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Urban Schools in Sweden.

Between Social Predicaments, the Power of Stigma and Relational Dilemmas

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ABSTRACT

Multicultural urban schools in Sweden are facing two major challenges. First, the communities they serve are typically stigmatized and economically impoverished, leading to growing concerns regarding the quality of education, lack of credibility and outflow of students. The second challenge is the ambivalent relations with students' parents (presumable consumers and partners, but who are also regarded as culturally conservative) and with a broader community, such as public authorities and universities. I argue that we cannot understand the practical operations and outcomes of multicultural schools if we only look at curriculum, individual attitudes or freedom of choice policy and do not examine the broader challenges facing these institutions. What is needed is a more relational approach linking together the interests of different groups, policy changes, modes of representation and the educators' practices.

KEYWORDS: *Urban education, community, stigma, relations, multicultural.*

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Introduction

Urban decline and housing segregation along ethnic and social boundaries in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö have for the last decade attracted a great deal of public attention, provoked pragmatic private and institutional practices and initiated policy responses in Sweden. News media have offered extensive coverage, although often cast in a dark light, of disadvantaged neighborhoods' plight in terms of unemployment, poor language skills, discrimination, physical decays, criminality and underachieving schools (Borevi, 2003; Bunar, 2001; Molina, 1997; Ristilammi, 1994; Stigendal, 2005; Strömblad, 2004). When middle-class families and ethnic Swedes moved out, there were not only empty apartments they left behind, into which newly arrived refugees were placed, but also shattered social networks incapable of sustaining informal social control over the local public spaces (Dahlstedt, 2005). The myth of youth gangs terrorizing the local community and plotting new crimes was born out of this sense claiming, "there are no role models and nobody cares what young people are doing while hanging around" (Sernhede, 2007). Development in Sweden resembles similar processes reported from other west European and American metropolises (Andersson, 1990; Bourdieu, 1999; Jargowsky, 1997; Mingione, 1996; O'Connor, Tilly, & Bobo, 2001; Venkatesh, 2000; Wilson, 1987). It is nonetheless surprising how deep the

marginalization of certain urban neighborhoods has become in a strong social-liberal welfare state of Swedish model. It is no less surprising how little this reality is known abroad, where the picturesque image of a small, rich, trouble-free country in northern Europe has prevailed for many years.¹

The national and local governments responded to urban deterioration with a set of traditional welfare instruments and with some seemingly new approaches (Governmental Proposal, 1997/98:165). Huge urban renewal projects were for example enacted to aid social development and improve life chances for people living there (Bunar, 2004; 2005). New integration, anti-discrimination and metropolitan policies were supposed to boost the promotion of cultural diversity, and social justice and discursive offensives for multicultural society were undertaken in order to thwart public stigmatization² of disadvantaged neighborhoods. One unintended consequence of this concoction is that poverty, urban segregation, welfare experiments and murky ideology of multiculturalism have in the public discourse blended together into one single category: *multicultural urban neighborhoods*.

Since enrollment in elementary schools in Sweden is still mainly based on the attendance zones principle, the social, demographic and symbolic composition of the local community is reflected by the schools' internal compositions. Neighborhoods with a bad reputation and low status have schools with an equally bad reputation and low status label (Anyon, 1997; Bunar 2001; Gustafson, 2006; Rivkin, 1994; Runfors, 2003). Many working class families, and especially many unemployed and migrant families in neighborhoods, entails many working class kids and ethnic minority students in local schools, which has bestowed upon schools the same multicultural label as their local communities (Roosens, 1995). Finally, a number of school improvement projects have been launched to increase pedagogical efficiency and students' achievements (Axelsson & Bunar, 2006). Thus, poverty, urban segregation, pedagogical experiments and the murky ideology of multiculturalism have blended together into one single category: *multicultural urban schools*.

Multicultural and urban aspects have consequently, in the public discourse, conflated into an unfortunate set of social problems, negative symbolic representations and clumsy political responses forcing parents and students to position themselves in different ways with respect to the neighborhoods' and schools' troubles. Strategies vary from voice to exit (Hirschman, 1970), that is, from mobilizing community resources to help diverting the negative development to moving out to other, considered to be "better," or more stable, neighborhoods and schools. Thus, it is not peculiar that the freedom of choice policy in compulsory education, as a warrant for an educational exit strategy, has been so enthusiastically embraced

among parents in multicultural urban neighborhoods, not only in Sweden (Fusarelli, 2003). It provides an additional opportunity for the children of those who could not or, for various reasons, did not want to move from their neighborhoods to leave local schools (Skolverket, 2003a). Furthermore, even schools began positioning themselves in relation to adverse public representations and the clients' concomitant strategies. Adoption of new, fancy pedagogical profiles and offensive PR-strategies are among some of the schools' actions in the newly established educational market (Bunar, 2008a).

