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# It is Important to Build on Their Knowledge Teachers' Approaches to Newly Arrived Immigrant Pupils'

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## Abstract

This study aims to contribute to the school social work practices in a Swedish context. By capturing the life worlds of newly arrived students and problematizing teachers' approaches to these pupils underlying competences and continued knowledge development and learning, I suggest how social work and education professionals can navigate these life worlds and empower young immigrant pupils in Swedish school. Theoretical basis consists of translanguaging, principles and ideas about education valuing underlying competencies and seeing them as means for further learning in all areas. Through an ecological approach to learning and teaching, I examine teachers' told experiences of teaching in the secondary school program of language introduction in a Swedish context. The analysis shows that the interviewed teachers systematically try to make use of the pupils' prior knowledge and experiences of instruction. The pupils work in language groups in order to complete assignments.

**Keywords:** translanguaging, language instruction, education, learning, underlying knowledge

## 1. Foreign background and newly arrived

Approximately 25% of students in Swedish school system have foreign background. Some of them are born in Sweden and others have arrived during their school years. In the Swedish school organization, pupils are counted as newly arrived if they have arrived to Sweden at the start of school, during school in pre-school, compulsory school, secondary school or special school or special schools, if they do not have Swedish as their native language, and if they do not command the Swedish language at all or insufficiently [1, 2].

In order to be admitted to a national program in the public secondary school, national requirements for eligibility must be fulfilled, meaning passing grades in many compulsory school subjects. An additional qualification requirement can be named age criterion, which involves commencing the public secondary school before the age of 20. Thereafter, students are referred to adult education or vocational training.

## 2. Aim – teachers approaches when teaching newly arrived

In light of the eligibility requirements and age criterion, the content and the organization of the education for newly arrived immigrant pupils are crucial for their further studies. This study aims to problematize teachers' approaches to newly arrived immigrant pupils underlying competences and continued knowledge development and learning in all school subjects in relation to translanguaging [3–7] strategies. Through an ecological [8] approach to learning, teaching, and interaction with the environment and by looking at school as a pedagogical practice, I examine teachers' told experiences of teaching newly arrived young people.

### 2.1 Requirements, program of language introduction, and preparation class

School and education are fundamental to all children and young people; schooling is crucial for the future. Newly arrived pupils and their teachers are challenged in different ways. The limited time in passing grades is one of these challenges, and research [9] shows that immigrant pupils have difficulty in becoming eligible in time. Pupils' use of different languages at home and in school, as well as pupils' need for support in order to understand instructional content, are other challenges highlighted by Cummins [5].

For the youths who do not have the qualifications required for admission to the national program in the Swedish public secondary school, there is a program called language introduction [10]. Within the program, pupils are placed in classes according to an assessment of school history and previous knowledge [2].

### 2.2 Parallel school life, interrupted past, and postponed future

Both Bunar [9] and Nilsson Folke [11, 12] who have studied immigrant pupils and their offered education, show a parallel school form where pupils' previous knowledge is not taken into account; assessments are not used when the instruction for immigrants is organized and implemented. According to these researchers, placement in an introduction program means both advantages and disadvantages for the immigrant pupils. An advantage is that assessment can be done in a secure environment. Other advantages are the gradual, fundamental introduction to the school language by second-language teachers and the guidance in one's native language. Disadvantages are segregation and exclusion from the other school and other pupils.

When reasoning about preparation, introduction and transitions Nilsson Folke [11, 12] uses the concepts of *parallel school-life*, *interrupted past*, and *postponed future*. The concept of a *parallel school-life* means that pupils remain in a preparation class for a long time and that the preparation class becomes a waiting room with a separating practice that remains even after the pupils move to ordinary classes. *Interrupted past* means inadequate assessment, difficulties in taking into account the pupils' earlier subject and language skills, and the lack of study guidance in their native languages. The instruction does not utilize or build upon previous education and underlying knowledge. In regard to the pupils' preferences, expectations, and future, Nilsson Folke [12] uses a further concept, which is *postponed future*. The immigrant pupils want to attend regular classes and when they go from the compulsory school preparation class to the secondary school, they have expectations of studying the national program. However, there is the problem that they often lack the qualifications, despite the time spent in the preparation classes, and then the solution of this problem is the language introduction program at secondary school level.

