



Youth in a multicultural setting

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Abstract

The following is a presentation of how young people (age 17-20) perceive and interpret their position in society according to their immigrant background in the Swedish majority society, subjective integration.

From the conclusions of a Master thesis where many of the youths expressed a sense of not belonging to the majority they presented strategies how to handle this situation. One possibility is when education is regarded as a way of self-realisation or as a mean to make it possible to move on to a life in another country. On the other hand they presented a strategy of starting an own company as an opposition to the Swedish society. This in order to create an own controlled unit within the society.

I will also give a practical example how a Social Service-project in a multicultural suburb can tackle the problem with youths who neither attend school and nor work. A situation that is connected to their lack of integration in the majority society. The project worked with young persons in a form of individual coaching in order to create a personal relation with them to motivate them for either education and/or seeking employment. The youths did simply get a form of attention that they did not get from schools and employment offices, which seemed to be successful.

Key words: youth, ethnicity, integration

All quotations in this paper are my own translation from Swedish.

Youth in a multicultural setting

The following presentation is a summary of an interview survey with 14 young people which all were 17-18 years at age and all living in a multicultural environment, in suburbs surrounding Stockholm. The persons interviewed have an immigrant or refugee background, were either they themselves or their parents have migrated to Sweden.

Exclusion/inclusion is the theme for this set of seminars and it is appropriate for my presentation since one of the major findings in my work is the constant reflection concerning the relationship between minority-majority, Swedish culture-one's own culture, these young people do.

In this presentation I will try to summarize this study, which is my Master thesis. I will outline my presentation in the following aspects:

First I will give a rough presentation of the suburbs were they lives in order to give an orientation of the specific context.

Secondly I will describe how they perceive the relation between their immigrant background and the Swedish majority society, which I have labelled a dimension of ethnicity.

For the third I will present Youth Centre, a social service project concerning education and work practise for persons that neither attend school and nor have any work.

And for the fourth and last I will present how they reason about their expectations of their future in

terms of studies and occupations. In this section I will present two different strategies that they express, which I have named *Towards higher education and Towards independence*.

The suburbs

They all live in suburbs that were built during the 1960-70-ties. During the 1960-ties there was a great lack of housing in Sweden, especially in the major cities. In order to create new housing the government started a huge programme called *The million programme*, which aimed at during 10-15 years time create a million new apartments. The million programme can be described as a large scale housing project where totally new suburbs at the edges of the big cities were created.

In earlier periods of more larger scale housing projects in the Stockholm area you can say that these projects took more consideration to the environmental surroundings in so far as the new houses were aimed to fit in the natural surroundings of woods, hills etc. One can possibly consider these earlier periods as a way of a more natural growth of the city area. Because of the large amount of new housing in the million programme this was not possible. In order to fulfil the aim of the programme the buildings had to be very large-scale blocks of apartments. But one also had a vision to create something new as Arnstberg (2000) states:

That during the first period of the million programme the inhabitants were selected. In the suburb the new man should live, he who was neither bourgeoisie nor proletarian, not rural and nor city people. The suburb became a symbol for Swedish modernity and future.

One researcher, Bergström (1996), is of that opinion that the physical environment affects the social life in these areas:

In the living areas of the Million programme there are large spaces of land that does not signal what they are meant for or who is in charge of them or who can use them. My hypothesis is that the anonymous spaces of land, the weak sense of belonging has a negative effect on the development of the social life.

The suburb lacks social life since there is no flow of people and it is mainly a living area and, even as this special suburb Flemingsberg that most of the persons I have interviewed comes from, has a lot of work-places, the people who work in the area never comes in contact with people actually living there because it is architecturally separated. The suburb has a lack of meeting-places which strengthens the effect of

anonymity and as Bergström (a.a) states (concerning a similar suburb in Gothenburg):

Like most structures of modern city environments the structure can only be perceived from the air or from a map. The purpose of the ground must be searched for in the city plan. The high degree of abstraction hinders the understanding of the place and makes it unintelligible.

