

# More Languages – More Opportunities

We can learn a new language without it being at the expense of another language. We have an infinite ability with regard to language – never-ending and invaluable. Language is an asset that should be developed and used. By means of language we can convey how we feel about our culture, our place in life and our values.

Language is also a tool for learning. Language carries with it knowledge and is the basis for the way in which we meet and react with others. The ability to speak a language is to understand. We need language in order to think, dream and communicate. Language gives us a feeling of self-esteem and is what makes us human. In order to grow as humans, widen our horizons and open up to the world around us, we need language.

The aim of this paper is to show the need for one's mother tongue. The National Agency for Education wants to emphasise the importance of having a good command of a language in order to function well, live a good life and make a contribution to the democratic society in which one lives.

Many languages are spoken in Sweden now in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. More and more children are growing up in families that speak several languages. In many parts of the country, pre-schools and schools are environments where different language groups meet. How well pre-schools and schools can take advantage of the fact that children and youths have a grasp of several languages is therefore a determining factor in their development. Language and identity are as inseparable as language and learning.

Children and youths with a mother tongue other than Swedish have every chance of developing several languages on a higher level. Whether or not they succeed in doing so depends, among other things, on the help they are given at pre-school and school – whether or not they are given the opportunity and stimulus to want to develop these different languages.

However, children with several languages do not always cope so well in Swedish schools. Even if some cope extremely well, others do not do so well at all. One explanation for this can be that there has been a decrease in native language or mother tongue lessons during the past ten years in all forms of schooling. The value of these lessons has been questioned by many in society and they are not a natural part of school activities at the present time. Another explanation may be the general cutback in the school sector during the 1990's, leading to less staff in classrooms and thereby poorer opportunities of meeting the needs of students.

Sweden has become a multicultural society with many languages. The existence of many languages is an asset both for individuals and for society in general. Schools are an important resource when it comes to integration and therefore share a large part of the responsibility of seeing to it that all have the opportunity of experiencing a richer life, irrespective of background. Children and youths with a mother tongue other than Swedish are an asset, not a problem that needs to be solved.

## Government Commission

There has been a reduction in mother tongue assistance and mother tongue instruction during the past ten years. Mother tongue assistance refers to the assistance given to children at pre-schools to improve their mother tongue. Mother tongue instruction refers to the instruction given to children at compulsory comprehensive schools to improve their mother tongue as well as to lessons carried out in their mother tongue. At the same time, several investigations have shown that students with several languages have not always reached up to the expected level of knowledge at school. An improvement must be seen, with all resources being utilised – especially in the work of caring for the language needs of children and youths.

### Some facts

- Ten years ago 60 percent of multilingual children received mother tongue assistance at pre-school. Today, that figure is 13 percent.
- At compulsory comprehensive school, the percentage of students that receive mother tongue instruction has fallen from 60 percent to 50 percent.
- Most mother tongue instruction is given in the afternoon – at the close of the ordinary school day.
- Only 10 percent of Sweden’s municipalities arrange tuition in particular subjects in the mother tongue.
- More than each fifth student with a mother tongue other than Swedish did not qualify to carry out a national programme at upper secondary school during 2002. That represents twice as many students as those with just one language.

The Government commissioned the National Agency for Education to carry out a survey of the situation in pre-schools and schools. They also wanted to find out more about the attitudes of different groups towards mother tongue education, and what



needs there were with regard to study guidance, mother tongue assistance and mother tongue instruction. What changes need to be made in rules and regulations and how shall we go about stimulating decision-makers to actually carry out improvements? And finally, what will the cost be?

The National Agency for Education presented its report on 15 May 2002.

## **What Needs to be Done?**

The home language reform of 1977 gave multilingual children the right to learn and develop their mother tongue at school, besides Swedish. However, ever since the reform took effect, there has been a wide gap between the intentions with regard to mother tongue education and the actual carrying out of these intentions. The National Agency for Education's survey shows that it is necessary to give pre-schools and schools better pre-requisites for attending to the needs of multilingual children. Those students that are in need of special measures in order to meet the target of proficiency in different subjects, must receive help in their mother tongue. Mother tongue education must be given a higher status, so that it becomes an integral part of pre-schools and schools.

## **What Does the National Agency for Education Wish to Achieve?**

All children and youths have a natural right to their own language and their own identity. Pre-schools and schools shall help these children by promoting and supporting their development in both Swedish and their own mother tongue. The United Nations children's convention maintains that a child's education shall aim to develop respect for its own cultural identity, its own language and its own values.

