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Change is no threat to culture.

All cultures through all time have constantly been engaged in a dance with new possibilities for life.

Change is the one constant in human history.

(Wade Davis, 2003)

Culture on the Move: Language and Literature as Vectors for Cultural Empowerment in Swedish Education

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We are currently amid a pristine white winter that has prematurely enveloped Sweden, except for the most southern parts. In the windows, advent candelabras and softly glowing stars serve as reminders to passersby that we are approaching one of the most important cultural events of the year – Christmas. In the advent of this celebration that blends old and new traditions and customs, the Swedish Public Service Media broadcast a costly production about the history of Sweden



(*Historiern om Sverige*, 2023), tracing events, languages and cultures that have impacted the people living here from the stone age till the present day. Change and development through human encounters from different parts of the world is the lead theme of the series, pedagogically displaying how cultures and languages are constantly shifting and are on the move.

Nowadays, transformations of cultures and languages are increasingly noticeable due to heightened international mobility and intensified global communication and information flows. How such transformations play out and are met in Swedish education is a pressing topic to address to ensure relevant and inclusive quality education for all. The theme of this special issue, *Culture on the Move*, foregrounds language and literature both as pedagogical tools and disciplinary fields necessary for learning to live and work in a culturally diverse world. The contributions stem from the initial activities within the graduate school “Culturally Empowering Education through Language and Literature” (CuEEd-LL).¹ Centre-staging teaching and learning in Swedish education, the articles in this issue present a range of inroads into how language and literature can be used to support cultural diversity among pupils, students and teachers since cultural diversity is steadily gaining attention both as a resource and a challenge in education and society.

In an ever-changing landscape of languages and origins, critically developing educational practices through research to acknowledge and accommodate diverse cultural backgrounds in school and teacher education becomes crucial. Firstly, such research helps enhance and sustain learning opportunities for all. Secondly, such research helps equip students with skills to participate in and navigate the world as global citizens. Grappling with cross-border mobility and cultural diversity, contemporary European societies recognize learning and participation as pivotal strengths and catalysts for innovation and sustainable global development within educational policies (UNESCO, 2009).

Historically, the institution of school and the prominence of mother tongue (L1) as a school subject were deeply intertwined with nation-building. They symbolized not only the veneration of singular entities like “the sovereign, the president, God, and the motherland” but also underscored the

¹ CuEEd-LL is a collaboration between Jönköping University, University of Gothenburg, Malmö University, and Stockholm University, financed by the Swedish Research Council (2021–2026). Borås University is an affiliated partner (<https://ju.se/center/cueed-ll/en.html>).

significance of the written national language and its cultural associations (Erixon & Green, 2020, p. 2). However, contemporary educational agendas in the European Union (EU) mark a significant shift. The focus has transitioned from merely teaching a single dominant culture to actively fostering connections with diverse cultures, recognizing this as the key to ensuring social cohesion (Fuentes et al., 2016). This shift also involves understanding how we shape our identities in an increasingly globalized and media-centric world (Merchant, 2021). These current cultural transformations do not necessitate the abandonment of national perspectives; instead, they signify the integration of the nation into a broader international context, thereby reshaping the perception of what constitutes a nation (Green & Erixon, 2020). Nevertheless, although education no longer serves the purpose of assimilating individuals into a single overarching national culture, the ideal of a homogeneous society persists. Indeed, ideologies of the rising far-right political parties in Europe and Sweden view culture, language and literature as an important means to achieve the sought-after, long-lasting move towards uniformed and monocultural nations (Teitelbaum, 2017). The challenge for teachers is thus navigating this complexity, finding ways of teaching and learning that rather unify than uniform, accommodate differences and translate curriculum guidelines on cultural diversity into effective classroom practices.

The diversity in Sweden can be represented by the approximately 200 spoken and written languages in a country of about 11 million inhabitants. In addition, recently, Sweden's 290 municipalities have received a proportionally large number of newly arrived students ('nyanlända')². Such migration dynamics have a profound and permanent impact on Swedish society and education, adding new layers to Sweden's historically existing diversity with its five national minority languages (Finnish, Meänkieli, Romani, Sámi and Yiddish) and the Swedish Sign Language. The Swedish curricula for compulsory school, preschool, and school-age educare address multiculturalism as a matter of fact to be addressed through the development of abilities to "appreciate the values inherent in cultural diversity" (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018). This includes an awareness and understanding of one's own and others' cultures and realities in an international context and "developing an understanding of cultural diversity within the country" (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018). However, despite the ostensibly positive perspectives on multiculturalism

² Newly arrived students are defined as students born abroad, with both parents born abroad, and who have arrived in Sweden during the last four years (SFS 2010:800, § 12a).

and pluralism (UNESCO, 2009), experienced diversity also includes negative realities of disunity and tensions between and within groups (Zriba, 2019).