### **3. Translanguaging, knowledge, and meaning**

Language, learning, and knowledge develop in a social context and if we look at language and knowledge as parts of the same linguistic fabric, of the same language mass, we may think that some knowledge forms patterns with a language and other knowledge forms patterns with another or other languages. Thus, knowledge and language form weaves of language, knowledge, and understanding that develop and grow in collaboration. The knowledge-and-language fabric grows and develops when the individual uses his or her underlying competencies and his or her knowledge-language in different settings. According to the principles of social practice and social justice, all languages and all knowledge are equally valuable and important for continued learning [4–7].

The English concept Translanguaging developed from the Welsh term *Trawsieithu* describes a teacher strategy of planned and systematic use of two languages for teaching and learning inside the same lesson in bilingual education. Translanguaging is a process where students and teachers engage in discursive practices that include all students' language practices in order to develop new and maintain old language practices. This process communicates knowledge and gives voice to new socio-political realities by questioning linguistic inequality [13].

Cummins [5], Cummins and Schecter [14] and Williams [15] states that knowledge and skills in both language and other school subjects develop and deepen when the pupils are given the opportunity to use their knowledge-related languages in different learning situations. Translanguaging in instruction deals with reciprocity, respect, and appreciation of multi-lingual pupils' underlying knowledge and skills. By using their linguistic competence, pupils can utilize and develop further their knowledge and understanding in different areas, they can gain, in-depth understanding in the different school subjects [4–7, 16].

#### **3.1 Cognitive development, recognition, challenges, and subject learning**

In order to promote pupils' language development and learning in the instructional setting, Cummins [3, 5] emphasizes interaction, respect, and comprehensible subject content as well as broad and varied instruction and subject content to relate to the pupils' underlying knowledge and ways of learning. Teacher strategies for successful instruction that involves instruction that supports understanding and language production, strengthens the knowledge-language in all subjects, and provides opportunities for pupils to use their multi-lingual repertoires are highlighted. Using the language or languages, one best master in different contexts is valuable for their learning in classrooms where several languages are spoken and in instructional contexts where teachers do not master the pupils' different languages, writes Cummins [5] further. The importance of pupils recognizing the manner of teaching and learning, recognizing the instructional subjects is pointed out by Sarstrand Marekovic [17]. And in addition, teachers must recognize and respect the pupils' knowledge, ways of learning, and how they are taught.

### **4. An ecological strategy and approach to learning**

School and instruction can be understood as a social and pedagogical practice aimed at facilitating pupils' learning. Several factors and strategies must come together in order for pupils to achieve success in their learning and succeed in their education. Kramsch [8, 18] speaks about ecological strategy with regard to school, pupils' learning, and approaches to learning. This strategy is based on human

interaction between innate traits and the environments that people live in. According to the ecological strategy, development and learning take place in harmony with the environment. For students, an ecological and sustainable learning strategy is when he or she can use underlying skills. Translanguaging [4–7, 15] that is, using one's whole linguistic competence to express and develop knowledge and learning within all areas of interplay and human interaction appears as an ecological and sustainable strategy for teachers, pupils, and learning in different school and education contexts.

## **5. Approach, data, methodology, and analysis**

This study aims to problematize teachers' approaches to newly arrived immigrant pupils underlying competences and continued knowledge development in relation to translanguaging [3–7] strategies. Through an ecological [8] approach to learning, teaching and interaction with the environment and by looking at school as a pedagogical practice teachers' told experiences of teaching are interpreted. Looking at school and teaching as pedagogical practice, I examine teachers' told experiences of teaching newly arrived young people.

Data are generated in one group interview [19, 20] with teachers within the individual program of language introduction directed especially to newly arrived people at one public secondary school. All teachers in this teacher team participated in a 2 hour long interview that was documented electronic and transcribed. Ethical considerations are made and I followed good research practice [21] by informing about the purpose of the study, the voluntary participation in the interview and that results will be reported confidentially.