The questions I address in this article reflect two major challenges facing multicultural urban schools in Sweden. Firstly, there are social and discursive challenges in the form of economical deprivation and negative representations. It includes having students living in relative poverty and suffering from low status, bad reputation and the lack of credibility. Secondly, immigration, high turn-over rates among students and increasing competition on an emerging educational quasi-market (Barlett, Propper, Wilson & Le Grand, 1994; Levacic, 1995) have posed a number of serious relational dilemmas with which teachers and principals need to deal. Issues in need of resolution include the prospect of becoming a community school, rebuilding the broken ties with parents and getting used to considering parents as consumers of their (academic) products. The purpose of this article is consequently to describe and analyze some of the main features of these two challenges as well as the reactions from some of the schools' major agents.³

Discursive and social challenges

Analyzing the urban decay in North American and European cities during the turbulent 1990s, Wacquant (1996a; 1996b) asserted that a new form of advanced marginality is accruing in Europe as an upshot of deindustrialization, changing modes of traditional welfare state organization, ideological transformation and dissolution of local social networks. Additionally, the process of stigmatization of certain neighborhoods, their inhabitants and institutions seemed to be ubiquitous and deeply engrained equally in the "local universe of black belt," which Wacquant labels the American inner-city ghettos populated by African-American and "red belt," as he calls the areas around Paris in France, populated by the impoverished and unemployed working class. Even Loury (2002; see Wilson 1987; 1997) acknowledges the power of racial stigma and ascribes it to the social isolation and negative perception of urban ghettos. Perhaps the most far-reaching effect is the tendency among young people to internalize the stigma and make it a part of their own identity, a way of

understanding themselves, of valuing their relations and of assessing their opportunities (Back, 1996). When the outside representations and structural constraints have been adopted as a part of one's own shortcomings or as something "normal" – or to paraphrase C.W. Mills (1971), when the social problems have been transformed into personal issues – then the process of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991) has been accomplished. Stigmatization is thus an important mechanism in perpetuating neoliberal public policies practically based on the principle of blaming the victim (Apple, 2006; Wilson, 1997)

There are however no free-floating discourses operating in contexts sterilized of social, ethnic and racial inequalities and struggles. All representations, no matter how positive or negative, are being deployed in a particular context and perform particular social functions. This "economy of language", as Gans (1996) calls it, in order to be properly understood and analyzed, has to be therefore related not only to ethnic or racial composition of the population in multicultural urban neighborhoods, but also to their economical reality. In the case of Sweden, the figures are utterly gloomy, although much improved in comparison with the middle of the 1990s, when the economical crises, a wave of immigration and White/middle-class flight (Andersson, 1998; Wilson & Taube, 2006) reached its peak, causing the highest rates of unemployment since the Great Depression in the early 1930s.

Let me illustrate this with the example of Rosengård, a sprawling neighborhood at the outskirts of Malmö, the third largest city in Sweden.⁴ The majority of Rosengård's 20 000 inhabitants are of immigrant origin, many of them recently arrived refugees from Iraq, Iran, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Somalia. In the years 2005-2006, 22 percent of the population was receiving social welfare (just a few percent in the country), the source of their only income, and the unemployment rate was about 15 percent (around 7 percent in the entire country).⁵

How, then, does the process of stigmatization, underpinned and sustained by strained economical circumstances in Swedish multicultural urban neighborhoods, work in practice in relation to local elementary schools?

The student outflow

One of the most obvious and economically most devastated consequences is the huge outflow of students. In some neighborhoods in Stockholm, up to 40 percent of students living in the schools' attendance zones "vote with their feet" (Ladd, 2003) and go to either other public schools in socially stronger (and more "Swedish") neighborhoods or to free (independent) schools irrespective of pedagogical orientation (Bunar & Kallstenius, 2007).⁶ The student

outflow is not solely a major blow to schools' economies and organization, including difficulties planning whether to hire or fire staff, but also to schools' reputation and status. The more students who leave one school, and especially when that school tends to experience student exodus, the worse the school reputation and status will become, an occurrence which would eventually prompt more to leave. A vicious and self-perpetuating circle unfolds with the capacity to close down a school because ultimately nobody would want to attend it. The reaction from neo-liberal educational scholars (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hoxby, 2001; 2003; Sandström, 2002) to this development is enthusiastic because it proves market forces are doing well and the "bad" schools should be indeed closed down. But, what if schools are not concerned with inferiority with regard to their core activity--teaching and inculcating citizenship values into children--but with what position their multicultural configurations holds in the symbolical hierarchy in the society? What if they are losing students, money and reputation solely because they are catering to the culturally diverse and socially weak community, and not because they are inferior and deserve to be closed down?