The National Agency for Education wants the focus to be put on each child and points out the importance of seeing to the needs of each individual. Language development shall be supported throughout school life in order to help each child succeed both at school and later on in life. The National Agency for Education therefore proposes that all children with a mother tongue other than Swedish shall be offered mother tongue assistance at pre-schools.

The National Agency for Education also wants mother tongue instruction at compulsory comprehensive schools and upper secondary schools to be integrated into the normal teaching curriculum, and that students should be offered instruction in different subjects in their mother tongue.

## **What Does the Law State?**

The right to receive assistance and instruction in one's mother tongue as well as study guidance is governed by legislation in official directives.

### **Assistance at pre-schools**

The curriculum for pre-schools states: "Pre-schools shall give children with a mother tongue other than Swedish the opportunity of developing both the Swedish language and their own mother tongue". It is the responsibility of each municipality to see to it that these children receive that assistance. The curriculum does not state how this is to be done. Instead, each municipality may organise this assistance in different ways.

## **Instruction at compulsory comprehensive schools and upper secondary schools**

The curriculum says that students have the right to receive mother tongue instruction if they have a mother tongue other than Swedish and use this in their everyday lives with at least one parent or guardian. Municipalities have the obligation of offering such instruction, but participation is voluntary on the part of students.

Those students who need study guidance in their mother tongue shall receive such.

## **Curricula and school reports**

The mother tongue is a subject of its own for which there is both curricula and criteria as to school reports. School reports are given in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> years of compulsory comprehensive schooling and at upper secondary school.

## **All Children Have the Right to Receive an Equally Good Education**

We know that language development is most intensive during the pre-school years. It is during this period that a basis is laid for multilingualism. Research and experience have shown that both the ability to learn Swedish and the development of a child's knowledge in general are made easier if the child is allowed to use its mother tongue. Despite this, mother tongue assistance for children at pre-school has declined radically during the 1990's.

At school we see a difference in results when comparing Swedish students to students with a foreign background. There are several reasons for this; however, the National Agency for Education is of the opinion that an increase in mother tongue assistance as a natural part of school activities would have a positive effect on multilingual students, resulting in more students reaching the set targets.

Mother tongue education has a low status at school, coming way down on the list in the municipalities' curricula. Because of the way in which lessons are organised, mother tongue teachers are not included in any work teams or staff meetings. There is a lack of co-operation with other classes and other teachers and they are not included in discussions about teaching methods at school.

## **In pre-schools**

The number of children attending pre-school increased during the 1990's, not least because of sharpened demands on municipalities to offer all children a place in the child care system. The percentage of children with a mother tongue other than Swedish was 13 percent in 2001. 13 percent of these children received support in their mother tongue. Many municipalities have completely discontinued mother tongue assistance. Among other reasons for this reduction was the fact that government grants were discontinued and many municipalities have been forced to cut down greatly on costs. Although there is an obligation to provide children with mother tongue assistance, this became one way in which to cut costs. Providing mother tongue assistance has a low priority in the municipalities. Only every fourth municipality arranges any kind of assistance at all.

At pre-school, this kind of assistance is usually given by teachers who come to the pre-school a couple of times a week. This support is integrated with other activities, but it is often difficult for teachers to be able to co-ordinate activities with the ordinary members of staff. There are some bilingual members of staff, but that is not so common.



### **In compulsory comprehensive schools**

A little more than 40 percent of Sweden's municipalities arrange to assist children in their mother tongue at pre-school. Generally, they use the same technique as in the compulsory comprehensive schools.

Approximately 12 percent of students at compulsory comprehensive school have the right to receive lessons in their mother tongue. This figure has not changed during the past decade. However, fewer and fewer students take advantage of this arrangement. This may depend on economy measures in teaching, tougher demands for those who partake in these lessons, and revised regulations that say that municipalities are not obliged to offer instruction to less than five students of any one language group in their mother tongue.

At compulsory comprehensive school mother tongue lessons are arranged as a language option that students choose within the framework of the options offered by the school or as an extra subject outside of the school's normal lessons.

Mostly, such lessons are arranged later in the afternoons outside of the ordinary school schedule.

Teaching particular subjects in a student's mother tongue is very uncommon. Only every eighth municipality arranges to teach particular subjects in the language of groups of students who speak the same mother tongue. This is most common in private schools that specialise in languages and ethnics.

## **In upper secondary schools**

14 percent of upper secondary school students have a foreign background. In individual course programmes the figure is 35 percent. Every fifth student received a final school report in at least one of their courses in their mother tongue at the end of the spring term of 2001.

