Knowledge I brought with me could not be used, it was not in Swedish

In recent years the Swedish education system has experienced a rise in the number of newly arrived students speaking different languages and with different school backgrounds. A newly arrived student is according to school legislation (Skollagen, 2010:800) a student under 18 years of age, who has migrated to Sweden lacking basic skills in the Swedish language.

This paper aims to shed light on a group of newly arrived students’ perspectives on conditions for learning in the Swedish upper secondary education system. Using Bourdieu’s concept of capital we critically discuss organisational and pedagogical responses in the education system as experienced by 19 newly arrived students.

Findings indicate that students’ performances using Swedish for academic purposes and being able to analyse Swedish culture are crucial skills. Simultaneously, unsuccessful students have to remain in Language introduction focusing on learning Swedish. Some students show resistance to current demands in mainstream teaching, which can be traced in students who resent not being able to make use of their previous learning and skills in different languages without using Swedish. As individuals, they are left with an experience of deficit, having no or little knowledge about Swedish culture and language. This is expressed by one student saying that sometimes knowledge from her native country cannot be used because it is in another language and that subject teaching often stipulates knowledge about Swedish history and Swedish kings.

At stake is newly arrived students’ educational careers, and their chances in society. “Education is my passport”, one student says. The authors argue for acknowledging students’ various language knowledge and cultural backgrounds in teaching, thereby improving students’ opportunities to receive recognition of their existing cultural capital while offering them a gateway to continued education and social inclusion.

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