The interviewed teachers are all qualified subject teachers and have several years of experience instructing their subjects in both the individual program and the national program in the public secondary school. In the interview I asked the teachers to tell me about their instruction in their subjects English, Swedish as a second language, Social Studies, and Mathematics. The interview questions dealt with their approaches to newly arrived immigrant pupils' underlying knowledge, competences, and continued knowledge development and how the immigrant pupils' underlying linguistic and cognitive competencies can be taken advantage of in the different subject instructions. The questions also dealt with knowledge or skills of importance for the pupils' continued education and after their schooling. Other questions concerned native language instruction, study guidance, opportunities, and limitations.

The recorded and transcribed interviews have been interpreted [22] based on what was told and the interpretation is aided by the previous sections in this text. I read the transcriptions' several times in order to clarify themes and to see the connections. In this reading, I focused on what the teachers told, and in the following presentation, the interviewed teachers' voices are illustrated by their own words with quotations [19]. Subsequently, the abbreviation IMS is used to refer to the program of language introduction at this public secondary school.

### **5.1 IMS – the educational context under study**

In this study, teachers talk about IMS-classes organized using registration interviews and assessments based on when the pupil arrived at the current school, age, previous schooling, subject knowledge, and language skills. The pupils different school histories vary from no or little schooling to started secondary education, and they speak different languages and speak Swedish at a very basic level.

Within IMS, the pupils are offered instruction in the various compulsory school subjects or secondary school subjects at the respective elementary, middle, lower or

upper secondary level. Some are taught three to seven compulsory school subjects, while others study one subject. Still others study simultaneously compulsory school courses and national program subject courses, such as Religion, Social Studies, Technology, and Art. Swedish as a second language/Swedish is nevertheless the basis of all the subject instruction in parallel with the other subject matter.

## 6. Result and analysis

In the following section, I thematically present what the IMS-teachers' told about their teaching and approach to the immigrant pupils' and education. Based on concepts from previous sections, the presentation is divided into sections named Underlying knowledge and present education, Language skills and learning Swedish as a Second Language, Building knowledge and time for qualification, and Parallel system and limited choice possibilities.

### 6.1 Underlying knowledge and present education

The pupils in IMS have different school histories, separate school experiences from various educational contexts, and they have been in Sweden for different lengths of time. The teachers say that the pupils' views on school and learning vary, and that their ways of learning, their subject knowledge, and experiences of instructional methods are different. Because of this, the teachers plan and design their instruction of different subjects differently depending on the pupils' previous school context. One teacher tells in the following quotation about how different education backgrounds, school experiences, and education cultures influence the IMS-education.

*Yes, and then it may not only be the Swedish culture but also the school culture [...] education culture [...] and previous schooling may not help in certain cases [...] but there is still a big difference whether you have a school background or not.*

Cummins [3–5]; García [6], Garcia and Kleyn [7], García and Leiva [16] and Williams [15] writes about underlying knowledge in terms of equally valuable. In the interview, we talk about this and the teachers emphasizes how teaching in IMS can bring out and take advantage of the pupils' underlying knowledge in the different school subjects. In the following quotation, one teacher describes instruction that respects and draws upon pupils' underlying subject knowledge in order to build new knowledge for both pupils and teachers.

*I think it is important to build on their knowledge, and I think that you get everyone involved when you have group discussions with them [...] I want to emphasize this because this is when they can show their own methods [...] not [...] so you may not figure out [...] or [...] you may not do this [...] but [...] you think like this and that is good [...] or I hear how you think and I understand how you think.*

We continued to talk about the pupils' different ways of completing school assignments and how the pupils can use and demonstrate their underlying knowledge as building blocks in the present educational context and common knowledge-building. From what the teachers say and in accordance with Sarstrand Marekovic [17] and Cummins [5], it becomes clear that the interviewed teachers show respect for the pupils' underlying knowledge, skills, and ways of learning. The following quotation from the interview shows reciprocity and how the IMS-pupils' different subject matter knowledge is utilized and becomes a resource in the instruction.

