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Culture and Education in Sweden

Abstract

This paper analyses how “culture” is constructed and mobilised in Swedish compulsory schooling and explores the implications of these constructions for teaching and teacher education. Drawing on the current national curriculum (Lgr22) and curriculum-historical research, culture is examined both as a normative framework for democratic citizenship and belonging, and as curricular content and expressive practice across school subjects. Persistent tensions are identified between stated intercultural ambitions and the positioning of Swedishness as an implicit normative centre, where language requirements, colour-blind ideals, and policy framings of diversity may reproduce boundaries between an unspoken “we” and an identified “them”. Culture is shown to function simultaneously as an object of knowledge—often positioning national minorities as curricular content—and as a potential resource for dialogical meaning-making. Recent debates, including proposals for a Swedish cultural canon, further intensify questions of heritage, representation, and exclusion. The paper concludes by outlining implications for teacher education, emphasising critical curriculum reading and pedagogical approaches addressing power, discrimination, and plurality.

Keywords: *Culture, Education, Sweden*

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag analysiert, wie „Kultur“ in der schwedischen Pflichtschule konstruiert und mobilisiert wird, und untersucht die Auswirkungen dieser Konstruktionen auf den Unterricht und die Lehrerbildung. Ausgehend vom aktuellen nationalen Lehrplan (Lgr22) und der lehrplanhistorischen Forschung wird Kultur sowohl als normativer Rahmen für demokratische Bürgerschaft und Zugehörigkeit als auch als Lehrplaninhalt und Ausdruckspraxis in verschiedenen Schulfächern untersucht. Es werden anhaltende Spannungen zwischen den erklärten interkulturellen Ambitionen und der Positionierung des Schweden-tums als implizites normatives Zentrum festgestellt, wo Sprachkenntnisse, farbenblinde Ideale und politische Rahmenbedingungen für Vielfalt Grenzen zwischen einem unausgesprochenen „Wir“ und einem identifi-

zierten „Sie“ reproduzieren können. Kultur fungiert gleichzeitig als Gegenstand des Wissens – wobei nationale Minderheiten oft als Lehrplaninhalt positioniert werden – und als potenzielle Ressource für dialogische Sinnstiftung. Jüngste Debatten, darunter Vorschläge für einen schwedischen Kulturkanon, verschärfen die Fragen nach Erbe, Repräsentation und Ausgrenzung weiter. Der Beitrag schließt mit einer Darstellung der Implikationen für die Lehrerbildung, wobei der Schwerpunkt auf kritischer Lehrplanlesung und pädagogischen Ansätzen liegt, die sich mit Macht, Diskriminierung und Pluralität befassen.

Schlüsselwörter: *Kultur, Bildung, Schweden*

Introduction

This paper examines how “culture” is constructed and mobilised in Swedish compulsory schooling, and what these constructions mean for teaching and teacher education. Drawing on the current national curriculum (Lgr22) and curriculum-historical research, we analyse culture both as a normative context for democratic citizenship and belonging, and as curricular content and expressive practice across subjects. We highlight persistent tensions between intercultural ambitions and the positioning of Swedishness as an implicit centre, where language, colour-blind ideals, and policy framings of diversity can reproduce boundaries between an unspoken “we” and an identified “them.” Against this backdrop, we discuss how recent debates—such as proposals for a Swedish cultural canon—intensify questions of heritage, representation, and exclusion. We conclude by outlining implications for teacher training, emphasising critical curriculum reading and pedagogical tools for addressing power, discrimination, and plurality in everyday classroom work.

Culture as context

Culture is a core part of the Swedish school’s value foundation and mission. According to the curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022, Lgr22), culture encompasses cultural heritage, diversity, and identity. Education should also strengthen students’ understand-

ding of and ability to live in a culturally diverse society. School is intended to function as a social and cultural meeting place, where students gain knowledge of cultural heritage while developing intercultural competence needed to navigate life. The concept of “culture” in the Swedish school system is constructed through a long historical and political trajectory shaped by curriculum policy, intercultural pedagogy but also broader social narratives about migration, diversity and national identity (Brantefors, 2015).