In their study on why students from multicultural neighborhoods in the city of Stockholm are leaving their schools and enrolling schools in socially better-off inner city neighborhoods mainly populated by ethnic Swedes, Bunar & Kallstenius (2006; 2007; see Gustafson, 2006; Skawonius, 2005) found that major reasons included the following: firstly, learning "proper" Swedish (Gruber, 2005; Runfors, 2003), or in Bourdieu's terminology, (1991) acquiring the social part of the language practice too, beside the linguistic one, was considered as impossible in a multicultural school without children having Swedish as their first language; secondly, to avoid stigmatization, that is, to detach themselves from the prevailing perceptions about multicultural neighborhoods and everything else associated with them: individuals, their knowledge and diligence; groups, their cultures and ways of life; institutions, their quality and standards (Ball 2003; Reay, 2004); thirdly, to get access to social networks with the majority of the population, not necessarily because they expect to profit from the peer-effect (Monkman, Ronald & Théraméne, 2005; Szulkin, 2007) – which anyhow does not seem to be so strong, at least in the Swedish context, as many believe – but first and foremost because there are not sure whether the values and norms developed and acquired in a multicultural setting are compatible with the Swedish cultural mainstream (Bunar, 2008c). Very few students, if any, expressed a deep dissatisfaction with instructional quality, teachers' engagement and ability to teach or with the violent and academically hostile environment as a reason for leaving. As a matter of fact, some multicultural urban schools have won (or were ranked among the best) the Stockholm municipality award for their quality of work. The

interviewed students often highlighted the friendly climate, teachers' commitment and even a relative affluence of schools, with renovated buildings, well-equipped libraries, tutoring programs, access to native language teaching, etc.⁷ Nevertheless, they decided to go. Remember, we are not talking about a few students looking for some alternative pedagogically or religiously profiled schools, but about a regular bussing policy orchestrated and performed by parents.

The acquisition of "proper" Swedish, high status and strong social networks are not a part of schools' pedagogical operations that can simply be improved by increasing teachers' salaries, forcing them to take their job more seriously or to get more education. They are primarily social and symbolical factors derived from the prevailing attitudes in the society and visions of what it means to be immigrant, grow up in an "immigrant neighborhood" and attend an "immigrant school". Being misrecognized (Bourdieu, 1977) as a matter of failing educational standards in heavily bureaucratized, public school stigmatization and the outflow of students, as one of its outcomes, impedes multicultural urban schools' development threatening their survival.

The lack of credibility

The student outflow and their explanations reveal another menace, beside emerging economical problems and entrenched stigmatization, to multicultural urban schools. They are chronically suffering from the lack of credibility as an institution capable of providing its students with the normal standards of knowledge, including primarily language skills, but also introducing them into "correct" Swedish norms, such as values and codes of conduct. One of the most excellent illustrations of this point was given by a head of the local Board of Education in one of the administratively self-ruling districts in southern Stockholm. The district has for a long time struggled with economical problems and ethnic stigma. Almost half the students at elementary school age (6-16 years) do not attend local schools. When I asked her during an interview the reasons for this exodus, the explanation was as follows:

Generally speaking, I believe we have good schools. But, we also have a problem. Our problem is not what kind of education our kids get here, that's not a problem, because they got a great education, I can guarantee that. Our problem is credibility. Does the public believe the same? In all official documents, it's being stated that schools ought to work more with integration of immigrant children. What should we do actually? We can't decide who shall live here, because when it's being said that we are gonna promote integration it often means we got to blend together with Swedes. I could say we have children here with 73 different first languages. We have an amazing, an incredible integration if one thinks it's worth

something. But, there are not so many Swedes. So, if that is a normalizing standard, we don't have it, because it depends on who lives here, and that's something we can't affect. I can't say to the people, "So bad you have moved to our school, because it's going to be a little bit ticklish now," or "So pity you gonna move out, I'm so sorry!"

Integration is a major paradigm for managing ethnic relations in the Swedish public policy of today. The paradigm is also backed up by a set of documents and instructions (Governmental Proposal, 1997/98:165) stipulating that integration means mutual respect for cultural traditions and identities, the principle of non-assimilation and non-discrimination and a promotion of cultural diversity in all public arenas (Södergran, 2000). Though this definition has largely remained an elusive paradigm at odds with the current development in and around multicultural urban schools, in practice integration has come to imply a mere physical presence in a milieu where Swedes are the majority. The goal seems to be the situational integration itself, or the geographical de-segregation, with fewer concerns about what quality that presence may have in terms of forging relations with socially strong networks or on the contrary being completely marginalized, as is the case for many of the school-changing students Bunar & Kallstenius (2007) interviewed and observed in their study. The powerful message clarifying what the desirable integration is, covertly or explicitly, is being disseminated through various channels into the public and reinforced by media coverage, for example, of the "forgotten children of the welfare state living in ghetto-style public housing" or statements by leading politicians urging the establishment of meeting places "so that immigrant children can meet their peer Swedes". Even parents' opinion of different schools, relying more on "hot knowledge," as Ball (2003) puts it (ethnic, class and racial composition, reputation, status), than on "cold knowledge" (supplementary programs, instructional innovations, teachers' education), belongs to this category. In all these examples, the multicultural milieus are explicitly denounced as inadequate and in need of a life-sustaining infusion of majority population, expecting to bring with them the "proper" language, culture and codes of conduct.