*I think it is thanks to Social Studies in the sense that we can discuss democracy and dictatorship, and there is someone who comes from Syria or Eritrea or wherever they come from [...] there is a lot of first-hand information [...] when the pupil feels it is OK [...] they can talk about the tax system [...] how it looks and the public sector and everything [...] absolutely as much as possible.*

From what the teachers say, it appears that also languages other than Swedish are used so that all pupils acquire and develop knowledge in and about all subjects. For example, in order to understand the instructional content in the different subject classes, the teachers ask the pupils to translate texts between their different languages. The teachers encourage the IMS-pupils in the subject classes to use their linguistic and subject competencies [4–7, 15, 16] when letting them explain the instructional content for one another in their knowledge-language and in Swedish.

*I have done it so that they work and answer the questions in Swedish then and later have them translated [...] but then I do not know how the translation is [...] then if they re-work it one more time in their native language [...] but I think that is a way to go [...] for these pupils to consolidate their knowledge in another way and think [...] I think this is a way to work with them.*

Despite the IMS-teachers do not always understand what the pupils say or write to each other, they say this is a successful strategy for teaching and the pupils' learning.

## 6.2 Language skills and learning Swedish as a second language

An explicit purpose of the secondary school introduction program is for the pupils to achieve passing compulsory school grades in the school subject of Swedish and in other subjects in order to be eligible for secondary school. The following quotation is an example of an ecological approach [8, 18] to learning and it shows how one of the teachers discusses the pupils' multi-lingual processing of subject matter in relation to learning both Swedish and the actual subject. Language and subject knowledge grow together.

*So Swedish is in all our subjects [...] so pupils who do not reach the goals in Social Studies, for example, may see it as good practice in Swedish in the meantime [...] and then it should be good training in Swedish.*

The teachers believe that with this multilingual and multi knowledge approach, the pupils re-work their knowledge in more than one way, and they develop their thinking, knowledge, and their languages. Above all, the pupils practice the school language of Swedish in different contexts and interaction with the environment [8, 18]. In their subject teaching teachers often organizes language groups and the quotation below shows that IMS-pupils group themselves by language in different instructional situations. By teaching this way, pupils who master both Swedish and the subject matter help other pupils who have not mastered the school language or the content as well.

*They often sit next to each other to get help from each other [...] if they are at different levels then one can explain to the other how to and so on [...] they usually say [...] I explained to him what it was you said [...] because they must answer in Swedish to me because that is the only language I understand well [...] but when they look for a word and ask their friend, then the friend does not usually say*

*the word in Swedish but in their native language [...] then he or she learns it in Swedish from a friend.*

The teachers' state that the pupils support each other's thinking and learning through using their underlying skills in languages [5, 17] in the different school subjects and in interaction in different contexts [8, 18]. In such a way, all the pupils develop their language competence and their subject competence, the teacher says.

### **6.3 Building knowledge and time for qualification**

The IMS-pupils have less time to become qualified for the Swedish public secondary school compared to their friends who have completed all or a large part of their education in Sweden. The teachers say that the pupils should experience the manner of instructing and of studying, plus the content in the education within IMS, as important and relevant. According to what the teachers say pupils choices of subjects become extra significant, and the content in the different subject classes cannot be isolated and extraneous when both pupils and teachers have to hurry. This hurry or lack of time is illustrated by the following quotation.

*Because many are in a hurry when they come and we are also in a hurry [...] there is a lot to do in a short time [...] so there are some [...] you say 'loose building blocks' that we throw at them [...] that they do not really know how to put together [...] ...] because for pupils who have attended 9 years in the Swedish school, the pieces fall into place quite naturally.*

It appears that both teachers and pupils experience a shortage of time. In this short time context, the teachers speak about challenges, stimulating assignments and about collisions when referring to the limited time to prepare the IMS-pupils for upcoming studies and for life after school. The following quotation shows an example of a challenge in terms of an experience of offered learning as important for both their continued studies and their life after school in order to avoid what Nilsson Folke [12] conceptualize postponed future.

*Then it is even more important that the approach is integrated so the pupil feels that what I do here now is important for real then [...] what I learn has value. [...] but when they want to go at turbo-speed here to get a grade to become qualified and move on [...] that crashes there I think. [...] it becomes even more important that you can use what you learn in school in society.*

The teachers say that different parts of the IMS-education, content, the pupils' previous knowledge, current know-how, and future study and career plans must fit together. The pupils must be able to experience that what they learn leads to valuable knowledge, say the teachers.

