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## TEACHING IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY INTEGRATING INTERNATIONAL ISSUES



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### Abstract

This study focused on enabling students to become aware of the global society and to become prepared to be adults in this society. A description of curricular change and international issues are discussed from a historical vantage point. Quotes from the curriculum and the discrimination act will be followed by short reflections, incorporating our experience from Farsta Gymsnium, Stockholm, Sweden. Finally, a focus of discrimination of students is discussed. These multi-cultural classrooms allow for opportunities for learning about the outside world and its many challenges.

### Introduction

How do we make our students aware of the world outside? How do we prepare our students for adult life in a global society? How does curriculum change over time? In this article we are going to describe our work with international issues according to curriculum and reality in a multicultural society starting with a short historical background of the educational system in Sweden. Quotes from the curriculum and the discrimination act will be followed by short reflections, incorporating our experience from Farsta Gymsnium, Stockholm, Sweden. It is not always easy to live up to the high standards in the provisions. Global economy and politics influence the thoughts of both adult and teenage citizens in a country. When you work in a school with 60% immigrants, as we do, it can be even harder when students are exposed to influences from different countries with sometimes opposite view on the course of events and history. When there is no common background there will be no common view. Nevertheless it is our mission to create that common view.

### Historical Background and School Today

In Sweden we have a long tradition of education. In 1842 it was decided that all children should go to school and learn how to read, write and count. Church and

clergymen were quite powerful at that time and they thought it would be a good thing if people could read religious books to raise morality in Sweden. Everyone should get a basic education but only a few went on to secondary upper school and even fewer to university. We have changed our education system a number of times since then. The changes follow the political climate and from 1970s an integrated upper secondary school took form with two year vocational education and three year theoretical education. In 1994 we got a three year course based school that should give everyone qualification for higher education. Internationally our results dropped, in the PISA study (**OECD.org**) it shows that reading ability has dropped from above average to average, but still we have more students continuing to higher studies than ever. These results make the challenge even bigger for teachers.

Number of students participating in upper secondary education by age 2010	
Age	Number
16 years	109,281
17 years	118,861
18 years	119,087
19 years	2,598

(scb.se)

In Sweden almost every teenager goes to upper secondary school and we put a lot of money into education. We as a nation spent 2010 almost 36 billion SEK (0, 5% of state expenses) on upper secondary school, the cost for each student were 92 500 SEK, approximately 13 000 USD, according to Yearbook of Educational statistics 2012, (scb.se). The cost includes teaching, school materials, school lunches, healthcare and administration. School is free of charge and includes lunches for every student. In addition to these costs each student gets a student grant of about 1000 SEK a month, during school year. According to Education at a glance 2012, OECD indicators, (<http://www.oecd.org/edu/EAG2012%20-%20Country%20note%20-%20Sweden5.pdf>) we spend 11 400 USD per student from primary to tertiary education.

From July 1st 2011 we have a new Education Act passed by parliament. The European Commission describes the system in their Overview on national education, (eacea.ec.europa.eu)

*The new structure for the upper secondary school – comprising 6 higher education preparatory programmes and 12 vocational programmes – provides apprenticeship training and the introduction of an upper secondary diploma, one for general upper secondary education and one for vocational education and training programmes. An upper secondary vocational diploma can be obtained through vocational education at school or through an apprenticeship scheme. Students in any of the 12 vocational programmes should be given the possibility to follow courses leading to the upper secondary diploma giving access to higher education.*

### **Vocational programmes**

Child and Recreation Programme (BF)  
Building and Construction Programme (BA)  
Electricity and Energy Programme (EE)  
Vehicle and Transport Programme (FT)  
Business and Administration Programme (HA)  
Handicraft Programme (HV)  
Hotel and Tourism Programme (HT)  
Industrial Technology Programme (IN)  
Natural Resource Use Programme (NB)  
Restaurant Management and Food Programme (RL)  
HVAC and Property Maintenance Programme (VF)  
Health and Social Care Programme (VO)

### **Higher education preparatory programmes**

Business Management and Economics Programme (EK)  
Arts Programme (ES)  
Humanities Programme (HU)  
Natural Science Programme (NA)  
Social Science Programme (SA)  
Technology Programme (TE)

([www.skolverket.se](http://www.skolverket.se), 2011)

In Sweden we need educated people since we are a small nation with comparatively few inhabitants (9, 5 millions) and we have to rely on everybody's capacity to make progress in business and international contact. The idea that everyone shall get education is a good one but it does not work out completely. Not everyone finishes upper secondary school; they drop out to work instead. According to Statistics Sweden ([scb.se](http://scb.se)) 24% of our students dropped out of upper secondary school in year 2007.

