Multiculturalism and literature in the English classroom

- A Swedish perspective
Abstract

The Swedish curriculum of English states that one of the main goals in the subject is ‘the ability to discuss and reflect on living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used’ (Skolverket, 2011, p 2). However, how this goal can or should be achieved is unclear, and this paper investigates whether multicultural literature could be useful.

The investigation is divided into four sections where different aspects of multicultural literature are discussed: what culture in the English subject means, which qualities literature has in the context, what makes multicultural literature different and last but not least examples of how multicultural literature could be used practically in the English classroom.

The obvious advantage of multicultural literature is that ‘silenced’ groups get represented. However, it takes much skill to achieve ultimate positive effects, and it is debated whether this literature could even be counterproductive.

My main conclusion is that the Swedish school, due to global challenges and migration, needs more multicultural course content, among other things multicultural literature. Nevertheless, it would be even better if the genre was normalized, and general literature would get representative instead.
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1 Introduction

Nowadays, teachers of English in Sweden have a very difficult task when it comes to culture. Neither the people who are to be taught nor the ones who are to be taught about are the same as they were approximately half a decade ago. It is no longer reasonable to hold on to the old-fashioned idea that English is a subject about the inhabitants in England and the way people speak and live there. Furthermore, it is nowadays just as absurd to assume that the students who take the English course have a homogeneous cultural identity, in this case Swedish.

Multiculturalism has turned practically all countries of the world into jumbles of different cultures that cannot be defined and simply explained by geography and/or nationality. It has probably always been this way more or less, but the frequency of cultural encounters and shocks have increased and the need for international collaboration is more urgent now than ever due to the global challenges we are all facing.

This paper reviews what has been written about multicultural literature and tries to investigate whether it can be helpful as a means to achieve the cultural goals of the English curriculum and contribute to multicultural values such as tolerance and understanding.

1.1 Method

The foundation of my literature review is mainly a number of anthologies, books and articles written by researchers from the fields of literature, culture and multiculturalism. What they all have in common is that they are also interested in the aspects of teaching in relation to these fields.

In order to make the paper relevant for the Swedish teacher profession of English, I have thought it necessary to provide references to the Swedish school documents, first and foremost the curriculum of English.

In my selection of sources I have tried to find books and articles that give different perspectives of the same occurrence, but I have also looked for coherence in the literature.

1.2 Theoretical background

The most important concept in this paper is multiculturalism and above all its literary genre, multicultural literature. Multicultural literature is a fairly new genre that came into existence
in the 1960’s. It is a result of the anti-racist movement and a reaction to the lack of representation in literature, not least the Canon.

However, there is an ongoing debate whether the genre could possibly be harmful to its own pro-multicultural intentions, since it isolates minorities from the norm.

1.3 Validity

This paper is highly relevant for teachers of English in Sweden, since the norm in the classroom is still to compare traditional Swedish culture to traditional British (or possibly North American) culture. This is not acceptable, since Sweden and the United Kingdom do not have two homogenous cultures that can simply be compared. Why the focus should be on the UK is also strange, since it is only a small part of the English-speaking world. I want the readers to realize that this approach is neither supported by the English curriculum nor reality and offer them an investigation of how multicultural literature can be used to achieve the actual cultural goals of the English subject.
2 Body

2.1 Definitions of culture and its role in the English subject

‘The English language surrounds us in our daily lives and is used in such diverse areas as politics, education and economics. Knowledge of English increases the individual's opportunities to participate in different social and cultural contexts, as well as in global studies and working life. Knowledge of English can also provide new perspectives on the surrounding world, enhanced opportunities to create contacts, and greater understanding of different ways of living.’ (Skolverket, 2011, p 1)

The quotation above comes from the introductory paragraph of the Swedish curriculum of English for upper intermediate school. As a matter of fact, the linguistic aspects of English are absent when Skolverket outlines the main focus of the subject. Logically, that should give teachers a hint of the fact that culture is regarded as a vital part of the English subject, if not the most important one. The curriculum of English (2011) also puts emphasis on the global aspects of the subject and manifests a wish for increased tolerance towards other lifestyles. According to Magnus Persson (2007), there is in fact no Swedish school subject today that does not include cultural goals in its curriculum, something that I will return to.