### **6.4 Parallel system and limited choice possibilities**

One of the requirements for being admitted to the public secondary school national program is that the pupil is under 20 years of age. The teachers state that this age requirement is part of a parallel system [9, 12] that leaves the IMS-pupils with limited choice possibilities. Following quotation from the teacher interview illustrates that time controls IMS-pupils' subject choices and study direction, as well as the teachers' instructional content.



*They really have to hurry [...] much depends on their own hurry in determining whether they are prepared for further study or for a vocational program [... ..] I want to give them everything [...] just like for my own youngsters [...] I feel [...] sorry that because of their own hurry they dismiss certain opportunities [...] it is not because we choose not to, but because they are in a hurry to see an actual vocational training or a job sometime in the future.*

The teachers feel that the system inhibits by making some choices possible while others are impossible based on the pupil's age. One of the teachers says that this hurry then leads to pupils choosing to study certain subjects and disregarding other subjects.

*I mean [...] depending on how many subjects they can take [...] what they have taken here and so on [...] what they have time for and so on.*

Thus, the age criterion is a factor rushing the IMS-pupils to become qualified for the public secondary school. The teachers say that the IMS-pupils wish the IMS studies would lead to further study at the public secondary school. The quotation above shows that through their choices which also mean what they do not choose, the pupils want to become qualified in the subjects required for admission to the national program in the public secondary school before the age barrier sets a stop to this opportunity and their studies ends up in postponed future [12].

## 7. Translanguaging, knowledge, and learning

This section discuss the teachers' approach to the immigrant pupils' underlying competences and continued knowledge development, as well as their experience of teaching in the secondary school individual program of language introduction by linking to research and the questions about how teachers can take advantage of, acknowledge, and develop further the immigrant pupils' underlying linguistic and cognitive skills in different subject classes.

The group interviews clearly reveal that the teachers in their instruction systematically try to take advantage of the pupils' previous knowledge and learning in the different school subjects. The goal is for the IMS-pupils to be integrated into regular education with other pupils. The importance of the pupils' various experiences of teaching and learning in different contexts in different school subjects is visible, as well as the importance of learning for the future, after IMS. The interview reveals that in the pupils often work in language groups to complete assignments and that residential staff provides instrumental help with schoolwork.

### 7.1 Equivalent education based on competence

The offered instruction corresponds to the demands of a multi-cultural society for equivalent education: the pupils are offered the right to equivalent education based on their competence, and their knowledge is respected [9, 23, 24].

When the teachers talk about the IMS-pupils' varying school histories, we can see how in their instruction, the teachers respect and take advantage of what the pupils already know. The teachers talk about all underlying knowledge as important for continued learning. The pupils support each other and doing so their knowledge and understanding develop when handling different subject matter in more than one way and in more than one language.

García's [6] work about educational principles such as social justice and social practice is about emphasizing the pupils' different competencies as equivalent and important to build upon in instruction. When teachers appreciate and see pupils' diverse and underlying knowledge as resources and when the instruction is systematically based on pupils' different skills, then the schooling can be said to be grounded in García's [6] principles of social justice and social practice. All languages and all knowledge are equally valuable and important for continued learning [4–7]. Cummins [5] and Sarstrand Marekovic [17] highlight educational strategies that teachers can use. The strategies involve supporting comprehension, assisting language production in all subjects, taking advantage of pupils' multi-lingualism, and strengthening the knowledge-language.

The teachers discuss all these aspects in the interview. They say that they support and value the pupils' understanding and continued knowledge development in different subjects. The IMS-pupils are given the opportunity to use their underlying knowledge, for example, in Social Studies, when the class discusses economic systems or in Mathematics when pupils show how different mathematics calculations can be carried out, set up, and explained. The pupils' different ways of solving mathematics problems, previous knowledge about socio-economics or helping each other understand in different languages, form the basis for instruction and discussion in the classroom.

According to Cummins [5] the language or languages the immigrant pupils speak best, their knowledge-language(s), fulfill an important function and strengthen their ability to learn. This is valid also in the multi-lingual classroom where the teachers do not have a command of all the classroom languages [5]. The interviewed teachers tell about not being able to speak all the languages spoken by their pupils. This in turn means that they do not always understand what the pupils say, how they translate or explain something for each other, for example, in Mathematics. The teachers still believe what is most important is for pupils to twist and turn their learning and knowledge. In such a way, they process their knowledge in several ways.