The young people I have interviewed all state that after a certain age, round 15, there is a constant lack of meeting places. The suburb is also a segregated area with a high degree of immigrants and people living on social subsidiaries. Many people look upon these suburbs as hardly belonging to the Swedish society, and this even occurs in state papers as in one report by *The Swedish National Agency for education*:

Leon (2001) quote and states:

In this report the schools that has been studied is defined as being in areas with a “non-existent participation in the Swedish society”. In my opinion this statement is difficult to understand since these areas demonstrably is located in Sweden and has got an infrastructure that is a part of the Swedish society.

But this is also a complex and paradox orientation as we shall see when I go over and talk about the ethnic dimension, which I strongly connected to the place itself.

The ethnic dimension

Bateson states that it is necessary to have two things “in order to create a difference” and in this sense it is absurd to talk about one isolated ethnic group because ethnicity occurs when cultural differences are made relevant through interaction.

The suburb is a place both of security and belonging but also of a tough and sometimes brutal environment. As one express it:

I don't like Flemingsberg; it's boring I can tell you. But I got my roots there. It's like having bad parents but they still are you're parents. That's the way with Flemingsberg, it's bad but it's still my place...you dislike Flemingsberg but still likes it.

This is a quite mature metaphor of a complex situation. Another person expresses the difficulty of attaining school because of his friends and surroundings that does not put education in the fore front. I asked him;

You said you would like to leave Flemingsberg when you have finished school?

No, but during the time I attend school.

So you would like to leave now?

Yes, but not after school, then I would move back!

The life in the suburb offers a security to be among friends of the same ethnic origin but also other non-Swedish neighbours consist in a sense of security, a sense of mutual understanding of both being non-Swedish. It seems as almost all of the persons I interviewed feel a sense of fellowship in being immigrants and not-Swedish. As one expresses it:

I would feel awkward living in a “Swedish environment” with only Swedish people living there. I am used to living with immigrants, which feel normal for me.

Borgström (1998) describes among immigrant adolescents of not feeling at home in a “Swedish” context because you are very “visible” there, you sort of stick out. In your own area you are just one in the crowd.

Integration is in this sense a very subjective feeling. To be integrated means you have to have a feeling of belonging and comfort in the society, which many of the young people I have interviewed seem to lack. One of my interviewees gives a clear example of this lack of trust when she says the following.

It’s like if you have a problem at home. I have a cousin who is 11. He got a note from school stating that if there is trouble at home and you need someone to talk with, you can phone this number. I mean, this is sick.

She develops her statement even further as if this number could lead to authorities will come to take a child in custody. This is a very dramatic statement and needs a bit of explaining. The telephone number she is referring to is probably the number to BRIS, which could be translated as the Children’s Right in Society. This is voluntary organisation which helps children in crisis and is not connected with any authority and is a well known NGO that support children with counselling etc. The point here is not what authorities can do to a single person but what a person think the authorities can do to you. This girl lack a basic trust for society and in that way interprets this telephone number. And this lack of basic trust is damaging to her identity. As Ahmadi (2000) puts it:

Integration is rather a feeling, a subjective condition, which is connected to the subjective experience of belonging.

This could be good to keep in mind for the final section of my presentation. Before I come to the concluding episode of the Future expectations I will say something about the project at the Youth Centre.

Youth Centre, a social service project

In my abstract I have said that I also should give some practical examples from a social service project, a Youth Centre (Gustafsson, 2007). That in a small scale, but in a rather successful way, have managed young people, who neither attended school and nor worked, to motivate them for education and work practice. First I will briefly say something about what the informants in my own study expressed about their school situation. They all come from similar multicultural backgrounds as the youngsters who are attending the Youth Centre and it is possible to relate those experiences to be more or less valid.

