the students responded positively to the idea of inviting the specific social pedagogue.

The headmaster declined any involvement by the researcher or other members of the research team, with the argument that the students whom the researcher had talked with were not credible, but “known trouble-makers”, and that the researcher uncritically had accepted the image of the school that they presented her with. The headmaster then asked rhetorically – “Because they don’t immediately get access to swim-classes, I’m racist, huh? You think that’s fair and just? Does that make me a racist?” This was puzzling since the students had not mentioned anything about swimming-classes, and neither had they claimed that the headmaster was racist; instead they had been keen to find constructive ways to participate in the school and improve their relationships with other students.

Thus, both the students and the researchers were silenced when wanting to raise the issue of racism with the headmaster in the school. Here we can draw on the work by Sara Ahmed who writes that the word “‘racism’ is very sticky” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 154) and using it “is to risk not being heard” which gives the feeling of “banging the head against the brick wall” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 156). This is exactly what happened in this school, but the boys didn’t know the taboo of mentioning the word racism. Neither did the researcher reflect on that at this point. Also, as Ahmed writes, those who speak about racism are made the cause of the problem. And this is exactly what happened here too. The headmaster gets very upset and the researcher gets the question of “I’m racist, huh? You think that’s fair and just? Does that make me a racist?” very harshly thrown at her. The researcher is made the problem, as well as the students who are labelled as not credible. The students’ articulations can stand for many different things, from racism to the possibility that the students actually want to attract visitors’ attention to themselves (cf. Jonsson, 2013). However, the fact that this type of language game would be just slang is contradicted by other staff at the school who claim that “racism is normalized at this school” and also believe that there is a “culture of silence” on these issues at school. Earlier research in Swedish upper secondary school also indicates that teachers respond with silence whereas students want to address racist ideas and discuss political issues (Rosvall & Öhrn, 2014). And the point here is not to validate the boys’ claims about a racist school, but to reflect on the concept of race and what it might be “doing” in a Swedish educational context.

Sweden – a Scandinavian welfare state

Sweden is often described as one of the Scandinavian welfare states characterized by generous, non-tested benefits for gaining citizenship, a strong element of redistribution in the system and high taxes. The model was developed after the Second World War, and has ideological roots in the labour movement from the late 1800s. Over the last 20 years the welfare model has been challenged due to globalization and an increase in international financial competition (Kuhnle & Alestalo, 2019). Yet, there is, as described above, a darker side of the Swedish welfare state story. A history of social eugenics in order to engineer a welfare community for “the fittest” and to exclude individuals defined as non-productive is also part of it (Spektorowski & Mizrachi, 2004, pp. 334–335). Some argue that

the international reputation of Sweden as a welfare state steeped in discourses of equality and social justice, owns a blind spot regarding its history, as well as social practices concerning race and ethnicity (Hällgren & Weiner, 2003). Does this darker side of Swedish history silence talk of racism? Is race still a “blind spot”?

Concluding reflections on education, racism and silences

Knowledge we acquire in school is embedded in powerful self-organizing systems of signification and communication such as disciplines, subjects and curriculum and these systems move and change slowly. The above sketched history of racism is rarely made into compulsory studies in education in Sweden even though it is emphasized in several studies and policies that racism should be taken very seriously to create a safe and inclusive school climate (see e.g. Moore, 2004).

In the 2012 report by ECRI, the Council of Europe Commission on Racism and Intolerance, awareness-raising measures are recommended for the need to combat racism, xenophobia and intolerance, and the ECRI reports “that the Swedish authorities are stepping up their efforts to prevent and combat racist harassment and racist bullying in school” (ECRI, 2012, p. 34). Racist expressions in both society and school are of course regarded as very serious in a just and democratic society.

The current Swedish curriculum states that the school should represent and impart “the inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity between people” (Lgr. 11, 2018, p. 5). Another paragraph in the school curriculum for compulsory education indicates that:

The school should promote understanding of other people and the ability to empathise. Concern for the well-being and development of the individual should permeate all school activity. No one should be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnic affiliation, religion or other belief system, transgender identity or its expression, sexual orientation, age or functional impairment or other degrading treatment.

(Lgr. 11, p. 5, the Swedish Curriculum)

The curriculum is thus clear that teachers have a responsibility to counteract all forms of discrimination. Yet, racism is not mentioned anywhere in the Swedish curricula. But how does the school act when students express that there is racism in school? In this case, the students claim that the staff do not act. The students say, “We have told them, but they do nothing!”

Sara Ahmed argues “Getting people to the table by not speaking of the wall [...] does not mean the wall disappears (Ahmed, 2012, p. 175). Therefore, we argue that there is a need for educational policy makers and teachers in Sweden, as in many other educational contexts, to recognize and act upon racist structures, i. e. “to act upon the wall” in Ahmed’s words, as racism remains deeply embedded in thought and practices in many parts of the world.

Notes

- 1 This research is reported in Korp, H., von Brömssen, K., Flensner, K. & Risenfors, S. (2019) *Inkludering och likvärdighet för nyanlända elever i grundskolan – en fallstudie i två kommuner* [*Inclusion and equality for newly arrived pupils in compulsory school – a case study in two municipalities*]. Tollhättan: Högskolan Väst, Sweden. The report is only available in Swedish. See: <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1321901/FULLTEXT02.pdf>.
- 2 The research project has undergone formal ethical review and been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (2016).
- 3 Second-order knowledge, or procedural knowledge, refers to the understanding of and ability to use the conceptual tools with which historians deal with historical data. This includes the concepts of time, change, continuity and development, causation and change. First-order concepts refers to “facts” about events, dates etc. (See e.g. Kinchloe, 2001).
- 4 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3HK8ubv7Mg&t=3s> [Retrieved 20200214].

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