Once again, there is a rising gap between multicultural urban schools and schools in other parts of the cities, not because of differences in the quality of education,⁸ but because of the disparity between the prevailing perception of what desirable integration (the management of ethnic relations) is and the ethnic and class composition of multicultural urban schools. This discrepancy is one of the major sources of disbelief about schools' credibility. Many parents opt for an exit strategy rather than staying and trying to change the public opinion and the

underlying prejudices and xenophobic sentiments in the society (Governmental Public Inquiry, 2006:79) that entails the lack of credibility and reinforcing the power of stigma. Another consequence is that many teachers, principals and heads of local Boards of Education are increasingly becoming disillusioned with their schools' possibility to ever derail the current development and restore strong credibility. Some are even inclined to blame all of their problems, even if it is obviously a matter of internal communication pattern or a lack of strong leadership, on segregation and discrimination. If nothing changes, this could soon unfold into the most devastating process for multicultural urban schools. The peril of living up to low expectations entailed by impaired credibility, as another outcome of stigmatization, is absolutely paramount.

Disarranged confidence and social enclosure

Having interviewed and had contact with numerous students in multicultural urban schools over the past decade, I realized one sentiment prevailed when discussing the quality of their schools: uncertainty. They did not really know if their schools were good or bad, or if they were properly preparing them for the further education (upper secondary and eventually university for some) or not. Here is where the ambivalence arises. On the one hand, and as aforementioned, students could tell long and persuasive stories about how wonderful schools, staff and everything else was. But, as soon as we started talking about a school's reputation and status, on the other hand, they started expressing distrust in the education they were receiving. Since schools had such a bad reputation, there must be something wrong with them, the students assumed, even if they at first could not recall what that something might be. Is the power of stigma stronger than first-hand experiences? I anticipated earlier in this article that may be the case, through the process of symbolic violence. But, how does it work in practice, and what are the sources of uncertainty? There are two points to highlight here.

Firstly, the youth are concerned about how the fact that the majority of them are of immigrant origin affects the expectations of their teachers. Do they really believe these students are capable of attaining the highest possible educational standards? Furthermore, they are concerned about how their immigrant background, in combination with neighborhood and school stigmas, is going to affect the expectations of teachers at upper-secondary schools, universities and future employers. Are they going to believe students possess sufficient language (both the linguistic and social dimensions) and cultural skills (a notoriously elusive concept, but constantly deployed in the labor market) to get a job, or

whether their grades really reflect the level of attained knowledge? These two concerns are constantly being reinforced by countless rumors about the harsh reality that schools' former students face once they reach the upper secondary level of education. Let me illustrate this point with a few excerpts from student interviews.⁹

Mehrdad: This school is good. But I've heard when you come up to the upper secondary school; they say we don't have sufficient knowledge.

Amra: My friend attends the third grade at the upper secondary and she was very disappointed when she graduated from our school and enrolled that school. She felt she couldn't anything the other kids could; despite she had high grades here.

Jorma: This schools was good once upon time... Students who have graduate from this school with top grades are not doing very well at the upper secondary. It's going to be much tougher for us.

The students' uncertainty about the quality of education is an outcome of cogent concerns that stigmatization affects expectations in a negative way, which in turn will affects either their daily work in schools, or is going to affect the way they will be treated throughout their educational careers (Finn & Cox, 1992; Nelson, Palonsky & McCarthy, 2004; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). They do not know whether they will encounter such circumstances now or in the future, but the rumors and encounters with people who embrace the stigmatized representations of the neighborhoods, their institutions and individuals provide students with enough material to nourish disbeliefs and uncertainty. This leads us to the second point.

Because of stigmatization and prejudices against their neighborhoods and schools, the young risk being discriminated against when they, for example, apply for a summer job or internship. They complained during the interviews that potential employers do not regard and assess them as individuals in their own right, but very much through the lenses of stereotypes and prejudices they hold against multicultural neighborhoods and schools. As soon as the employers learned where young people lived or which school they attended, the risk of being rejected became imminent.¹⁰

Kira: I went into a store. I said basically hi, I would like to apply for an internship. They said, no problems, at which week would you like to start. I said week 41 or something like that. Then they asked, which school are you coming from? When I mentioned the name of my school, they said sorry we got no place. But she was really polite from the beginning and even said there was a place available. When I said Mehaby, she got appalled!

Salas: When we were about to apply for internship they [gave me a place and] forgot to ask me which school I'm coming from. They asked about name, second name and all that. And then she said, I forgot to ask which school you are coming from. I said Potok school, and she just said oh, isn't that one in Mehaby.