Their main experiences, which are here very shortly described, can be summarized in a problem dealing with ethnicity and cultural factors. My informants describe the situation that meetings between different cultures in school never take place. My informants do not interact in a substantial way with fellow students of “Swedish background”. And many of them lack a confidence for their teachers, whom they say does not try to understand their points of view. They say that the teachers come to their school, a multicultural context, they teach and then they leave for their “Swedish” context. My informants express that no dialogue takes place. The Swedish teachers and the pupils of different cultural backgrounds do not interact.

What could, and I state should, lead to an intercultural meeting, in which school must be considered to be an ideal place and also an obligation to be, does not occur. What could become a multicultural meeting-place stays mono-cultural, on behalf of the teachers position in being persons in control of the educational situation.

Well, the project at the Youth Centre, where 5 young people aged 17-18 attended. The staff in the project consisted of two coaches, 1 teacher and 1 social worker, whose first task was to crate a functional group of these youngsters. This was the first problem to solve since they did not function in a group context, due to different reasons. It was also quite heterogeneous groups were some of them had problems with reading and writing. Some of them had a pressure from their families to get jobs and they

tested the limits of the coaches like; What can you offer? You don't give me money!

They all had a small subsidiary for attaining the program, which was more or less a symbolic sum, definitely nothing you could live upon. So the first period of the project were very loud and messy. So the coaches realized that they had to change plans. Instead of working in a group context they started with individual teaching and a larger amount of practise at different work places. This the youngsters did approve of. They got support in both education and in the practice at work places. A support they were not used in getting.

You can look upon the project as the opposite of their former experiences from a negative school context. The coaches managed to listen to and interpret their needs of support. The youngsters describes the coaches in terms of: "not like teachers and social workers but more of a supportive family".

So by quite simple means this project established a platform for these youngsters for further individual growth. Something that school had failed in doing.

Future expectations

I have in this concluding section, that summarizes this study, identified two different strategies for the choice of future education and occupation. Strategies that are based on their experiences from school, the majority society that I have described earlier.

Towards higher education

Two girls, Agnes and Beata, both strive for academic studies but from two different viewpoints.

Agnes is a girl which could symbolize a traditional high regard for education. She is a very reflexive person and also interested in politics, which no other of the persons interviewed have expressed. She looks upon knowledge as a way for personal growth, to widen ones mind. She is born in Sweden but both her parents are from Chile, fled during Pinochet which can account for her political interest. But she also thinks a lot about her multicultural environment and background and especially round the negative attitudes of the public consensus towards the suburb as a place. She says that she was very affected by these negative opinions earlier but that she now has liberated herself from that. She thinks she has gained from growing up in this multicultural environment. She is very determined of her plans for the future and says she also would like to go abroad, preferably Spain, for further studies as a means for increasing her experience with new ideas.

Beata on the other hand have one dream for the future and that is to become a dentist. She seems quite confident with these plans but she is not so successful in school as *Agnes*. Her educational results needs improvement to fulfil her goals to be able to make an application for dental school. Much of her wishes to become at dentist refer to her longing back to Turkey. Both of her parents are from Turkey but she is born and raised in Sweden. She expresses that if she had a choice she would prefer to go and live in Turkey and mentions her grandparents as important persons in her life. But in order to do so she must have an education and a high status profession. Becoming a dentist must be an excellent choice under these circumstances. If she does not succeed in this she will not leave for Turkey. She is quite critical concerning the living conditions in Flemingsberg. She says that living there has become tougher with more violence and drugs. She is critical to how Swedish parents educate their children. She thinks that there is not enough responsibility, one let children stay out late at night.

If *Agnes*' longs to leave Sweden for studies, in order to get new impressions and experiences you can say that *Beata* does the opposite. *Beata* sees education as a way of rather returning to something, to her picture of Turkey.