Formulations about culture in Swedish curricula display well-intended initiatives to sustain and promote equitable and inclusive quality education for all in Swedish schools. Yet, the curricula fall short in the attempts to move beyond the dichotomy of “we” and “them” and beyond the tensions between the nowadays interdependent majority culture and minority cultures within the national borders. Educational guidelines thus imprison culture in a static mould that prevents perspectives observing the movements and entanglements of cultures. As shown by Magnus Persson (2005), “culture” is a frequent keyword across school subject descriptions. Nevertheless, these texts fail to problematize the fact that independently of inclusive approaches, culture will always designate norms, insiderness and outsiderness. To highlight borders that are continuously made and unmade in the ongoing negotiations and transactions of culture, Persson cites Frederic Jameson: “[N]o group ‘has’ a culture all by itself: Culture is the nimbus perceived by one group when it comes into contact with and observes another one. It is the objectification of everything alien and strange about the contact group” (Jameson, 1993, s. 33 in Persson, 2005, p. 38). Bringing about the awareness of the misrepresentation of culture in the curricula and the many cultures students are part of requires culturally sensitized and informed teachers who can go beyond mainstream thinking to explicitly integrate decolonizing ideas into teaching and learning and thereby address tensions, academic gaps, and identity issues (Hopkins, 2020; Hviid & Martsin, 2019).

Within the CuEEd-LL research, we recognize language and literature as culturally embedded tools for learning that consistently unveil cultural facets across the curricula. An overarching intention of this special issue is to address these two domains – language and literature – and fuel the scholarly discussion about how these fields together can contribute to empowering learners and support “the development of the capacity to participate in a multiplicity of ways of reading and writing in a plurality of Discourses, in different formats, and through diverse means and resources, in the framework of socially and culturally diverse contexts” (Porto, 2010, p. 47-48). By following internationally established research that emphasizes the integration of language and literature (Helgesson & Kullberg, 2018; Kramsch & Kramsch, 2000; Pandey, 2016), the CuEEd-LL PhD program upholds the belief in the interconnectedness of these disciplines.

The Swedish curricula never mention “diversity” or “multiculturalism” in relation to culture in the subject-specific descriptions for languages and literatures. With this in mind, CuEEd-LL conducts research in these domains with a specific focus on decolonizing aspects of human communication and cultural expressions. Engaging with culture in innovative ways, the different disciplines represented in CuEEd-LL are developing a range of concepts and terminologies, for example, in the fields of World Literature and Southern Theories. The CuEEd-LL PhD projects not only advance the field but also introduce new critical perspectives. These perspectives pertain to the concepts and analytical tools used in research and education, with a particular emphasis on the cultural dimensions at play. Furthermore, the PhD projects highlight the role of language and literature as essential practices that shape teaching and learning. This research spans multiple educational domains to identify and address potential gaps in the integration of culture in education and the development of culturally empowering pedagogical methods. Such potential gaps may include the well-intended yet superficial, stereotypical “celebrations” of diversity through food, festivals and flags or oversimplified views of language and identity observed in lessons on a specific “target culture” in certain subjects or during designated “culture days” in school (Kearney, 2016; Skelton et al., 2002).

CuEEd-LL draws inspiration from the core tenets of socially responsible educational practices, as outlined by scholars like Shelly Brown-Jeffy and Jewell E. Cooper (2011). These tenets encompass inclusive identity development, fostering strong student-teacher relationships, promoting equity, and striving for high learning achievements. In the context of CuEEd-LL, the focus lies on examining how culturally empowering methods of teaching and learning embedded within linguistic and literary dimensions unfold and can be improved in ongoing educational scenarios. The initial activities in CuEEd-LL had a critical focus on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) (see e.g., Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021) and on the practical and theoretical uses of concepts related to this research area. The PhD students raised questions about what culture is, how culture emerges, is observed and defined, how education is caught in outdated ideas of national culture and cultural hegemonies, and how to identify innovation with regard to cultural diversity in education. The reflective papers that addressed such questions provided valuable perspectives on how different educational settings can respond to cultural diversity with language and/or literature support.

In the special issue *Culture on the Move*, four of the PhD students' reflective papers on CRP have been developed into position papers and placed in the first section. A position paper elaborates around a concept in the field, to explore its usefulness to a research problem, question, topic, or area. The second section comprises four research articles by PhD students and senior scholars in CuEEd-LL. The third section presents two essays by two members of the CuEEd-LL advisory board, retracing their respective teaching journeys within the university of their country. In the following, the authors' contributions are briefly introduced in relation to the theme of the special issue.