I said, yes. She said, “hm, okay”, she couldn’t withdraw her word, because she had already given me a place. Then I just said, you regret now, don’t you? And she said, yes.

One explanation the youths were referring to, while trying to grasp the various reactions, including discrimination, from the surrounding community, was the social enclosure they felt (Coleman, 1988; Rankin & Quane, 2000). They lived in Sweden, but not really, as they put it. For example, when students from Mehaby, a notorious suburb on the fringes of Malmö, are about to pay a visit to an institution, company or school somewhere else, their teachers repeatedly tell them “we are going to Sweden”. Eventually, they adopted this way of talking and even thinking about their neighborhood and the place in which their school was within Swedish society, and that place is outside mainstream Sweden. The “lack” of Swedes is a defining factor for understanding this position. Their schools have no Swedish students – “everyone is an immigrant here” as 15-year-old Chano from a Stockholm suburb puts it, although many of his peers were born in Sweden – which makes them a too easy target for categorization and stigmatization as an “segregated and immigrant area and school”. More Swedes in the neighborhood and school would simply, as young people calculate, diminish the basis for stigmatization and relieve themselves of the ethnic stigma burden.

Thus, social enclosure and ethnic segregation give impetus to stigmatization, which can become a powerful instrument leading, for example, to discrimination and low expectations, and to blatantly negative social consequences for students from multicultural urban schools. One way to derail this process, according to them, is to attract more ethnic Swedes to their neighborhood and schools, and thereby divert stigmatized representations to another place. That is basically why they are looking for a more ethnic mixture, and not because that would, say, increase their language proficiency (Bunar, 2008c).

To conclude, there is evidently an analytical link between the social enclosure in the form of ethnic and social composition of the multicultural neighborhoods and their schools; the level of expectations on what such milieus can achieve and live up to; the lack of credibility and uncertainty about whether the education can give “proper” language, desirable norms and contacts as being defined by the middle class cultural mainstream; the continual outflow of students threatening the schools’ mere survival; and entrenched stigmatization, symbolic violence and the peril of being discriminated against while identified as a part of the multicultural urban context. The prerequisite, in order to formulate new government policy interventions into this “structure of marginalization”, is first of all to recognize their power and especially their relational nature. The power of stigma is not self-imposed, even if

teachers' and students' practices sometimes reinforce it. It has a source, internal logic and driving force, and these are to be found in the educational aspirations of the Swedish middle class imposing a symbolic hierarchy – most visible in the dichotomized “economy of language” (Swedes/immigrants; “proper” Swedish/“immigrant” Swedish; high/low status) – based on the possession of cultural and economical capital (Ball, 2003; Bourdieu, 1977; Coleman, 1990). What is at stake is nothing less than the finest instrument of social reproduction.

Relational dilemmas

The second major challenge multicultural urban schools need to cope with includes the pattern of communication with parents and working together with their community. To define what “their community” implies, is however not as easy as it seems at first glance. According to Arum (2000, p.395), “recent research has attempted to re-specify and redefine what is meant by a school community”, embracing a theoretical shift from the Chicago school-inspired traditional ecological approach which only considers the neighborhood as a school community to neoinstitutional educational research. For neoinstitutionalists, a school community embraces a wider group of interests, including state regulatory agencies, professional associations, training organizations and market competition. This perspective is particularly important when it comes to understanding racial and ethnic schools segregation since their patterns could be changed by remodeling a part of their institutional field, e.g. politically redrawing attendance zones, launching freedom of choice or deploying bussing policy. The point is that a school community is constituted by a set of dynamic, politically and administratively created agents scattered well beyond the boundaries of a geographically defined community. And, the importance of ties is broadly regarded as one of the possible panaceas for troubled schools and their neighborhoods in particular. After reviewing literature on community involvement in schools, Sanders (2003) found that a close relationship would be of benefit for both partners, since it can “enhance student’s achievement and well-being, build stronger schools, assist families and revitalize communities” (p.173). Despite obvious benefits, it is still a largely underestimated possibility among educators, partly because of structural reasons (faculty burnout, lack of resources), but as it appears, according to Sanders, also because of teachers’ reluctance to be publicly scrutinized and “negative perceptions of students’ communities among school staff and administrators” (Ascher, 1988; Epstein, 1995; Searle, 1997).

