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Integrating migrants through language immersion models

The case of Finland

Dear all,

I'm happy to be here with all of you today to discuss integration in linguistically diverse contexts in Europe. The Swedish Assembly (Folktinget) views integration as a very important issue that we have worked with systematically for a long time.

As you know, we have two national languages in Finland: Finnish and Swedish. The population of Finland is about 5.5 million and Swedish is the mother tongue of about 300,000 people. According to the Finnish Constitution, the Finnish- and Swedish-speaking population is entitled to cultural and social services on an equal basis. The main rule is that you are entitled to use Swedish or Finnish in your contacts with bilingual municipal authorities and with state authorities.

Most of the Swedish-speaking and bi-lingual families choose Swedish-speaking day-care and schools for their children, whereas most of the Finnish-speaking families put their children in Finnish-speaking day-care centers and schools. However, there is a large interest among Finnish-speaking families to give their children two languages from an early age through immersion.

Immersion, in accordance with the Canadian model was introduced in Finland at the end of the 1970s. It is an optional teaching programme which exists for those whose mother tongue is the majority language, in this case Finnish, and who will not otherwise naturally come in contact with the Swedish, the immersion language.

The type of language immersion used in Finland is total and early; in other words, it usually begins at the age of 3-6 and continues from day care/preschool to grade 9 of the comprehensive school. Around 4,500 children in Finland participate in language immersion teaching in 15 municipalities.

However, immersion as a language teaching method for migrant children, has not yet been used in Finland. Children with migrant background integrate in Finland through the ordinary school or daycare system, where the teaching language is *either* Finnish or Swedish. The educational system in Finland is equal in both our national languages. We do not have bilingual schools in Finland, so the education is either provided in Finnish or Swedish, and the other national language is taught as a subject beginning in primary school.

In 2020, 444 000 persons with migrant backgrounds lived in Finland. That is about 8 % of the population and the number of immigrants is expected to increase in the future. In the Helsinki capital area about 20 % of the population have another mother tongue than the domestic languages Finnish, Swedish or Sámi. Today, most migrants come to Finland because of family relations or for work-reasons. It is worth noting that the population of Finland is aging and the workforce is shrinking rapidly. The society is thus already to a large extent dependent on persons that have moved to Finland to work from other parts of the world.

Until now, most migrants have integrated in the majority language, Finnish, while only a small percentage of the newcomers have integrated in the Swedish language.

As Finland is a bi-lingual country and the linguistic rights are equal according to the constitution and other legislation, we at Folktinget, emphasize that newcomers should have a right to choose whether they want to integrate in Finnish or in Swedish. Unfortunately, the authorities and municipalities do not always inform the immigrants that they have the right to choose between the two languages.

In collaboration with many Swedish speaking organizations, Folktinget has worked hard to develop an integration path in the Swedish language in the bilingual municipalities. We urge the state- and municipal authorities to make the Swedish integration path more visible and structured. We want the integration path in Swedish to be provided on equal terms not just in legal provisions, but also in practice. We would be happy if more immigrants would choose the Swedish speaking school path for their children.

We also know that many people find it very difficult to learn Finnish. Especially for immigrants who already speak and understand English, Swedish is oftentimes easier to learn than Finnish, as the languages are linguistically closely connected.

A topical question that we have raised, is developing integration models for both national languages. Many immigrants come from cultures where multilingualism is a normal part of society and daily life, and they have expressed the wish to learn both Swedish and Finnish simultaneously as that would increase job opportunities.

It is not yet possible to be bilingually integrated. This question and challenge is recognized in the governments national program for integration of immigrants. In the same program it is mentioned that a flexible Swedish integration path must be secured and that the number of people who are integrated in Swedish should be increased.

One of our main challenges is that only about 50 % of the bilingual municipalities in Finland offer integration in both Swedish and Finnish. About 50 % of the municipalities only offer integration in Finnish, even if sometimes the main language in the municipality is Swedish. This very often means that the migrants move away from the municipality after their integration period is over, to a municipality where the majority language is Finnish.

As I already mentioned, many newcomers find the Swedish language easier to learn than Finnish and also find it easier to become a part of the Swedish speaking society as the social networks are smaller and there is a deeper understanding of being a part of a minority.

At Folktinget we work very much in collaboration with local authorities. This year we have started two networks to develop and promote integration in the Swedish language. One of the networks focuses on educating integration coordinators in the bilingual municipalities and the other network is aimed for directors of education in our biggest bilingual municipalities. Our goal is to achieve a bigger understanding of the integration path in Swedish and to raise awareness about it. We also want to share good examples of integration practices in bilingual- and Swedish speaking municipalities. We believe that it is of utmost importance that there are teachers who are specialists in supporting and teaching migrant children at school in the beginning of the integration process. It is also important that children with another mother tongue than Swedish or Finnish can improve their skills in their own home language or mother tongue.

A lot of work remains to be done before the Swedish integration path is equal to the Finnish one, both at schools and in the rest of the society. During the last five years much has been done to improve the Swedish integration path and the awareness and interest amongst

authorities, which has contributed to a positive development in the municipalities. I believe that eventually we will see concrete results of the work that is happening right now. With that I mean, that the Swedish integration path will be visible and a real option for many more immigrants compared to today. I also hope that the Swedish speaking schools in Finland will develop and improve preconditions to include and welcome immigrants; both children and their parents to the school community. Last but not least; I hope that the authorities and municipalities will secure the immigrants their lawful right to choose in which language they want to be integrated in, which means that Swedish language is offered as the integration language equally to Finnish.

I am looking forward to hearing ideas and good practices regarding immersion as a model for successful integration in minority languages as we in Finland do not have experience of that yet, but we are very eager to learn more.

Thank you for your attention!