

MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION - THE INTEREST OF A NATION

A policy study in Sweden 1957 - 2017

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Abstract

This doctoral thesis is a policy study about mother tongue education policies as they have developed historically in Sweden. In this thesis mother tongue education refers to mother tongue as a school subject for students whose mother tongue is not Swedish. The overall aim of this thesis is to investigate the policies of mother tongue education from 1957 to 2017, focusing on how Swedish nation-state politics and societal change characterized the status and positioning of mother tongue education in the Swedish school system. The empirical material of the thesis consists of policy texts expressing or shedding light on mother tongue education policies, such as Government Official Reports, Curriculum Committee Reports, and National Curricula. The thesis is based on the analytical concepts of order of discourse and recontextualization to investigate how the mother tongue education discourse(s) as an outcome of discursive struggle are articulated over time, and whether discursive reproduction or change has occurred. An order of discourse forms what I have termed a discursive period.

The thesis shows that Swedish nation-state politics concerning mother tongue education has varied depending on national interests created in specific historical and political contexts, and on different political intentions 1957-2017. Through studying the recontextualization of mother tongue education discourse(s) I have delineated four discursive periods. The first period, 1957 to 1965, is characterized by cohesiveness and homogenization as ideals as a result of consensus between political actors, and a unifying language was seen as an essential part of nation building. The nation state's progressive policies in relation to mother tongue education, equality and bilingualism during 1966 and 1988 were undermined by the marketization of public schools based on the new funding system during the 1990s and 2000s, and by a combination of conservative and liberal ideologies, promoting Swedish language as a unifying value for the nation. Rhetorically, there is a strong continuity during all discursive periods regarding the perception that mother tongue education is important for all students whose mother tongue is not Swedish. At the same time mother tongue education, unlike Swedish, is more or less continually valued in relation to what is happening in the outside world – increased migration, diversity, unemployment, etc. – as well as in relation to other school subjects. This thesis has shown mother tongue education to be a highly political issue. Political decision-making as regards mother tongue education functions as a tool for achieving nationalistic interests such as equality for all or exclusion, assimilation homogenization and “Swedification”, or a respect for ethnic and linguistic diversity.

Key words: Mother tongue education, policy, discourse, order of discourse, nationalism, equality and diversity