## **7.2 Underlying knowledge – uninterrupted past and started future**

Swedish/Swedish as a second language appears as a significant component and important content in all IMS instruction, perhaps the most important. Increased collaboration over the subject and level boundaries and integrating subjects, for example, Mathematics and English, is emphasized as important for the pupils' education. Both IMS-pupils and their teachers seek increased opportunities for the pupils to study more subjects at the compulsory school level and in the secondary school national program.

Pupils' learning and cognitive development, the importance of teachers' and pupils' expectations, attitudes, engagement, and interaction, are discussed by Cummins and Schechter [14], Sarstrand Marekovic [17]. Fundamental for new learning is that pupils can use their underlying knowledge and learning, that their knowledge is respected and that high demands are set. Another important aspect in this context is the teacher's ability in the instruction to refer to all the pupils' knowledge and ways of teaching and learning [25]. Sarstrand Marekovic [17] points out positive and negative experiences from earlier schooling and recognition as fundamental with regard to pupils' success in school.

Collaboration over subject boundaries is examples of how within IMS, teachers take advantage of pupils' knowledge and interests, and they refer to pupils' underlying competencies in different school subjects. This way the IMS-pupils' background

knowledge is respected and utilized in instruction. The teachers say that the IMS-pupils can be offered to participate in the subjects, English or Social Studies, for example, in the national program. Some pupils may attend individual lessons in subjects without being admitted, while other pupils may be admitted and attend the national course.

Nonetheless, a shortage of places in the classroom may limit or set a stop to such collaboration.

### 7.3 Utilized past – native language and study counselor

Pupils' web or net of languages, thought, and knowledge develops in interaction with the environment [8, 18] and dependence on others when pupils take advantage of their underlying resources in different learning contexts. Cummins and Schecter [14], Cummins [3–5], García [6], [7], and Williams [15] discuss this in terms of continued and deepened learning.

The aforementioned means that pupils develop their expertise in language as well as in other areas when they use their language, knowledge, and learning, their skills in different contexts. To be able to use underlying skills in school instruction without distinguishing them, to be supported by study guidance in a language that one understands so as to understand the instruction given in another language, can be discussed in terms of translanguaging ([4–7]: [15]). Translanguaging appears in this context as an ecological teaching and learning strategy [8, 18], a strategy that makes learning possible. Ecological strategy may be the teachers describing pupils who do not keep their language aside, but rather let their language and knowledge interact.

### 7.4 Urgency and challenge to become eligible – postponed future

Changed requirements and circumstances within IMS have brought increased collaboration between the teachers in IMS and in the national subject courses. Changed requirements and circumstances within IMS have also brought an increased number of subjects and levels of instruction being offered to the pupils.

The challenge that both teachers and IMS-pupils face, to be qualified for the public secondary school, is discussed by researchers such as Bunar [9] and Cummins [5]. Immigrant pupils' difficulties in obtaining eligibility depend on how the instruction is organized, whether the content is comprehensible for the pupils and on the amount of time [5, 9]. The pupils, who arrive late during their compulsory school years, have just a few years to achieve passing grades for the compulsory school subjects. Teachers' need in-service training in order to meet these pupils in the best way and the pupils need support in both language and knowledge areas in order to understand the content in the given instruction.

These topics come up in the interviews with IMS-teachers who teach in an organization under constant change. The number of pupils varies; the pupils' school histories differ. The common goal of the instruction within IMS, however, is for the pupils to be qualified for the national program in the public secondary school before they turn 20 years old.

*They really have to hurry [...] much depends on their own hurry in determining whether they are prepared for further study or for a vocational program [... ...] because of their own hurry they dismiss certain opportunities [...] it is not because we choose not to, but because they are in a hurry to see an actual vocational training or a job sometime in the future.*

The above quotation visualizes how the age criterion appears for both pupils and teachers as interrupting the past and postponing the future [12], as a system brake that makes it impossible for them in terms of hurrying and study pace, and in terms of orientation and goals and content in the studies.

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