The growth of what we today call intercultural education, is strongly interconnected with society’s prevailing immigrant policies. Swedish educational policy has repeatedly shifted, from assimilation in the 1960s, to multiculturalism in the 1970s–80s, and later to interculturalism (Brantefors, 2015). Despite shifts to intercultural policies, Brantefors (2015) argues that the curriculum consistently positions Swedish culture as a normative centre. Historically, culture has been strongly linked to Swedish national heritage, something that the curriculum has framed as a shared foundation of values and traditions that all students must learn in order to become democratic citizens. Some of these concern fundamental democratic values, sometimes denoted core values. However, the curriculum also speaks of diversity, while Swedish culture remains the default reference point. An important marker of Swedishness is language which is a fundamental requirement for full belonging. For example, since the 1960s, Swedish formal curricula for compulsory school have positioned Swedish as “*the most important tool for integration*” (Brantefors 2015, p. 306).

The curriculum, even when promoting tolerance, human rights, and anti-racism, constructs a clear boundary between an unarticulated “we” and a defined “them”, not due to explicit xenophobia, but as an idea embedded in the cultural logic of educational policy, which frames Swedish culture as coherent and authentic while minority cultures appear as peripheral or supplementary. Essentialist understandings have continued to dominate educational practice, as intercultural educational approaches often build on essentialist notions where culture is frequently equated with ethnicity or origin (Åkerblom & Harju, 2019).

Bauer et al. (2024) add to the interpretation that Swedish culture is described as coherent and authentic in contrast to other cultures in their study on civic orientation for newly arrived migrants. They show how Sweden is constructed as developed in the world in terms of values and, how migrants are portrayed in contrast to such an idealized image. Another pattern that refers to culture in pedagogical practices is the communication of culture treated as something that minority students “have”, while Swedish students remain culturally unmarked. This includes the risk of understandings of culture as something fixed that children bring with them to school (Högberg, 2024). It also results in a simplistic pedagogy a “food-and-festival” approach, in which culture becomes associated with superficial aspects such as food, clothing or celebrations, while structural inequalities and discriminatory practices remain unaddressed.

Several scholars have highlighted Sweden’s strong national self-image as a tolerant and anti-racist na-

tion (Wahlström Smith, 2020; Hübinette & Lundström, 2022). This Swedishness is closely tied to a colour-blind ideal in which race is not acknowledged, and discussions of racism are often framed as impolite or “un-Swedish” (Wahlström Smith, 2020, p. 38). Bauer et al. (2024) show how well-intentioned teachers frequently emphasise similarity and sameness, believing this to be an anti-racist practice. In educational settings, this means that performing Swedishness also entails performing colour-blindness, avoiding explicit engagement with issues of race or structural inequality (Trulsson & Nilsson, 2024).

The connection between national identity, culture and education has recently been emphasized by the development of a *cultural* canon presented by the right-wing parliamentary parties (Swedish National Agency for Education & Swedish Arts Council, 2024). A cultural canon is intended as a state-endorsed selection of works and phenomena deemed to have had enduring significance for Swedish culture and societal development—across both artistic and civic domains—intended to promote civic “Bildung” that can strengthen social cohesion and broaden understanding of Sweden’s historical rootedness. The canon has been questioned regarding which cultural works, traditions, and expressions should be considered central to “Swedish culture” and also with respect to if it is at all possible to define a cultural canon highlighting a shared cultural heritage, and a national identity. Proponents argue that Sweden needs a clearer common frame of reference in a time of globalization, polarization, and rapid societal change and a way to articulate what is shared and cohesive. The idea is that certain works have had a particularly significant impact on Swedish history and cultural development and should therefore be emphasized. A canon means that the state actively selects certain works over others, which always raises questions about norms, representation, and politics (Borsgård, 2025). Critics argue that a Swedish cultural canon easily becomes a project that excludes the cultures of minorities and immigrants, since the selection is often based on a traditionally ethnic Swedish understanding of culture. Critics also emphasize that it entails a *fixa-tion* of culture as something static in contrast to intercultural ideas seeing culture as changeable, dynamic, and diverse. A canon, by contrast, signals that some expressions are “more Swedish” than others and that culture can be defined from above.