This development harmonises with the general trend within the cultural (research) field. During the last decade, the concept of culture has become broader and therefore also more present in a larger range of fields and contexts, and school is no an exception. Persson deduces this process from the early 1970s, when ‘cultural studies’ became a popular and established research field which also led to studies of popular culture becoming accepted and seen as serious work. Altogether it has resulted in the modern opinion that nearly everything could be the object of cultural studies. Botelho and Rudman (2009) credit this new development for having turned culture into the most complex word of the English language.

Moreover, Botelho and Rudman (2009) make clear that the increased number of possible study objects have not made cultural studies easier, which could be anticipated when a field goes from being narrow to wide. Thus they claim that a widened field means more complexity; that is, more possible factors to bear in mind and adjust to. There are several adjacent concepts that are more or less impossible to separate from the concept of culture, even if only a small cultural phenomenon is investigated, an opinion that is also shared by Persson (2007) An adjacent concept that Botelho and Rudman (2009) bring up is the concept of power structures in society and their significant influences on our perception and valuation.
of different cultures. It is an important field for those who want to understand the mechanisms of a multicultural society. In the discussion about multiculturalism I will explore those (multi)cultural complexities further.

A common criticism found in the literature that I surveyed (Botelho and Rudman, 2009; Persson, 2007) is that people too often tend to describe culture as something static that belongs to a certain time, a certain group of people or a single individual. Persson (2007) calls for a view that allows culture to be seen as something that is more ‘alive’ than that. Culture is defined more correctly as something that pervades as well as surrounds us, through public symbols and habits (Botelho and Rudman, 2009). Ronald Carter (2007) expresses a similar view when he writes that:

‘The contexts for such research are the growing influence of Vygotskian socio-cultural approaches to learning, (...) an acceptance that culture is best seen as something that is not a thing but an active and negotiated entity, a “verb”, a process in which learners do not simply learn new labels for what they already have but directly engage with and participate in a new reality’ (p 10)

As already mentioned, both the Swedish syllabus and curricula reflect these changes in culture’s role and meaning, not least through an increased number of cultural goals. Persson (2007) even claims that cultural changes are one of the principal reasons for the revision of the Swedish curricula in 2000. He relates the increased use of cultural goals not only to the advancement of cultural studies, but to the positive associations that the concept of culture seems to have. He states, however, that the authors of the Swedish school documents have a naïve conception of culture in that they believe that the inclusion of cultural goals is a miracle cure that will somehow automatically lead to atonement and harmony in school and society.

Persson opposes this idea and stresses the need for a more nuanced conception. In his opinion, the concept of culture embeds the idea of hierarchy in social structures, as well as a focus on human differences that often have negative effects. Therefore, he argues, the approach of Skolverket is problematic and even contradictory, since the nature of culture does not go along with their intentions with the inclusion of cultural goals. The embedded focus on hierarchy and differences in culture has counterproductive effects if one is not aware of it. Swedish school documents that describe culture do not recognize the problem of the divided nature of culture, at least not sufficiently.

In fact, Persson continues, authors of the Swedish curricula could even be accused of putting unnecessary emphasis on an “us and them”-oriented approach, since culture is again
and again described as a means of aligning the students to ‘their own’ traditions, history and cultural heritage, but also to make them more tolerant and understanding towards other cultural groups than the Swedish one. These formulations would perhaps make sense in a homogeneous country, which Sweden is not. The syllabus excludes large groups of the Swedish population when it assumes that there is a collective cultural identity that can function as a firm model when comparing with the lives of ‘the others’, which are by the way just as diverse as the ones of the cultural majority.

2.2 The role of literature when working with culture

There are as many answers to the question why we should read literature in school as there are people. Christopher Brumfit and Ronald Carter (1986) write that ‘the key question is how to provide students with a reading experience which to a greater degree than other available experiences enriches their perception of what it is to be human.’(p 34) Expressions of what it is to be human are probably the core of culture’s nature and without doubt culture is a vital aspect of literature, and vice versa. Persson (2007) declares that the close relationship between literature and culture should be obvious, since all literature is the direct product of culture. Moreover, he also sees a clear connection between the two concepts in the Swedish school curricula, where culture systematically is the ‘justifier’ for the use of literature when its use is motivated in the curricula.