The Education Act stipulates that students in upper secondary school are to embrace democratic values and respect human rights. School is also supposed to give students knowledge about Swedish culture as well as knowledge about Nordic, European and international culture to encourage international contacts and studies abroad. We as a nation depend on the economic and political development in other states. We shall discuss how nations relate to each other and how we take part in an international community without losing our Swedish inheritance. One of the questions we raise is how our students as individuals can take part in a global community either by working or studying abroad. Good and solid international contacts will help us to prosper and we, their teachers, are to make our students aware of that.

## **Curriculum and Reality**

One of the study preparatory programmes are Business management and economics .We will comment on the suggestions from the National board of education in the light of our own work experience teaching economic and social science classes,

we will comment our quotes from the book Upper Secondary School 2011 edited by National board of education.

*Economic relationships in the world are complex and changes taking place in one area can often have consequences in completely different areas. The education should thus develop students' knowledge of economic conditions in society, about the conditions countries face for trade, and about the foundations for international groupings and agreements. It should also provide knowledge about the conditions for sustainable development, not only from environmental but also economic and social viewpoints. For studies in economics, knowledge of history is central. The education should develop students' knowledge of history so that they understand the present, and can reason over causal relationships and the consequences of different decisions. ... p. 197 (www.skolverket.se, 2011)*

*The use of English-language sources and training in communication in English contributes to developing a language that can be used in international contexts. p. 202 (www.skolverket.se, 2011)*

*The diploma goals state that students should develop knowledge of history as a foundation for understanding the present. This can apply to different aspects of entrepreneurship, from long-term industrial development and different structural forms of entrepreneurship to more specific questions such as trade union cooperation and gender equality in vocational life. This can also concern questions about migration, problems in the welfare state, and the effect of globalization on people's living standards in different countries. p. 199 (www.skolverket.se, 2011)*

Our school, Farsta gymnasium, is a school with a high level, 60%, of first and second generation immigrants, when we study an international issue that is a great asset. We have firsthand information on politics and conflicts throughout the world through our students and their parents. Then again many differences appear and cannot be resolved due to cultural collisions. When we study history it is from a western point of view and many of our students origin from Africa, Asia and Middle East. Those who are new immigrants in Sweden often have a good school background and they have studied history from another perspective. In history class we study economic history and we study i.e. industrialization, protectionism, trade, colonization. When a Swede is thinking of industry as prosperity an African may think of it as oppression, which often gives an animated discussion that sometimes escalate to real conflicts between students that can last for weeks. The bright side of it is the golden opportunity we get to talk about perspective, the value of different sources to knowledge. As long as the sources are in English we can compare them, see differences and similarities. We also discuss international relationships today and put it on a timeline, asking questions about trade, different wars, revolutions and UN as a guardian for peace and equality.

*... All subjects in the education should contribute to students developing language skills and that modern technology is used as a tool in searching for information, presentations and communication... p. 197 (www.skolverket.se, 2011)*

In Sweden we are very much influenced by Pauline Gibbons and this shows even in our curriculum *...Teaching programs in all curriculum areas must therefore aim to integrate "language" and "content"...* p. 6 (Gibbons, 2002). In Farsta Gymnasium we have emphasized the importance of language skills. All teachers have been educated about learning and developing the Swedish language so that every student regardless of background shall be able to achieve knowledge and increase their academic capacity. We have discussed how every teacher in his or her classroom can contribute to increased language skills. How does a teacher in Mathematics or Economy work to develop language skills?

