

STAY IN THE TENSION

Background

As Eva Norén stated yesterday, from time to time Swedish society receives a number of immigrants and refugees. What is different this time is that the Swedish National Agency for Education has decided to set up a screening exercise for newly arrived students on a national level. The aim is to facilitate and support the placing and organisation of newly arrived students into educational institutions (Skolverket, 2016a).

From April 2016, it has been mandatory to use this so-called screening exercise in Swedish schools to assess the level of knowledge and previous school experience of newly arrived students in different subjects, focusing on numeracy and literacy. Every new student is asked to answer questions and complete tasks during a couple interviews. The screening exercise is carried out in a language which the student is presumed to be proficient, and one person and a translator who speaks that language or regional dialect is to present during the screening exercises. After completing the assessment and the interviews, the head teacher of the school decides which grade and level of study the student will be placed in. The result of the assessment will also form the basis of the teachers' plans for the students' first months at school (Skolverket, 2016b). In other words, the screening exercise forms a foundation for future decisions regarding the student's further education and life.

I was part of the group appointed by this agency to create the science part of the screening, with a focus on empirical knowledge. Later, along with Anna Chronaki and other colleagues, I began to problematize this screening.

As if I had a choice

Upon working with, researching and reflecting on this issue, I realised that something else had happened in my mind. With my critical thinking skills strongly influenced by a sceptical perspective regarding testing, assessment and grading, this led to a "Let's not screen" argument in my mind. That, in turn, gave my mind the option to bury my head in the sand regarding issues of immigration. As though they were not here; as though "if we do not screen" came with the logic of "then they are not here". What had sneaked into my mind was a strange logic:

Screen here – do not screen, not here

And then came this logic:

If they come here, then we screen – if we do not want to screen, then they can't come here.

When writing and reflecting about the screening exercise, I realised that I have been asking questions and presenting arguments as if I had a choice on the immigrant issue. A logic of choice had quietly sneaked into my mind – a neoliberal logic.

In August 2017, Stephen Metcalf wrote in *The Guardian* on neoliberalism: "In short, 'neoliberalism' is not simply a name for pro-market policies, or for the compromises with finance capitalism made by failing social democratic parties. It is a name for a premise that, quietly, has come to regulate all we practise and believe: that competition is the only legitimate organizing principle for human activity".

Inspired and strongly influenced by not only the academic discourse on argumentation but also critical thinking – to always perform and produce good arguments – I realised that neoliberal arguments organize my thoughts on education, organize my thoughts in general, and organize the core of human activity. I suspect some things more than others, for example, long debates on to reform or not, to assess or not, to test or not, etc. have made way for the possibility to ask, what's the use of argumentation? Or, in other words, **What's out? Who's included? Who's excluded?**

But in this case with the screening and holding my head high – too high – high on argumentation and critical thinking, I realised I actually buried my head in the sand like an ostrich.

Of course, we have a choice to test or not, assess or not, and screen or not. All that we do and are is political. But I have realised that I placed the new immigrant – the child – into that kind of argument...

screen here – not screen, not here

...and I forgot that the children *are* here: To them, everything is normal and not about choice because they seldom have any choice.

Re-thinking

So, when I look at my texts and reflect on immigrants who are children, I now have to re-think. Do I argue somewhere as if there is a choice when there actually is none? Certain other questions have stemmed from the MES conference:

Based on Popkewitz, I have asked myself, is there a risk that the screening exercise will function as a governing force (Popkewitz, 2004) stipulating certain identities and practices in mathematics and science? Yes, of course there is!

Based on Ahmed, I asked myself, is there a risk that the screening exercise positions the migrating students as 'the Other' (see e.g. Ahmed, 2000)? Yes, of course there is!

But actually, do I have any choice? Or am I just afraid of the risks?

My absolute conviction is that we have to welcome immigrants. My conviction is also that we need to take action when immigrants arrive. And no, we might not have the right solution; and no, the Swedish National Agency for Education and the screening exercise might not be the best thing! But what is the other option?

Inspired by Ulrika Ryan's 25% seminar at Malmö University, I began to wonder if there is any way to stay right in the middle of, as Ulrika put it, in "the functional – critical and theoretical – empirical".

I do not ask myself to stop problematizing or criticizing, but I ask myself to examine my argumentation about societal and political questions. I realised that the thinking regarding immigrants does not need more choice or more polarization, but rather to stand in the midst of everything, as Dave Wagner said yesterday, where everything is normal for the child.

So, this leaves me, as I think Iann Lundegård said yesterday in one discussion group, to stay in the dilemma, or drawing on Biesta and Säfström's text 'A Manifesto for Education' – to stay in the tension.

[Stay in the tension](#)

As Biesta and Säfström argue, rather than focus on 'what is' or 'what is not', it's important to stay in the tension. That sets out, according to the authors, another kind of freedom of choice. They state,

We propose that to speak for education in an educational manner means to express an interest in freedom and, more specifically, an interest in the freedom of the other: the freedom of the child, the freedom of the pupil, the freedom of the student. Freedom is not license. It is neither about 'anything goes' nor about individual preference and choice. Freedom is relational and therefore inherently difficult. This is why educational freedom is not about the absence of

authority but about authority that carries an orientation towards freedom with it. ... Such freedom is often projected into the future. (Biesta and Säfström, 2011, p.1)

They suggest that the proper place of education (and as I negotiate it, educational research) is found in the tension between 'what is' and 'what is not.'

So where is the tension? Where is the *nepantla*? as Rochelle Gutiérrez said. What is in the midst of 'What is' and 'What is not'? What is and what is not? It's not as easy to answer as Geeta Verma's example on NCLB showed. For me, being in the tension means being right in the middle of the screening exercise – being critical, being a participant, listening. Daring to think that policy in many ways has good intentions, as Eva spoke about, and that I as a researcher can be there – changing, translating, negotiating. Being there like Dana Seifeddine Ehdwall, who tells histories of not only trouble and mistakes but also freedom. And as Geeta showed us with the coding of the blue bots, being able to see children take other positions.

My own empirical example comes from working with the screening exercise and trying out the tasks. I realised that this material gave the children a voice – gave them better prerequisites. Giving possibilities for, as Rochelle said, "windows and mirrors". And not only for the child; for example, when sitting with the interpreter and the child discussing questions about chemistry in Dari, I realised that I was the Other.

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