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Newly arrived refugee students and learning – the case of Sweden

Against the backdrop of recent Swedish developments, the aim of this presentation is to describe and analyze some of the main structural constraints as well as opportunities concerning learning and language acquisition of newly arrived refugee students. With roughly 10 million inhabitants, Sweden is a relatively small country known for its generous welfare system. The country is also renowned for its liberal migration policy towards asylum-seekers and refugees. During 2015, Sweden received 163 000 refugees, mainly from Syria, Iraq, Somalia, and Afghanistan. About 70,000 were minors under the age of 18. Due to tighter border controls throughout Europe and stricter refugee admission policies in Sweden, the number plummeted to 30,000 refugees (of which 10,000 children) in 2016.

In order to promote inclusion, learning, and language acquisition of newly arrived refugee children and youth, Swedish authorities (national government, governmental agencies, and local governments) responded with a set of legal measures, organizational routines, and pedagogical policies. The following are amongst the most important legal and organizational changes:

- A student is considered as newly arrived up to four years after enrolling in a school.
- Students shall receive the same rights and obligations as other students, irrespective of migration status. However, at the elementary level (age 7-15), it is not compulsory for asylum-seeking and undocumented children to attend school.
- General organizational models for newly arrived at elementary level (age 7-15) is direct immersion in regular classes or education (although partially and max two years) in separate classes.
- General organizational model for newly arrived at upper (non-compulsory) secondary level (age 16-19) consists of language introduction which is a specially designed program for newly arrived students with focus on Swedish as a second language.

Amongst the most important pedagogical revisions were:

- The receiving school is required (after a new law was enacted in 2016) to conduct an assessment of students' previous knowledge within two months of the student's arrival to school.
- Efforts should be put into place to increase the number of teachers educated in Swedish as a second language. Efforts should also be put into place to get all teachers to work with language developing strategies.
- Newly arrived children and youth are entitled to support in their mother-tongue language with a minimum of one to two hours per week as well as to mother tongue teaching.
- Teaching hours can be redirected from other subjects to Swedish as a second language during the first year of schooling for the newly arrived children and youths.

The arduous journey for refugees does not end once the asylum-application has been submitted in Austria, Germany, or Sweden. Nor is the process finished when asylum has been granted. New challenges and opportunities emerge in school, the playground, the neighborhood, within the family, culture, within self-identity, and future plans. Variations within these areas have been widely referred to as integration and inclusion. Children need to gather their resources to meet challenges and seize opportunities, to adjust to new circumstances, and to adapt to new realities. Four crucial components of learning resources possessed by newly arrived refugee children are resilience, ambition, previous knowledge/experiences, and above all, their mother tongue. In some strange twist, these resources are also presented as the children's biggest liabilities in schools. This presentation addresses why these so-called liabilities have come about, what effects can occur from them, and what can be done about them.

Finally the presentation will touch upon contexts and practices at a structural level that promote learning and language acquisition. Among the most important are: Support based inclusion as a formal organizational model; Informal places for inclusion, empowerment and peer-learning; School staff awareness of students' previous and present experiences; First language perceived and used as a learning resource through mother tongue support teachers; and Active communication with parents.