

Abstract

Title: Swedish Language Courses for Immigrants (SFI) – Bridge or Border?

On Views of Knowledge and Learning in SFI Education

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This thesis is intended to increase the understanding of the encounter between a group of “immigrants with low education” and the Swedish educational system in the form of SFI, Swedish Language Courses for Immigrants. The study uses a social-constructivist interpretative framework and discourse analysis in order to elucidate how “knowledge” and learning are *organized, handled and articulated* within SFI, but also participants’ description of how they are *influenced* by SFI. The analysis of different actors’ perspectives and ideas focuses upon language and its usage as an important symbolic medium of power. In addition to a number of key persons within SFI and surrounding institutions, twelve female participants, nine teachers and three school principals at two adult education centres were interviewed. Documents about and for the school, including some of the most important textbooks, were also used in the study.

Analytical elaboration proceeds from the social macrolevel via an institutional mesolevel to the microlevel of participants and their everyday context. The analysis shows that SFI rests upon a “Swedish model of society” anchored in a top-down perspective on welfare and strong educational optimism. SFI educators’ and other employees’ speech, as well as texts in SFI documents, research and debate, presupposes “the Swedish” as the norm, even if not always consciously. They jointly sustain numerous “deficiency discourses” and the study shows that SFI participants are often subjected to corrective efforts and a partially fostering attitude. In addition, when SFI participants are hence positioned as “the others”, a preoccupation with “the Swedish” occurs, which can be understood as an ongoing construction and cultivation of the social majority’s own ethnicity.

On the institutional level, the analysis also reveals complex relationships between SFI and other institutions. SFI teachers, for example, criticize employment office clerks for their interpretation and use of the SFI certificate of approval as a sorting instrument for immigrants who apply for work. Similarly, the social service’s attendance checks and intervention in the pedagogical assignment are questioned. At the same time, these three institutions collaborate in (re)producing “deficiency discourses” and an ambition of improvement directed towards the immigrants. For SFI, the analysis exposes a paradox: discursive exclusion and limited possibilities of influence in the instruction on behalf of the participants, despite organizing concepts such as “own responsibility”, “communication”, “critical reflection” and “participation” in the control documents.

On the participants’ level, SFI gives rise to benefits and joy as well as shortcomings and frustrations. SFI studies yield greater opportunities for taking part in more social arenas, give better self-confidence and increase “everyday power”. The shortcomings are for example related to “Swedish” ideas, not least the norm of gender equality and sometimes to feelings of being wrongly attributed traits such as “passive”, “traditional” and “backward”. Dominant perceptions of Swedish society, partly conveyed through SFI, seem to force the women into reflexive resistance, but also to strengthen their role of being a “bridge” to a new life in Sweden.

Keywords: language learning, adult education, identity, immigrants, Sweden, ethnicity, integration, discourse