However, the literary field of pedagogy has, as Carter (2007) writes in his article, experienced ambivalence and scepticism since the 1940s when more ‘functional’ learning methods were called for, with measurable and quicker results. He writes that ‘literature was seen as extraneous to everyday communicative needs and as something of an elitist pursuit’ (p 6). The 1970s and 1980s gave literature a new chance, but still for more ‘practical’, linguistic purposes than the cultural ones that we according to Persson’s (2007) book find in the modern curricula. From that one can deduce that literature continually seems to be in need to find new sorts of justification.

As a result of literature’s constant struggle to find justification, there seems to be uncertainty regarding the current status of literature in the education of English. Amos Paron (2006) reports that there are countries today where it is possible to have a university degree in English without any literary education. At the same time, however, he acknowledges the existence of a living Canon that contains titles that are commonly used for the purpose of
teaching English all over the world. All in all, literature’s status seems to differ from place to place and situation to situation.

Paron (2006) and Persson (2007) describe another aspect of modern ambivalence in literature: the definitions of what a literary respectively a non-literary text is are not as clear as they used to be. Basically, they state that researchers of the literary field may use any kind of text as study material nowadays – another phenomenon that is funny to observe in a literary reality that at the same time is said to have a strong Canon.

Regarding this, the role of the Canon should be explained in further detail. Persson (2007) calls the problematization of the Canon one of the most typical issues of the modern literary debate. The popular point of view is that the Canon is outdated, a view that was found in practically all the sources that dealt with this topic; see Long (1986), Botelho and Rudman (2009) or Persson (2007) etc. They state that the main problem lies in the fact that the classic literary Canon lacks representativeness, which multicultural literature (that is the main focus of this paper) could be seen as a reaction to.

However, there are also people who advocate for the view that the Canon actually has multicultural elements itself and/or could be used for multicultural purposes. Juan Ramón Guijarro-Ojeda (2013) mentions that Shakespeare’s sonnets as an interesting material since they contain poems about homosexual love as well as love for a black woman. José M. Yebra (2012) recommends Oscar Wilde’s ‘The Picture of Dorian Gray’ as another good example of ‘queer Canon’ that could be used in the English classroom.

Not far away from the discussion of the Canon, Long (1986) suggests that teachers of English need to leave the idea of ‘English literature’ and embrace the concept of ‘Literatures in English’ instead, which could replace the old concept that is often associated with British classics written by white males. As English is an international language and in fact used to a larger extent by non-native speakers, it should more usual to work with culturally more diverse literature in the English classroom than it is now. That is, students should be given the opportunity to analyze literary works both by native and non-native speakers of English in other parts of the world than Britain and North America.

Representation is important for the members of a minority group due to cultural (and linguistic) identification in literature, whereas the importance for the non-members lies in the fact that only increased representation will make them realize the status of the other group. From both perspectives we can derive the conclusion that it is vital to provide a large variety of cultural perspectives and uses of language when teaching ‘Literatures in English’.
Furthermore, Long accuses teachers and researchers who question the authenticity of works by non-native speakers of English or speakers of regional variations of English of finding their arguments in emotionalism - perhaps in the idea of British literature as the only real English literature - rather than in observations of the English-speaking reality.

Brumfit and Carter (1986) share the opinion that literature that describes other cultures does indeed make students understand foreign culture better. Nevertheless, they admit that it sometimes leads to strange and inaccurate views of culture as well. As long as the teacher is aware of this fact, however, they defend the use of this kind of multicultural literature.

Brumfit and Carter also warn teachers that, even though literature has so many advantages, a normal school course of English should not entirely be based on literature; one main reason being that literature is not an ideal source of input when teaching structural linguistic aspects, such as grammar.