Towards Independence

This is a voluntary vague category. What I want to express is the ambivalence of this concept. Independence is both a form of personal independence but also independence in relation to the surrounding society. In this case from both the majority, the Swedish society, but also from the adult society, represented by their parents. One can actually state that the majority society in a sense forces this orientation. The persons in this category are all males *Adam*, *Bruno* and *Carl* and have different reasons for their plans of starting an own company, a small business, mainly a restaurant.

Adam attends the Individual programme at upper secondary school. This is a programme specially designed for students that does not have the adequate grades for attending a regular programme. The Individual programme also includes practical training at a working place a couple of days in the week. The aim of this programme is that the student after one year shall be qualifies for the different regular programmes.

Adam does his job practice in his father's restaurant, which is a bit odd I presume. I asked him if the restaurant business was something he planned to continue with after school. He says that he has

thought about that but his main interest is further studies in becoming a recreation instructor. He has previous experience from different sports clubs.

You can trace a conflict in opinion with what is *Adam's* interest and what are his fathers. *Adam* describes the relationship with his parents as good they listen to and respect each others. But *Adam* also states:

As long as you live in your parent's house you shall respect and obey their will and desire.

The way I interpret his wishes and plans for becoming a recreation instructor is that there is going to be a conflict between this and his fathers more or less explicit demands of him taking over the restaurant business.

Bruno on the other hand attends a Social science programme and his father has constantly urged and motivated him to study. He considers himself ambitious in school and he also works extra in his brother's restaurant at his spare time. He talks a lot about the relationships between Swedes and immigrants and he thinks of it as two separated or divided worlds. He says:

Immigrants stick to immigrants and Swedes with Swedes. It has always been like that, I really don't know why. I do know a lot of Swedes and we hang out, but actually it's nothing I do each day.

He sees his career opportunities as becoming a lawyer or economist but is not fully convinced with his own plans and say:

But it is still something that does not fit. I think I end up starting a small business, with my brother or so.

In *Bruno's* case, the plans for starting a small business, is based on a feeling that he does not fit in the Swedish context. He still wants to have an education but more of a way to broaden his possibilities and, not least, it is a good base for running a company.

Finally *Carl*, who came to Sweden 7 years ago from Turkey, and says he is not aware of why his family moved to Sweden. He has asked his father several times but he says he is too young to know. As in the case of *Bruno*, his father emphasizes the value of education. He himself worked as a dentist for 20 years in Turkey. Now he works as a taxi driver. *Carl* means that it is because his father has trouble with learning Swedish. *Carl* says that his grades are quite moderate and that he from time to time has lived in a

rather turbulent way. But his father has all the time urged him to study:

You better get hold of yourself before it is too late!

Carl has got a number of offers from relatives to work in their restaurants but his parents have rejected these offers. They want him to continue studying.

When I ask him what he wants he says he wants to become a flight mechanic. But at the same time he hesitates and says he will not apply for a technical education.

I want to study. I will create my own occupation. I don't want to work for anyone else.

Then he again talks about having a restaurant.

It is an easy job. It is a good job and it is better to work for your own benefit than for somebody else.

You can see that *Adam*, *Carl* and *Bruno* all have an orientation towards starting a small business and that they have different reasons for doing so. They all have that in common that they see starting an own company is one possibility for a future career since they feel it's difficult to fit in the "Swedish" society and the educational system.

A concluding summary

The young people must tackle the demands and expectations from their parents *and* the society. According to the informants this situation is further complicated due to their immigrant background, a fact that can both limit or widen their opportunities.

In this sense the youth take different strategies in coping with their plans for the future. They develop a kind of strategy, which in some way is in contrast with the "Swedish" and the Swedish majority society. One possibility, as described in the section *Towards a higher education*, education is regarded as a way of self-realisation or as a mean to make it possible to move on to a life in another country. Or, as described in *Towards independence*, the strategy of starting an own company as an opposition to the Swedish society. This in order to create an own controlled unit within the society.

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