

The Swedish National report to the FEAPDA congress on Education of deaf children from ethnic minorities.

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In Sweden we have 6 Special Schools for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing which are directly funded by the state. The schools are sign bilingual, but we do get more and more pupils who have most of their instruction in spoken Swedish. There are also children with cochlear implants and hard of hearing children in ordinary schools, mainstreamed or in units, and most of what is said here also apply to them.

I also want to point out that although Sweden may look fairly large on the map, it is not very densely populated. That means that we don't have large populations of ethnic minorities other than in the larger cities.

To come to a new country to live always poses new challenges and difficulties, even if it is a country near to your own. You think you come from a similar culture society and educational background (e.g compulsory education). BUT – even if this is the case, you still find a lot of things, apart from language, that are different, and takes time to accept and adapt to.

What happens then if you come from a very different cultural background, a society that is very different from the one you move to, and maybe you also have a different educational background to most people in that society?

Most pupils in our schools for the deaf with another ethnic background come from the Middle East or from African countries, but there are of course children from other countries too. Some of them come when they are of school age, but have had no formal schooling at all, others have been to school in their home countries. And of course some of them are born in Sweden or come at an early age.

When you meet a new family from an ethnic minority it is important to secure communication by having an interpreter if the parents are not more or less fluent in Swedish. Things may be difficult anyway, as our cultures and our perceptions of what a disability means for their child's future may be very different.

Things are even more complicated if the parents are deaf themselves, because communication gets difficult, but you have to try through interpreters and hope that you understand and make yourself understood.

If the family is newly arrived in the country they may also have someone from another authority with them, to help and to share the information so that they can talk about it after the meeting and have time to make the right choices. Keep in mind always to speak directly to the parents, not to the person/persons accompanying them.

Having said this, it is also important to limit the number of people at the meeting as much as possible, so that the parents do not feel overwhelmed and as a consequence too shy to really

take part, and therefore will feel just talked to, instead of sharing information and asking questions.

Sometimes, just because the family comes from a certain country or a certain region, you may assume a lot of things about the family, but that is a trap one has to avoid. It helps to have a background of knowledge about a certain country, or religion, but every family is unique and has a unique background. It is also important to know what the family has been through before coming to Sweden. If there has been traumatic experiences we want to know, so that we are prepared if something shows up in school. So listen first, answer questions and try to explain what your school, in your country, stands for, and how your view of deafness or hearing loss influences their child's schooling. You will meet parents with hardly any formal education at all, to parents with an academic degree, so by listening first you can then have a better understanding of what kind of information, on what level, each family needs. You must always respect the parents and their view on things, it is by information and discussion that you can reach a common ground and work together for the benefit of the child.

After the child has started school you should involve the parents as much as possible in what is happening at school. This can be done through interpreter service on telephone if the parents don't speak or read Swedish. Always tell them that you have booked interpreters when there is some sort of meeting at the school. The more the parents get involved and meet other parents too, the more they will get to know how the Swedish school works and how it works out for their child.

Parents to deaf and hard of hearing children in Sweden are offered Sign Language courses. It is not only parents to children who use only Sign Language, parents to hard of hearing children and to children with cochlear implants are also offered courses. Their siblings can also learn SSL in special courses.

In some areas, for example the Örebro area, where I come from, there are special courses for parents from ethnic minorities, especially new immigrants who do not know so much Swedish. There is a Sign Language teacher who works only with parents from ethnic minorities. Other parents often have deaf Sign Language teachers but that comes later for those parents.

This Sign Language teacher visits the parents in their home first. The first times she brings an interpreter, but when the actual Sign Language lessons start, they do without, unless there is something special the parents or the teacher wants to talk about. The teacher has to sign an oath of confidentiality, so the parents can feel safe to bring up anything they want to talk about. As soon as possible she tries to form a small group with new parents and sometimes also parents whose children have attended preschool or school for a while. If possible also with "older" parents who speak the same language as they do. Sometimes they might study together and sometimes just keep contact. And if they get to know parents whose children have been to preschool or school for a while, they can ask all the questions they may not want to ask the school. And maybe also get explanations to things happening that seems strange to them.

At the preschool, if a child with another ethnic background comes in, and has virtually no communication, they start in a group immediately but get special attention and help without being taken from the group.