2.3 The aspects of multiculturalism

My discussion of advantages and disadvantages has already touched upon multiculturalism and multicultural literature, but there is a lot more to say and define. First, there is no uniform definition in my sources of which components must or must not be included in order for a cultural phenomenon to be called multiculturalism. Commonly the concept of multicultural literature refers to books that give another ethnic perspective than the one of mainstream society, which in a western context generally refers to people of colour compared to whites.

The concept could also be extended to include all marginalized groups in society, such as women, homosexuals or disabled people and not only people of a different ethnical origin. Botelho and Rudman (2009) take it even further and suggest that in fact all literature could be called multicultural, since all books contain some elements of cultural diversity.

Moreover, they argue that the narrow definition of the word multiculturalism with its focus on specific ethnicity might in fact be destructive for the purposes of a pro-multicultural approach. A reason why the definition should be broader, alternatively renamed, is that it isolates minorities. This kind of isolation, positive or negative, might be destructive for pro-multiculturalism, since it always points out minorities as not normal. Kevin Kumashiro (2002) sees this issue similarly when he declares that all stereotypes are harmful, even if they are meant to be positive. Botelho and Rudman (2009) add that as long as multicultural literature is a specific genre, its people will always be considered different and not a part of society as a
whole - not normalized. In other words, the unequal division of power in society will not change, since the mere describing of ‘otherness’ does not question the existence of racial and cultural dominance. Botelho and Rudman suggest that perhaps ‘literature of diversity’ would be a more suitable name for books that question racial and social structures in society.

Similar to, in Persson’s (2007) opinion, the naïve attitude of the authors of the Swedish curricula (who imply that cultural content in school course plans is a never-failing miracle cure wherever and however it appears), many teachers expose their students to multicultural literature without further thought and instruction.

According to a study by Jocelyn Glazier and Jung-A Seo (2005), this ill-conceived use of multicultural material has shown sometimes to lead to not only to a lack of positive, but also negative effects, such as indifference or even resistance. A troublesome consequence of the reading of multicultural literature is that teaching methods often focuses on ‘us and them’ and ‘otherness’, which is similar to the observation of multicultural literature made by Botelho and Rudman (2009). As a consequence, Glazier and Seo (2005) believe that the gap between different ethnical and cultural groups has widened. If the focus of the reading is on difference, there is an overhanging risk that the ethnically ‘mainstream’ students do not feel involved, since they dismiss the literature in the belief that the stories are irrelevant for their lives and identification.

Glazier and Seo also reveal that white children of the dominant culture in the US feel that they are cultureless and cannot point out any specific characteristics of their own culture. ‘While the experience allowed minority students to find their voices in the classroom, in some ways it simultaneously stifled the voices of majority students’ (p 686). Glazier and Seo think that it is highly problematic if the reading of multicultural literature results in a situation where the majority of the students do not see the relevance of the reading and do not benefit from the activity.

However, Glazier and Seo do not advocate for multicultural books to be banned from school. A metaphor used in their article is that the teaching of multicultural literature must be both a window AND a mirror for ALL students in order to be successful. The window metaphor stands for the observation and understanding of people who are different from oneself, and the mirror for the strengthening of the own (cultural) identity. It is common that the teacher only manages to achieve one of these goals at a time.

In other words, it is too simple to state that so called multicultural books are exclusively interesting for students who belong to a specific ethnic group, a reasoning that can be compared to the discussion below that describes why some books are not selected, where
MacKay (1986) and Williams and Christensen Haag (2011) express a similar view. Unlike them, however, even though Glazier and Seo (2005) do not recommend complete avoidance of multicultural books, they think that avoidance of so-called unsuitable multicultural works is important. Brumfit (1986) and Williams and Christensen Haag (2011) are open to most multicultural books, even if they are difficult or biased; what matters is the way in which they are taught to the students. MacKay (1986) shares Glazier and Seo’s (2005) view to a limited extent, since she does believe that a book can be too difficult culturally (or linguistically), but at the same time declares that this mostly is not the case.