Culture as content

Although not emphasized in the curriculum, culture appears in the aims and central content of several subjects (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022). Swedish students learn about culture as *cultural heritage and identity*, where students are to develop awareness of their own and the shared cultural heritage and gain knowledge of national minorities. In Visual Arts, students are to gain experience of visual culture such as film, photography, design, and art. In Modern Languages, students learn to understand cultural and social conditions in the contexts where the language is used. In Swedish, they gain

knowledge about literature's historical and cultural contexts. In Swedish for Immigrants as well as in instruction in national minority languages, combinations of media such as film and theatre are treated as cultural forms of expression.

Culture is one of the general objectives of compulsory school as the formal curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022) states that students should have “acquired knowledge of the culture, language, religion and history of the national minorities (Jews, Roma, the indigenous Sami people, Swedish Finns and Tornedalians)” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022, p. 13) after completion of compulsory school. This means, for example, that students should be able to interact with other people based on knowledge of similarities and differences in living conditions, culture, language, religion and history. These formulations construct diversity primarily as an object of knowledge, something that pupils should “acquire knowledge of”, which risks positioning national minorities and cultural others as topics to be studied rather than as co-constitutive subjects within the school community with a risk of reinforcing an asymmetrical relationship between majority and minority positions, where the majority remains normative while the latter becomes curricular “content”.

Besides culture as knowledge, culture is also a means of expression (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022). Students should be able to “use and engage in many different forms of expression, such as language, art, music, drama and dance, and has developed knowledge of society's cultural offerings” (ibid., p. 14). At the same time, by framing culture as a means of expression the curriculum opens up possibilities for teaching that engages pupils in intercultural meaning-making. This dual framing, culture as both knowledge content and expressive practice, creates an important tension for teachers when designing learning activities that move beyond mere recognition of difference towards dialogical encounters. This tension mirrors a pedagogical challenge: whether culture is approached as a static attribute tied to identity or as a dynamic process of meaning-making. The latter requires teachers to engage not only with curricular directives but also with the power relations that shape whose voices and experiences become legitimate in classroom dialogues.

Curriculum Frameworks for Diversity, Plurality, and Interculturality in Swedish Compulsory Schooling

When addressing the efforts of diversity, plurality and interculturality/transculturality in Swedish teaching, the impact of the curriculum needs to be taken into account. While diversity is often framed as a pedagogical aspiration, its realization is strongly conditioned by how teachers interpret and negotiate curricular mandates. The curriculum emerges as a strong framework for the organization of school activities, albeit curriculum interpretation is not a strict technical process, but a process where broader societal ideas on diversity and national identity are reproduced or challen-

ged. Wahlström and Sundberg (2015) showed that Swedish teachers place the curriculum at the centre of their work pointing to a high degree of loyalty to the intentions of the curriculum but also to a scope for professional interpretation, in which teachers negotiate between the demands of policy documents, local conditions, and their own pedagogical beliefs. An overwhelming majority views the curriculum as central to how they understand their teaching assignment, and even more regard it as decisive when selecting the content to be included in instruction. Teachers' assignments on diversity in the classroom are conditioned by the ways in which they read, negotiate, and translate the curriculum's value commitments into everyday teaching practices.

The current Swedish curriculum for compulsory school Lgr22 (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022), is highly normative in terms of values as it prescribes an intercultural approach: “The school's objectives are that each pupil can make and express conscious ethical judgments based on knowledge of human rights, fundamental democratic values and personal experience,” (ibid., p.11). Every child should learn not to “accept people being subjected to violence, oppression, discrimination and victimization” (ibid., p. 11). The guidelines for teachers indicate that they shall clarify” and discuss with pupils the fundamental values of Swedish society and their consequences in terms of individual actions” (ibid., p. 11).

The understanding of national minorities also has a parallel in the guidelines. There it is stated that everyone working in the school shall “actively combat discrimination and victimization of individuals or groups” (ibid., p. 11). This choice of wording is powerful as it requires not only teachers to react to discrimination and victimization of people, but also to take an active stance in this endeavour. To “actively” combat discrimination requires teachers to critically examine everyday routines, teaching materials, and interactional patterns that may reproduce exclusionary norms including addressing one's own bias (Lundin & Torpsten, 2018).