School-linked service and civil society integration

In their studies on links between multicultural urban schools and their communities in Sweden, Bunar (2001), who studied Stockholm, and Bouakaz (2007), who studied Malmö, found that educators indeed divided the concept of school community into two separate components and treated them in different ways. On the one hand, there was what Skrtic and Sailor (1996) call “school-linked service integration”, that is, governmental and municipal services and authorities deployed in the neighborhood such as police, welfare officers, health care and youth workers. Even civic organizations outside the neighborhood, such as universities and businesses (Benton, Zath & Hensley, 1996), were considered a part of this wider community component. Teachers, principals and heads of local Boards of Education underlined the importance of transcending the constraints of geographical belongingness and connections with “the world outside”. As Bunar (2001) noted, relations with agents outside the geographical school community were generally considered among the educators as of higher status and more profitable for schools, since they could be used as an additional advantage in competition on the educational market. A principal of the Bokaby-school in a Stockholm suburb boasted during an interview about his school’s cooperation with Deutsche bank and Nobel Prize literature laureates. Cooperation with local ethnic and religious associations and parents of their students was on the other hand not so flourishing. Obviously, it was for some reason easier to establish contact with an international investment bank in Frankfurt, Germany than with, say, the Iraqi cultural alliance across the street. Thus, the level of cooperation, mutual understanding and the exchange of information with mainly other authorities was satisfactory and integration was relatively smoothly attained.

Parents and ethnic and religious associations represented the other, so-called “school-linked civil society integration”, component of school community. Relations with them were often strained and pervaded by suspicion, low expectations and even stigmatization. The reason for weak relationships with parents and local civil society was the result of the perception that social marginalization and cultural/religious conservatism of parents worked against the message schools tried to imbue in immigrant children. The educators felt they were not co-working with parents, but rather being involved in power struggles over children’s hearts and minds. As Ingrid, a deputy principal in Maltaby-school, a suburb in northern Stockholm, puts it: “There are cultural clashes. I mean what has been said at home

differs very much from what we are trying to get through, how is it ought to be, so to speak.” Apparently, integration did not go as smoothly as in the previous case. Another reason is, as indicated by Sanders (2003) above, the attempt by many principals to symbolically distance his/her schools from the geographically defined community – conceived as the major source of school’s problem including stigmatization, low grades and the student outflow – rather than establishing closer ties. Some schools which share their neighborhood’s name even tried to get rid of it in order to improve their reputation.

However, it would be wrong to assert that the educators in multicultural urban schools are not aware of what benefits the strong partnership with parents and their associations could produce or that they are not trying to repair the broken ties. In a number of multicultural urban schools in Stockholm, Malmö and Gothenburg, steering committees with parents in the majority have been set up. Although the power of these committees is not overwhelming, it is nonetheless a salient symbolic message, or invitation if you like, by the professionals to the local civil society to engage in working together. Schools have even been hosting local events, such as multicultural dinners, parties and educational activities for adults, acting therefore as an active “collective community worker”. Important as they are, these efforts suffer from a serious structural weakness. They have been so far propelled by local, often individual initiatives, carried through by devoted principals, teachers, parents or community workers. Once that individual disappears or is replaced, the whole project runs the risk of being abolished (Bouakaz, 2006). What is needed in order to restore the broken ties between multicultural urban schools and the community they are catering to is a policy requiring that “school-linked civil society integration” is at least at the same apparent level of achievement as “school-linked service integration”. Maybe freedom of choice may compel schools to take more decisive steps in that direction.

Parents as consumers

Since freedom of choice was introduced in Swedish comprehensive education at the beginning of the 1990s, the position of parents in relation to the education system has become enhanced with an additional role. In a presumably free market (Apple, 2006), they were equipped by the government with a voucher and encouraged to be active players in their pursuit of the best school for their children. One of the highest expectations was that decentralization, de-bureaucratization and competition between service providers (schools) would entail lower costs, better quality and more user democracy (Governmental Proposal

1990/91:95). Similar reforms have been enacted in virtually all industrialized countries (Aasen, 2003; Beach, Gordon & Lahelma, 2003; Benveniste, Carnoy & Rothstein, 2003; Karsten 1999; Maile, 2004; Whitty, Power & Halpin, 1998). Researchers disagree whether the explicit objectives have been attained or, on the contrary, whether the segregation gap between classes and ethnic groups have widened due to so-called “cream-skimming” processes (Harris & Ranson, 2005; Hoxby, 2001). But, one achievement of the market paradigm introduction into the world of education (Friedman, 1965) appears to have been validated across countries, and that is the educators’ increasing inclination to observe and listen to proposals put forward by their clients, or purchasers, that are the parents themselves (Skolverket, 2003b).

As earlier emphasized, more and more students in Sweden are exercising their consumer role by leaving multicultural urban schools. From the beginning, the educators’ reaction could be described in a twofold process. First of all, they expressed a kind of logic of resignation (Bunar, 2008a), conceiving the leavers were socially strong students with educated parents who would have left their stigmatized school sooner or later anyway. The second reaction was blaming parents who moved their children into religious and ethnic independent schools for making wrong (Reay, 2004) and marginalizing (Gustafsson, 2004) choices. These reactions apparently did not persuade educators to rethink their position as service providers who, independently of what they thought about it, was compelled to attract parents and students to enroll their schools. Instead, the parents themselves, the market forces rewarding pedagogically unimportant issues, the stigmatization and prejudices, were pointed out as the real culprits, not the educators’ attitudes or the internal leadership and organization.