Having just described the possible dangers of too much focus on ‘us and them’, another common consequence is that e.g., immigrants are seen as one homogeneous group, which is of course not the case. In Williams and Christensen Haag’s (2011) article, they add that from the outside people often seem to belong to the same cultural group or have the same ethnical origin, but in reality they have different cultural identities. What outsiders might forget is that it matters a lot whether immigrants belong to the first, second or third generation, since the cultural identity mostly gets more complicated and more mixed with the one of the new country with every new generation. This calls for diversity also within the multicultural genre, so that students who belong to non-mainstream cultures realize that they can have differing personalities and identities - not only one.

Kevin Kumashiro (2002) complicates multiculturalism even more, which he also thinks is absolutely necessary. As he belongs to an ethnical as well as a sexual minority himself, he is personally familiar with the problems of finding a firm identity. He witnesses that it is difficult to find literature where either of the two cultural groups is portrayed, but almost impossible to find literature with characters that belong to both. He reminds us of the fact that there is oppression within minority groups as well; e.g., Asian minorities in a Western society might look down on ethnical members that are also homosexual, both because homosexuality is not accepted and is associated with Western values. At the same time, however, this person who is an outsider within the Asian minority is regarded just as much an outsider within the other minority cultures that s/he only partly fits into.

2.4 How to work with literature for cultural purposes

In this final section of the body, I want to investigate the cultural goals of the English curriculum in relation to the reviewed literature, and how teachers might work with multicultural literature.
First and foremost, a teacher always has to relate to the syllabus and curriculum when selecting a working method and materials. Looking closer at the curriculum of English, culture is mentioned both as one of the main goals of the subject and as a suitable content when achieving different communicative goals.

*Teaching in the subject of English should give students the opportunities to develop the following:*

(...) 5. *The ability to discuss and reflect on living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used.* (Skolverket, 2011, p 2)

*Content of communication:*

- Subject areas related to students' education, and societal and working life; current issues; events and processes; thoughts, opinions, ideas, experiences and feelings; relationships and ethical issues.
- (...)
- Living conditions, attitudes, values and traditions, as well as social, political and cultural conditions in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used. *The spread of English and its position in the world.* (Skolverket, 2011, p 3)

However, the Swedish curricula do not provide teachers with hands-on plans on how to create course and lesson content that correspond to these criteria. Teachers need to create these themselves, but preferably with the help of science and experience.

The process of selecting and planning course material is probably one of the most difficult parts of teaching. Brumfit and Carter (1986) believe that the most important thing for a teacher to think about when selecting is that literature should always be chosen with the intended readers in mind. This means for instance that a corresponding level of linguistic skill is required from the students in order to justify the use of a book, no matter how good its content is. Sandra MacKay (1986), however, adds that other pre-knowledge might make up for the lack of linguistic knowledge, but only to a certain extent.

Belinda Y. Louie (2006), on the other hand, believes that authenticity is the most important criteria when selecting a multicultural book, since cultural awareness, the final goal, relies on eliminating prejudice and inaccuracies. She reminds us that the ethnicity of the writers (and illustrators, if the book is illustrated) does not guarantee authenticity. Race is only a social construction (Botelho and Rudman, 2009) and this construction of culture and identity differs a lot depending on where a person is raised and which generation he or she
belongs to, a fact that has already been introduced in this paper by Christensen and Haag (2011). At the same time, a person who does not belong to a certain ethnical group can write an authentic story if authentic sources were used. (Louie, 2006)

All in all, in Louie’s opinion, authenticity is mainly about research and correctness in detail, not who actually wrote the story. Botelho and Rudman (2009), on the other hand, think that the idea of authenticity is complicated, since one person alone will never be able represent and speak for a whole people. In other words, there is not only one possible truth when it comes to authenticity. This is especially obvious when one compares an insider to an outsider perspective of the same issue: both can be true, but still very different. Williams and Christensen Haag (2011) agree, but emphasize the fact that ‘(...) there will always be a range of what is considered “accurate” even from an insider perspective given the complexities of any given culture’ (p 55).

Sandra MacKay (1986) shares the opinion that the selection of the right book is very important, and sometimes hard. She recommends the use of young adult literature, even when the students are older (as might be the case for an English teacher at Swedish Komvux). In her view, this kind of book is the ideal choice for EFL students, since they are in general neither stylistically nor linguistically too demanding, but popularly touch upon themes that concern personal growth and are therefore involving.