Furthermore, what counts as discrimination is addressed in the first section of the curriculum where it is explained that nobody is to be subjected to discrimination related to sex, ethnicity, religion or other beliefs, transgender identity or expression, sexual orientation, age or disability. However, by codifying discrimination through a fixed set of grounds, the legal framework may risk obscuring more subtle or intersectional forms of marginalization that do not neatly fit into these categories (Eek-Karlsson et al., 2020). The topic of religion and other beliefs needs particular attention in this context, as the opening paragraph of the curriculum states that the

“... sanctity of human life, the freedom and integrity of the individual, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men and solidarity between people are the values that schools shall embody and impart. In keeping with the ethics embodied in the Christian tradition and Western humanism, this is achieved by fostering in the individual a sense

of justice, generosity, tolerance and responsibility.”
(Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022, p. 5)

The choice of words pointing out “the Christian tradition and Western humanism”, found in the introductory clause of Lgr22 has been widely debated. Teachers have questioned what this choice of words implies in relation to other religions and, for example, Eastern humanism. History might shed some light as one of the aims of the broader school reform 1962 was to break away from the religiously influenced traditions of the old form of elementary school system, historically shaped by the Church. In the area of religious education, this shift was signalled by changing the subject's name from *Christianity to Knowledge of Christianity* to be integrated with the other social studies subjects, reflecting a move toward a more secular and academic approach rather than confessional instruction, but yet keeping the notion of Christianity in the introductory clause (Hartman, 2000). From a diversity and interculturality perspective, this raises the question of whether the curriculum implicitly establishes a hierarchy of traditions, where Christian and Western humanist ethics function as the taken-for-granted norm against which other belief systems are measured (Lundin, 2012). That is, implicit hierarchies are significant because they shape not only what is taught but also what is thinkable within educational discourse. When certain traditions are positioned as universal, others risk being framed as deviations rather than equally legitimate epistemic resources. Such an ordering risks constraining how religious and philosophical plurality can be addressed in teaching. The contrast between explicitly mentioning the Christian tradition and the statement in Lgr22 that “teaching provided in schools must be non-denominational” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022, p. 5) has also been debated for long. This enduring tension between a non-denominational school and a value base explicitly linked to Christian tradition and Western humanism can be understood as a structural ambiguity at the heart of the curriculum. For teachers, it creates a complex backdrop for designing teaching that is simultaneously faithful to the curriculum's value statements and genuinely inclusive of religious and philosophical plurality in the classroom.

Implications for teacher training

The analyses discussed in the preceding sections show that issues of culture, Swedishness, diversity and interculturality in school are marked by complexity, historical layering, and inherent tensions. For teacher education, this implies that student teachers need to develop both a deep conceptual understanding and a reflective and analytical stance toward how culture and identity are constructed within the education system. A key conclusion is that future teachers had better learn to recognise how cultural and linguistic norms, even when they appear neutral, shape the conditions for inclusion and exclusion. This requires teacher education to move beyond notions of culture as static content to be transmitted, and instead emphasise culture

as relational, dynamic and deeply intertwined with power.

Given that the curriculum functions as a strong governing framework for teachers' practices (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2015), student teachers must develop the capacity for critical curriculum reading. They need to analyse how value statements, references to national cultural heritage, and the curriculum's normative intercultural ambitions, particularly in Lgr22 (Swedish Agency for Education, 2022), structure their future professional agency. This entails learning to identify both possibilities and constraints within policy texts, for instance, how the construction of national minorities as objects of knowledge, instead of as co-constructors of it, may risk reinforcing distance and otherness. Such critical reading must also include an understanding of how the curriculum's formulations on Christian tradition and Western humanism interact with the school's mandate of non-confessional teaching, shaping teachers' work with religious and philosophical plurality.

Strengthening student teachers' ability to work with intercultural and anti-racist perspectives also requires attention to the conditions under which exclusion occurs. This requires knowledge of the legal grounds of discrimination, structural inequality, segregation and more subtle or intersectional forms of exclusion. It also calls for developing the professional courage and pedagogical tools necessary to actively prevent and counter discrimination. To sum up, teacher training must create reflexive spaces in which student teachers can critically explore their own norms, assumptions and positions. Such reflexive practice is a prerequisite for enacting the curriculum's intercultural ambitions in ways that acknowledge complexity, support all pupils' sense of belonging, and enable genuinely dialogical encounters in the classroom.

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