If a child comes to our school without Sign Language and Swedish, these two languages are what we work with from the start, as we are a bilingual school, where some groups also have

instruction in spoken Swedish. The important thing is to get the communication with teachers and peers going as soon as possible. For pupils who already have attended school in other countries, we start finding out where they are in for example math, or other subjects. They also have physical education, art, handicraft and movement drama in groups with their peers, even though most of the other time in school in the beginning is spent with other immigrant children who have the same needs or on their own with a teacher or an assistant. It is important that they belong to a group and that they spend more and more time in regular lessons with their peers as soon as possible.

Sometimes, both with children born in Sweden, and with those who have come later, there are requests that do not comply with what we think is right, or with the school law. It may concern lessons in certain subjects for example. Then you have to have a discussion about this with the parents, and tell them what is possible, and what is not. Sometimes you might be able to enlist other persons from the same religion or culture in the discussions, people whom the parents see as authorities and who can be of help in such discussions.

All school children in Sweden whose parents (or one of them) have another mother tongue than Swedish are entitled to instruction in that language if it is used daily in their home. The school has to arrange this, if they can find a teacher for that language. In ordinary compulsory school, there has to be at least 5 pupils, but in our schools for the deaf and hard of hearing we can arrange it for fewer pupils. The teachers come from the municipality (the special schools for the deaf and hard of hearing are state schools) and we offer them Sign Language instruction as part of the time we “buy”.

The offer of instruction in another mother tongue is optional for the family. We have seen a tendency to wait with this until the pupil has learnt enough Swedish (and/or SL). Pupils who have a spoken language tend to start earlier than the profoundly or severely deaf, and pupils who start later the school and has been to school in the country they came from tend to start at once.

The teacher can also help with study advice in their mother tongue if the pupil knows enough of the language.

As in other languages, the syllabus for Mother Tongue for children who use SL is modified to suit Things like listening and talking are not there, and there is more emphasis on culture. They are actually part of several cultures, the Deaf culture, the Swedish culture and the culture of their country of origin.

Mother Tongue

From the syllabus

..aims at giving pupils with a language and cultural background other than Swedish to develop a multicultural identity. In this way the subject has the important task of integrating pupils into Swedish society.

The subject of mother tongue helps to increase understanding of cultures, society and living conditions in the country of origin and also the family’s minority situation in Sweden.

Since the subject contains comparisons with Swedish conditions it compliments other subjects.

The subject also aims at developing basic skills in the written language of origin.

The different choices mentioned above are also offered to hard of hearing pupils included in ordinary schools.

All the things above are part of what we do for the child and the family. It is also vital that the staff gets support, both from the head and deputy head, and if necessary, from the educational psychologist and social worker at school. It would be ideal that all the staff has some general knowledge about ethnic minorities and different views on handicap, but then when a child comes to preschool or school the teachers who work with that child may need specific knowledge, pertinent to that child.

The Swedish Institute for Special Needs Education has advisors that can be contacted by the schools. There are advisors for different fields, and also for working with children who come from ethnic minorities and have disabilities. They do not work directly with the family, but they can advise the school and they can also have teacher study days.

Those advisors have cooperated with others in two new books that have come out in the last year. I find them very good. One is called "We are all unique and still more alike than we think" A book about disability, ethnicity and how to conduct meetings It gives very sound advice about how to meet families from ethnic minorities.

Another new book is "Doubly vulnerable" written for people, organisations educational facilities that come in contact with this "double vulnerability" in their daily work and which deals mostly with ethnic minorities from the Middle East.

I will end by giving you some of the questions posed and advice given in "We are all unique"

" We are all unique, but more alike than we think"

Are the established "truths" about pupils and families depending on where they come from, or where they live now, or their religion?

Are there hidden routines within an organisation that can lead to discrimination?
What would they be?

How do you find strategies to handle this?

Are there "special groups"?

If some groups are "special", which groups are the "ordinary"?

The word immigrant is often thought of as related to problems.

The word culture is a part of everyday life. Still it can become an important conception when one meets someone with a non Swedish background. What do we mean by it? Are there other words that are better to use?

Myths

Can “the immigrant problem” be an established truth for me and my organisation? Can an individual be seen as “bothersome”?

There are differences, but in an open dialogue you can ask, and through that it is easier to understand potential differences.

Some differences may be important and then openness and questions are essential.

How do you ask the right questions without overstepping the line of integrity?

How you accept a disability depends on earlier experiences and how you are treated when you meet people.