Nicolas Femia explores language as a vector for participating actively in society and developing a sense of belonging through the conceptual lens of "linguistic citizenship." This exploration facilitates inquiries into how education can integrate a wide spectrum of language varieties, negotiate notions of language, and adopt fluid understandings of multilingualism. The active participation and dialogues that are promoted through this exploration may support empirical grounds for renewed understandings of how education can be empowering. **Terese Kerstinsdotter** addresses the dilemmas and challenges of culturally relevant educational approaches. Focusing on race in Swedish education (that customarily avoids this term), Kerstinsdotter uncovers how ambiguous and inexplicit understandings of race can stir up uncomfortable feelings among teachers and students, as well as fear of inadequate treatment of specific knowledge content in literature pedagogy. A key issue is how to address race without being trapped in essentialist views and allow for diverse and changing cultural perspectives in classroom conversations on literature. Efforts to implement culturally empowering pedagogy in the Swedish education system are further observed by **Scarlett Mannish**, who focuses on the conceptualization of mother-tongue instruction (MTI) to promote multilingualism and diversity in Swedish society. MTI pedagogical practices are highlighted as supporting students' active use of their cultural and linguistic knowledge, which are not necessarily recognized as resources in education. The problem is that structurally and discursively MTI is positioned in education and society at large as being outside, counterproductive to the system, and a threat to "Swedishness." Inherent in the conceptualization of MTI, such paradox prevents its full legitimization as a cultural learning resource and fulfilment of its potential in Swedish education. Arguably, structures, traditions and forceful imaginaries about education make it difficult to develop, implement and pursue innovative ways of teaching and learning that are not only culturally empowering but also relevant for future

generations. In line with teaching and learning innovation, **Alexander Brauer** promotes creative writing as a tool for culturally responsive pedagogy, with the potential to activate individual experiences and explore diverse relationships between humans, things and languages while learning writing skills. Conceptualizing creative writing as a pedagogical practice that considers students' individual cultural and linguistic trajectories and repertoires positions it as a tool for reaching both convergent and divergent learning goals, meaning that creative writing facilitates unexpected learning outcomes and insights. Bringing in such transformative qualities in education is also what **Björn Bradling** targets in his study on how upper secondary school students read Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (2006), how they develop their literary meta-reflections and how they expand their horizons and relationships to cultures of Sudan, the geographical milieu of the novel. The presentation of the continuing meaning-making in the school reading practices through adequate teaching and learning design illuminates how culture can be on the move and in development in the minds of the students. In contrast, **Simon Bauer, Tommaso M. Milani, Kerstin von Brömssen,** and **Andrea Spehar** focus on how Swedish cultural values are presented as stable and unchanging in the educational structure of Civic Orientation for Newly Arrived Migrants. Through a multi-level analysis considering a range of data sources, the team teases out how the so-called Swedish values play out in education. An imaginary of Sweden as a nation with the most developed values in the world and migrants as antithetical to this vision is argued to be flawed, specifically since universal values – such as human rights and democracy – become unique signifiers for Sweden. To counteract similar disempowering relations and dichotomized positions, **Tesfaye Ayele** engages with fictional works that include stories on colonial education in Africa. The focus on student agency promotes analyzing how “students interact with and even resist the pedagogical and political power of the colonial education system.” Through a lens of critical pedagogy, the novel *Weep Not, Child* (1964) by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o exemplifies how culturally relevant pedagogy can be informed by the cultural entanglements and transactions put afore in post-colonial literature. Similarly, **Annette Svensson** focuses on students' agency in her study, and how to make use of their interpretative powers in the EFL classroom. The contemporary digital and global transmedia landscape is brought into teaching and learning to let the students explore how literary classics are remade in different media to include the marginalized and the silenced. By engaging with the content and functions of transmedia storytelling, the students develop both digital and critical awareness, which is, arguably, a form of cultural empowerment.

These contributions are followed by two essays that in different ways retrace the respective teaching journeys of Dr. **Lynda Spencer**, Rhodes University, South Africa and Dr. **Vibha Sharma**, Aligarh Muslim University, India, both members of the CuEEd-LL advisory board. The essays elucidate the circumstances within universities in South Africa and India, accentuating historical trajectories and infrastructures. University educators must acknowledge and engage with these circumstances to be able to understand and act in academic cultures, both locally and transnationally. The authors' self-reflective stories of their personal choices and development are punctuated by examples from their teaching practices, shedding light on how society and culture have changed within their local contexts over the past few decades. Their experiences and views on teaching and learning – with and about language and literature – expand the focus of this special issue beyond Swedish education and teacher training.

In the position papers, articles and essays, the critical and explorative engagement with how languages and literatures negotiate cultures and support teaching and learning in various ways constitute a reflection on the consolidation phase of the CuEEd-LL graduate school. We hope this special issue inspires you to engage with the culturally empowering practices of language and literature.

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