However, when the student outflow began threatening their jobs, teachers and principals in many schools initiated internal discussions in an attempt to grasp the best way of providing parents with direct and more accurate information about what their schools stood for. But, the educators persisted that there was not much room for pedagogical improvements since they were already, in their own minds and with regard to circumstances, doing a great job. They just needed to educate the parents about this “obvious” fact. That something may be wrong with this approach as well – beside the fact that the information flow between schools and parents needs to be improved – is an awakening insight. As Shahiri, a teacher of Iranian descent in Ballby, a multicultural neighborhood in the city of Uppsala, puts it during an open round table discussions in her school: “I am in favor of freedom of choice for only one reason. Previously teachers in this school, almost all of them ethnically Swedes, did not care so much about parents in the neighborhood. But now when many are leaving they are suddenly very

much interested in their culture, customs, religious holidays, social problems, inviting parents to come to school and setting up multiple projects and programs for parents.” This view is shared by other educators as well. Carina, a head of local Board of Education in Mikaby, a multicultural neighborhood in the northwestern part of Stockholm, declared during an interview: “After having contacts with Somali parents, I realized they held strong opinion about how we are disparaging them, their children and youth, how we don’t invest in them enough, regard them as the second-class citizens, don’t care... and I thought, if we had met them differently, they maybe wouldn’t be holding these opinions.” Acting as an impetus for the educators to turn towards their geographical communities, to reconnect ties with parents and to try to attain the school-linked civil society integration as well, freedom of choice and competition seem to be pretty effective instruments indeed. Yet, if not balanced, their outcomes can be a serious impediment to social justice and overall integration into the whole of society (Apple, 2003; 2006; Ball, 2003; Henig, 1994; Peters). Therefore, the answer for forging stronger ties and extracting remuneration for schools, students, parents and local communities is not more marketization and unregulated consumer choice, but as Rabrenovic (1998) contends, making parents co-producers of education.

To conclude, the benefits of achieving integration with local communities for schools are obvious, especially against the background of the student outflow challenge. Larger parental involvement would provide an insight into school’s daily work and access to valuable information, “cold knowledge”, concerning development plans, multicultural curriculum, native language teaching, supplementary activities, cooperation with universities, etc. It would also provide an arena for critical dialogue and suggestions that could lead to general school development. But, what would be the pay-off for the local community? Four major outcomes could be accounted for. Firstly, better grades and less social disturbance would grant schools more positive media representations and better reputations, the results of which could eventually spill over into the local community. Secondly, schools could contribute to strengthening the parents’ social citizenship (Young, 1990) by providing them with valuable information about the Swedish society or setting up shorter courses about citizenship rights and obligations. Thirdly, schools could contribute to strengthening the parents’ political citizenship (Marshall, 1996), by inviting them to actively participate, or to exercise their political rights, in the decision-making about schools’ organization and development. Fourthly, given a scale of internal segregation in multicultural urban neighborhoods, schools could provide a meeting place for parents and citizens with different ethnic backgrounds and the same social difficulties to come together, forge new political alliances and aggregate their

demands for the redistribution of the public wealth. Strong community and empowered parents mitigate schools' work and provide one of the defining aspects for achieving educational excellence.

Conclusion

Multicultural urban schools are an organic part of their communities. They reflect not only social and ethnic composition of parents whose children attend schools, and not only policy changes that fundamentally have redefined the nature of links between parents and teachers, but they also reflect attitudes towards immigrants, immigrant-dominated neighborhoods and schools prevalent in the Swedish welfare society where the redistribution of social resources is not as just as many believe. In order to fully grasp the nature of major challenges that multicultural schools are facing today – social predicaments, the power of stigma and ambivalent relations with parents – we need therefore to broaden the definition of school community and look beyond the geographically, socially and discursively erected “Berlin walls” surrounding some of the nations’ poorest neighborhoods. There are both analytical and political reasons for this. Analytically, we cannot understand why the student outflow is taking place if we only look at teachers’ instructional methods or how much money each particular school has. We cannot understand why schools are losing their credibility because at the same time many parents are seemingly pleased with them (Skolverket, 2003b), if we only look at the patterns of communication between teachers and parents. We cannot fully understand the uncertainty about the quality and “properness” of their education many students express if we only look at the test scores or demand more inspections and evaluations. These are important features, although insufficient. We need to also pay attention to the structure of the institutional field in which multicultural schools hold positions in social and symbolic hierarchy. Since these positions are relational, held in relation to other schools, neighborhoods, ethnic and social groups and parental interests, the analytical gaze will be thereby able to precisely determine their daily operations, from lobbying for educational changes (a total freedom of choice, and thereby a greater control over admission rules) to effectively blocking different reforms (de-segregation initiatives) and voting with their feet. Politically, the responsibility of carrying through the reforms aimed at reducing the devastating effects of the ethnic stigma, economical poverty and social enclosure, will be shared among different positions in the field, and not unilaterally turned over to the socially weakest and most stigmatized groups in the society, disguised in the form of calling for more

integration, more “proper” Swedish and acquisition of “proper” norms, values and codes of conduct.