Paron (2006) looks closer at the factors among teachers that contribute to the choice of material by describing a ‘school Canon’. He declares that school teachers tend to look for novels that direct themselves to the age group that they teach (Lord of the Flies, the Catcher in the Rye), novels that will not take too much time to read (Animal Farm) or books that will suit a certain theme that the students work with, e.g. the American dream (The Great Gatsby). Moreover, he also sees the availability of books and other supportive materials as critical for the teachers’ selection process.

Williams and Christensen Haag (2011) introduce another parameter when they state that there is a widespread belief that the ethnic background of the characters in a book should match the ethnicity of a class, more or less. Even though they find a book good and interesting, teachers and librarians tend not to use it if it does not fulfil this criterion. MacKay (1986) describes a similar problem when she writes that teachers are afraid to select ‘culturally difficult’ (i.e. books that describe a culture that might seem alien to the students) because they might lead to confusion or even offense among the students.

Considering that, before the work with the selected book is started, it might be necessary to prepare the students in different ways. Elaine Showalter (2003) declares in her
book that it should be every teacher’s principle to inform students beforehand that they might feel offended and provoked when working with a sensitive topic, which many cultural issues are, not least when they concern race. Moreover, she advocates that students need to be given a sociological and historical background in order to understand the context of what they are reading, and also why they are reading the book. Students must also be allowed to express their reactions and discuss the text freely in the classroom, all which the teacher must be prepared to handle. Louie (2006) thinks in a similar way when she declares that: ‘in order to understand ethnic characters’ actions and intentions, students have to realize that other cultural groups may think and act in ways that are different from their own group’ (p 439). She suggests that the life patterns and the intrigues of the main characters are charted and analyzed together in class, which will make the different lifestyle more comprehensible. She believes that it enables the students to become more involved with the reading.

When working with a multicultural book, Louie (2006), Williams and Christensen Haag (2011) and Brumfit and Carter (1986) all agree that inaccuracies and stereotypes always need to be noticed and discussed. Brumfit and Carter (1986) and Williams and Christensen Haag (2011) even declare that books that give an incorrect view of a cultural group may well be selected by a teacher and should not be avoided, as long as these possible issues are processed. Louie suggests that the students should be encouraged to have a ‘dialogue’ with the book they are reading, where they talk back at things that they find questionable, not clear or simply missing. They should also be encouraged to try the same thing both from the perspective of an insider and an outsider.

One good way of highlighting differences and similarities between cultures is to compare different versions of the same story. The result will probably tell a lot about different values and ethics. Fairytales often vary from country to country and culture to culture and have a moral message, which make them ideal for cultural comparisons (Botelho and Rudman, 2009).

Kumashiro (2002) contributes to the discussion when he argues that teachers can discuss differences and similarities between cultures using different starting points. The most common method is probably the reading that focuses on the otherness and difference contained in the text. At best, students are offered alternatives to the mainstream truths, so that everyone can understand themselves and be allowed to identify. The teacher also must signal that difference is not the same as inferiority, which unfortunately is one of the reasons why multicultural books sometimes have the opposite effect to the intended one. The focus on differences, which means that the characteristics of the different groups are outlined, also
tends to make things less complicated than they are in order to make them more comprehensible for outsiders.

Instead, the reader could choose to look for norms (which are often invisible) and what is regarded as natural in a text, which is then applied to society. Kumashiro’s goal with this kind of reading is that the students should realize that a norm is not the same as a natural law that is unchangeable and has to be obeyed. This reading is interesting in relation to Glazier and Seo’s (2005) findings that indicate that culturally mainstream students are unaware of their own culture and the problems that might follow.
3 Conclusions

3.1 Should we use literature for the teaching of culture or not?

A lot of criticism has been presented in this paper concerning the utility of literature and multicultural literature, when used as a means of teaching culture. Still, in my opinion, there is no source that vindicates total banishment of literature in school classrooms. Literature is recognized by most as an invaluable but somewhat ‘dangerous’ resource, that has to be utilized with great caution and skill.