All of our students have their own laptop which is a blessing and a curse. The curse is the distraction provided by all kinds of media i.e. YouTube and face book, students are more interested in funny video clips and what their friends are up to than our education. The blessing is that we easily can find new research, statistics and economic facts and use it in our teaching. We can read news from all continents and include it in any subject. We can compare the same event described in different media and different culture and political climate. Since we have students from all over the world we can get direct translations so that we can get news written in languages other than English which broaden our minds and gives a more gradated debate. Using the computers as a study tool our students not only learn to handle the internet and compare sources of knowledge, they also learn how to use the most common computer programmes - word, excel and PowerPoint for writing papers and making presentation so that they are prepared for life after school.

*The diploma goals emphasize international economic relationships. This can be about the reciprocal dependence of countries, economic development and distribution of resources. It can also involve the role of the company and its actions in an international environment or with international customers. p. 199 (www.skolverket.se, 2011)*

By comparing national economy, comparing national GDP, we can make students realize the difference between countries. Some countries like Qatar is very wealthy and others like Eritrea are extremely poor. We raise questions about the impact national accounts have on individuals and everyday life regarding life quality and work. We also raise questions of the impact on commercial and industrial life as well as the countries development. We look at statistics about income in different groups as well as nations. We compare the access and use of water discussing the impact on hunger, health and business. We raise questions about what you as an individual can do, what UN can do and what the countries government can do. We talk about natural resources. What will happen to a country that is depending on one natural resource i.e. oil when the resource is emptied out.

Each student is to write a paper about an issue to pass their exam. When writing students have to formulate a question, discuss and draw a conclusion. Curriculum states what students have to achieve and what topics they shall include in their paper.

*The diploma goals state that students should develop knowledge of how people think, feel and act. Psychology provides a basis for understanding established theories on human behavior in areas such as marketing and leadership. This knowledge also provides support for understanding legal judgments, such as those involving questions about legal predictability, reliability and credibility. p. 198 (www.skolverket.se, 2011)*

*The subject psychology develops knowledge of the thinking, feelings, behavior and interaction of human beings. It is knowledge which is of importance in many economic and legal contexts. p. 203 (www.skolverket.se, 2011)*

Knowledge in psychology gives everybody a tool to handle people around them. In our school with students from countries all over the world that is essential. It is a valuable knowledge for their future life as businessmen as well regardless if they are working in Sweden or elsewhere.

*The upper secondary school should provide a good foundation for work and further studies and also for personal development and active participation in the life of society. The education should be organized so that it promotes a sense of social community and develops students' ability to independently and jointly with others acquire, deepen and apply knowledge. p. 8 (www.skolverket.se, 2011)*

The education act stipulates that we are to give our students the tools to be part of a community, a study group or be part of a social context. Knowledge about the process taking place in a group or have people relate to each other in various situations are skills they need no matter what career they choose.

We are to give our students a good foundation for work so that they who do not want to study can contribute to society. It is hard to get a job after upper secondary school since employers expect a well-educated workforce. Unemployment among our young is relatively high. In one of Sweden's largest newspaper, Dagens Nyheter, (DN.se, 2012) you could read about statistics on unemployment amongst the young, 15-24 years, that unemployment, according to Statistics Sweden was 22, 9%. This figure include students looking for an extra income, if they were excluded the number would drop to 14, 6%. The difficulty to find work forces some students to remain in school even if they do not want to be there, which creates a difficulty for teachers trying to educate unwilling students.

We shall also prepare our students for further studies. According to Yearbook of Educational Statistics 2012 (scb.se) we can see that approximately every fourth student that completed their studies in upper secondary school 2008/09 after one year had begun their studies in higher education.

7.14 Transition rate for upper secondary school leavers. Percentage university entrants by the end of the academic year

Program i gymnasieskolan programmes in upper secondary school	Antal avgångna från gymnasieskolans program 2008/09 Students who has finished upper secondary school 2008/9			Därav andel som påbörjat högskolestudier t.o.m. 2009/10 Part of students who had started higher education 2009/10		
	Totally	Female	Male	Totally	Female	Male
All programmes	97,923	59,532	48,391	26	29	22

(scb.se)

## Discrimination of Students

In Swedish Discrimination act, published on the Swedish government's website, (regeringen.se) you find a definition of discrimination, chapter 1 section 1. You can also read what school has to do in case of an act of discrimination of any kind section 5-8.