Finally and consequently, the answer to a question often posed--whether multicultural schools are a mere reflection of the surrounding community’s problems--is *no*, they are not, but the change at stake is not just the imposition of a new multicultural curriculum, changing teachers’ attitudes and expectations on students and parents, urging for further pedagogical development or balancing the power of market forces. What is really at stake is change in the current pattern of social relations between different parts of the city and groups in the society, as well as the mode of representation of immigrant issues on the public agenda.

NOTES

¹ Participating at numerous international conferences, I realized how appalled many of the scholars from other countries were when I presented the material on urban education in Sweden. However, it is not the outcome of either solely the positive perceptions of or ignorance from the scientific community, but mainly a lack of research on urban educational issues in Sweden.

² Erving Goffman is widely recognized as a sociologist who introduced the concept of stigma into social sciences in his seminal work *Stigma – Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963). According to him, stigma is a discrepancy between an individual’s virtual (categorization and expectations imputed from the outside) and actual (the attributes individual actually possesses) identity. The term is deeply discrediting and stresses the importance of relational approach to its examination (p.2-3). Another landmark study on stigma is Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1979). According to him, the essential mechanisms of the stigma are categorization, essentialization, ascribing the attributes and drawing boundaries against the stigmatized subject.

³ In the article, I am mainly drawing on two types of materials. The major part derives from my own research findings gathered over the past ten years of field work in Swedish multicultural settings (Bunar, 2001; 2004; 2005; 2008a; 2008b). The field work, conducted as a part of different research projects, has included interviews with more than 150 students in elementary school at different levels; with more than 40 principals and heads of local Boards of Education and teachers; as well as with many parents and local community leaders in Stockholm and Malmö. Additionally, I have spent many hours participating in different community events, directly or indirectly connected to the operations of local schools. Secondly, I am drawing on other Swedish and international literature on urban sociology and sociology of education, which I refer to in the article.

⁴ The figures vary of course between different multicultural neighborhoods across the country, with the situation slightly better in some of Stockholm’s and slightly worse in some of Gothenburg’s (the countries two biggest cities) neighborhoods. But, Rosengård can serve as an illustration for what economical reality populations in Swedish multicultural urban neighborhoods on average are facing.

⁵ Included are even individuals involved in government-sponsored education for the unemployed as a part of their labor market reintegration efforts.

⁶ The Swedish compulsory K-9 education is organizationally divided into two parts. First, there are public schools, which are run, controlled and financed through vouchers by local municipalities. They are obliged to provide a place for children living in a certain attendance zone, drawn by local Board of Education. They cannot deny place to any student from that particular area, irrespective of disabilities or other learning difficulties a student may suffer from. Second, there are independent or free schools, run by private corporations, associations, religious or ethnic interests. They are also financed by local municipalities via vouchers, which means that every student that comes to them “pays” for his/her place with a voucher, simultaneously impoverishing the public school they are leaving. Although they are not allowed to “cherry-pick” their students on the basis of class, ethnicity, race, gender, grades etc. – which would be considered an act of discrimination – free schools can deny place to a student on the basis of disability by referring to the lack of proper support they could provide to such a child. Both free and public schools are allowed, and even encouraged, to develop new instructional models and

new pedagogical profiles in order to raise the educational standard in the country. There is an increase in competition between public and free schools for students and their entirely tax-financed vouchers, but also between public schools themselves (see Bunar 2008a; 2008b).

⁷ Schools in multicultural urban neighborhoods have more money per pupil than comparable schools in other parts of the country. This is partly because schools with the majority of immigrant children receive an additional voucher for every student, and partly because many of these neighborhoods have during the last fifteen years been a subject for costly integrational projects bringing in additional resources to local schools (Axelsson & Bunar, 2006). However, many of these projects have ceased after the new conservative government coalition came into power in 2006, and the number of children at school age have generally decreased in the country, which implies less students to share between competing schools.

⁸ The level of average grades is indeed generally lower in multicultural urban schools than in the rest of the cities and in the country. Difference is however more a result of strained social conditions in the neighborhoods and a constant turn-over of students, with a substantial influx of newly arrived refugee children with no or a few years in schools, rather than the quality of education itself (Skolverket, 2004).

⁹ Mehrdad, Amra and Jorma (assumed names) were at the time for interview 15 years old and attended grade 9 in an elementary school in a suburb of Stockholm.

¹⁰ Kira and Salas were at the time for interview 15 years old and attended grade 9 in an elementary school in a suburb of Malmö.

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