In particular, it is the Canon that seems to have ruined the reputation of literature. It is associated with whiteness, gender inequality and boring, mandatory reading. However, I think it would be more productive to evolve the Canon than to throw it into the dust bin, something that Guijarro-Ojeda (2013) and Yebra (2013) would probably agree with.

As the quotations from and the comments on the Swedish curriculum indicate, its nature is vague and full of idealistic goals without concrete directives. In order for a Swedish school education to be comparable all over the country, teachers need to organize themselves more and share successful ways of working. A national database with recognized and qualitative books touching upon all kinds of themes and genres should be available for all school classes in Sweden. Preferably there should be a central school library that all these books can be borrowed from in large numbers.

From my own experience I can tell that I only read one single real novel in English during my whole school time and it was one that I got to choose myself. During my practical teacher training I also noticed that availability rather than quality decides what and if the students get to read English books. Since the resources of the single school libraries are very limited, the result is often that outdated books that neither the teacher nor the students really want to work with are selected. This is one good example of harmful use of literature in teaching.

To answer my original question, whether literature should use in the teaching of culture, my answer is definitely yes. However, as wrong as it is to exclude aesthetic subjects from school, a trend that seems to go along with the view of literature as something that has to be justified with hands-on utility, as wrong is it to ignore the value of the pleasure and comfort good reading give human-beings. Not all qualities are easy to measure, but are still vital for the development into a stimulated and mature adult. As to culture, it is something that
is not easy to measure and describe either, since it is based on people’s inner, mental processes. This somewhat diffuse but conclusive fact makes literature, even if it is often difficult to concretize a book’s greatness into sensible motivations made out of words, one of the best means of teaching and understanding culture.

3.2 Should the term multicultural literature be used or not?

One of the clear problems of the so called multicultural literature is that it, with the best intentions, points out certain groups of people as different and not normal. Thus I support the idea that a change of name, a seemingly simple solution, could be enough to make the genre less harmful for the pro-multicultural process. The long term goal should of course even be that the genre does not need a specific label at all. Still we are probably at a too early stage in the literary evolution to implement that now, and a hybrid term as ‘literature of diversity’ as suggested by Botelho et al. (2009) is probably the best solution at the moment.

This issue is a dilemma, since it is the choice between not being visible at all and to only be viewed in certain contexts. Even if the status of the genre (a genre that per definition marks its characters with alienation) was not problematic, books alone cannot change the fact that some ethnicities are seldom seen in powerful positions and often depicted in negative ways in media. However, books are very good at inspiring people to undertake political changes and that is also why it is so important to make young people read.

3.3 Development and future of multiculturalism from a school perspective

I believe that it is not the genre multicultural literature that will be a crucial part of the future Swedish school, but the books that contain characters and stories that correlate with the ethnical and cultural reality in the Swedish society. In a society that acknowledges all its population in a righteous way, I believe there is no need to discuss and call attention to multiculturalism specifically, since it will be such a natural part of society. I found this assumption in the findings of Glazier and Seo (2005) that indicate that students who belong to a cultural majority tend to be very unaware of cultural characteristics of their ethnical group and instead focus on individual differences. Glazier and Seo describes this unawareness of group identity as something negative, but I would argue that it is positive, at least in this
respect. If we can manage to blur the lines between the ‘us’ and ‘them’, we will start to see individuals, and not only in one’s own social group.

Furthermore, considering migration and birth rates, many societies that used to have a population predominated by white Caucasian people will have other ethnical majorities in the future. In the US for instance, it is estimated that white people will be a minority by 2070 (Botelho et al, 2009). It is interesting to think about how this will influence mainstream culture and not least what today is called multicultural literature. Will white people still be dominant in power relationships despite the fact that they will be a minority? Will people continue to read books from a Canon that in its current form almost exclusively focuses on white people and their culture? Will there at some point be a need to establish ‘multicultural literature’ that promotes literature also containing white people? If that is the case, it should also be highly relevant for the persistence of ‘white’ culture to make sure that it is not only the ethnical majority that is considered to be part of the normal society and thus is ‘allowed’ to be shown in books and media.
Reference list

Printed sources


Electronic sources