### *Discrimination Act*

#### *Chapter 1. Introductory provisions*

##### *The purpose of the Act*

*Section 1 The purpose of this Act is to combat discrimination and in other ways promote equal rights and opportunities regardless of sex, transgender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation or age...Section 7 If an education provider becomes aware that a child, pupil or student participating in or applying for the provider's activities considers that he or she has been subjected in connection with these activities to harassment or sexual harassment, the education provider is obliged to investigate the circumstances surrounding the alleged harassment and where appropriate take the measures that can reasonably be demanded to prevent harassment in the future.*

Since Sweden is a multicultural and democratic society we do not accept discrimination of any kind. We have a law that stipulates how discrimination shall be prevented and stopped in every aspect of society. The law has a special section for education and each and every school has to have a plan how to prevent discrimination; the plan for equal treatment. When our National board of education makes their inspection they check if the school has a plan and how the work for equality shows in every day activity. Working against discrimination is easy in theory but a bit more difficult in reality since prejudice exists everywhere and within everyone. We talk a lot about prejudice and human rights in our society and globally as well as behavior in school. Our student's originating from different countries and cultures makes it easy to compare prejudice in different countries and try to figure out why it exists. Is it fear? Is it



a feeling of superiority? These discussions are to take place in every subject. One way to overcome prejudice is to help students choose partners for discussions or problem solving. We sometimes have our exams in form of “Sitting down drama”. A student has to be someone else i.e. an industrial leader and a worker somewhere in the world and they will have to try to think as them. That is easily done in social studies but it is time consuming to prepare. As well as classroom education on the matter each student has to have time to prepare and think about the person he or she is supposed to be and in what context that person is acting. They also have to prepare questions for the other character. The actual exam takes form as a round table discussion. Most students think it is a good and fun way to learn even if it is difficult to imagine being someone else.

We also have groups in our schools that are to prohibit and resolve cases of discrimination. These groups consists of adults in school, teachers, school nurse, counselor, headmaster and sometimes personal from school canteen or caretaker. If someone in school notices some kind of discrimination they report it to the group as well as deal with the matter. Students are to report to teachers for help dealing with the injustice. At first we talk to the participants one by one and if they agree we have a meeting to get both parties do listen to one another. We hope that this will increase understanding of other people and we hope to get our students understand that in a workplace, in society it is necessary to get along with others. Many of our young believe that respect and democracy means having things done their way and we have to help them see that respect is a two way street. Democracy is not one persons will it is the will of the majority.

## **Conclusion**

Education in Sweden has changed over time from being a school for acquiring basic skills to an investigating school preparing students for a life in a global society. We utilize modern technology in our education. We compare news in different countries and discuss why there sometimes are discrepancies in the news report. We discuss different matters in an attempt to get our students to realize that we all are depending on one another for prosperity. We talk a lot about prejudice and through different methods i.e. pairing students up for to solve a task we will accomplish an insight about the necessity of being able to communicate with others. We debate cultural differences to make students aware of different ways of life and make them prepared for meeting other cultural. Since we work in a globalized environment the discussions sometimes are animated due to cultural collision. On the other hand we achieve better understanding of different ways having students from all over the world

The challenges we meet are closely connected to the fact that our school is a melting pot for students with different origin, culture, religion and mother tongue. The awareness of the outside world is both wide and narrow i.e. many students have their feet in two cultures and understand similarities and differences. The greatest challenge we meet is to create a study climate making students respect one another. We have to deal with prejudice from various countries not only our own. It is a difficult task but our students at least get several “eye-opening” experiences that they are likely to gain from in future work life. In a global community it is essential with an international network.

By using “old” school contacts our students get an opportunity that others, from mono cultural schools lack.

Even though we use a variety of methods and discuss global matters in our education the questions remains as long as the world is changing:

- How do we make our students aware of the world outside?
- How do we prepare our students for adult life in a global society?

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