Upper secondary school students can study their mother tongue as an individual option, as a language option or as an augmented course programme. Approximately half of Sweden's municipalities offer to instruct students in their mother tongue at upper secondary school.

## **Students with special educational needs**

Students with special educational needs have the same rights as other students in compulsory comprehensive schools. However, virtually no mother tongue instruction is available for students in special schools and very little instruction in special schools for the intellectually disabled.

There are no statistics to show whether or not students in youth homes, or under treatment programmes for addiction or who are part of other special educational models receive any lessons in their mother tongue. Children with a mother tongue other than Swedish are overly represented in this group. Their language difficulty is often a part of their schooling problem. Despite this, they receive fewer lessons in their home language than other students according to a survey carried out by the National Agency for Education.

## **In private schools**

In private schools approximately 19 percent of the students qualify for instruction in their home language. Of this number, 67 percent took part in these lessons in 2001. Among private schools there are schools that specialise in languages and ethnics.

## **Teaching aids**

Mother tongue instruction is given in approximately 60 languages. Many of the teaching aids used are published for schools in the land of origin. It requires a great deal on the part of teachers to find material and to adapt existing material to Swedish conditions. The National Agency for Education has published material in several languages, and material is being developed to help teachers improve their methodology. Information will be found at [www.modersmal.net](http://www.modersmal.net)

Dictionaries are important aids to improve the quality of teaching. The LEXIN project, run by the National Agency for Education, is built around a database of 30,000 words and more than 100 IT terms. The word bank has been translated into 21 languages in its entirety or in part, and more languages are being added.

## **Common solutions**

Municipalities have organised the way in which they provide mother tongue assistance and mother tongue instruction for children in similar ways:

- Most mother tongue lessons are held by teachers who work at several pre-schools and schools
- Most of these lessons are held outside of the normal timetable
- Very few, or no students at all, study individual subjects in their mother tongue

- Applications for mother tongue lessons are sent to a central division of school administration departments, which are responsible for mother tongue teachers.

It is not common for mother tongue assistance and mother tongue instruction to be followed up or evaluated on the central level.

## Attitudes

*The National Agency for Education's survey on attitudes shows that:*

The less people know about mother tongue education and the further away from this activity people are, the less they believe in it. There is a difference between those who are directly and regularly involved in this activity and those who are not. Those who are involved in these activities are very conscious of the importance of mother tongue education for children to keep their identity, develop their language and learn, whereas it is common for others in society to question its importance and to have a negative attitude towards it.

The survey carried out by the National Agency for Education about attitudes focuses on attitudes towards both mother tongue assistance and mother tongue instruction, as well as attitudes towards integration, diversity and multilingualism.

*The results of this survey show that:*

Positive attitudes towards mother tongue assistance and mother tongue instruction dominate over negative ones. Most people feel that it is a good way for children to develop their identity, their understanding of their background and to improve their chances of adapting to Sweden – to communicate and learn. However, several municipal representatives point out that many question the importance of giving children instruction in their mother tongue. It is still common for many to feel that it is more important for children to concentrate on the Swedish language than to spend time developing their mother tongue. Even many decision-makers are of this opinion, as can be seen in the distribution of resources to pre-schools and schools. This reflects the idea that these two skills stand in opposition to one another. Researchers agree that this is not the case. On the contrary, the pre-requisites for learning Swedish are greater if the mother tongue is well-developed.

Those who are positive towards these activities are, however, more critical about their form and the system itself. These negative attitudes concern practical problems such as times, classrooms and groups. However, criticism is also aimed at the content of mother tongue instruction, the quality, the status and teacher qualifications.

Many parents, being affected by the attitudes they perceive in society, are doubtful about mother tongue instruction.

## Fewer teachers, but new opportunities

There are now fewer teachers providing mother tongue assistance and mother tongue instruction, and opportunities for multilingual pre-school teachers and teachers to receive training in this field have practically disappeared. However, present teacher training courses provide new opportunities for training that includes mother tongue education. The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education's programme for teachers with a foreign background may, in time, give rise to more qualified multilingual teachers in school.

## **A Knowledge of More Than One Language Opens Up the Way For a Richer Life**

There are three objectives with regard to mother tongue education – three important aspects that are connected to one another.

### **The importance of the mother tongue for developing one's identity:**

*This is me*

Every child has the right to an identity that helps him or her feel easy in his or her mind. To be seen and treated as the person you really are. Having a positive feeling of self-esteem is a basis upon which to stand and from which to develop. A language – one's mother tongue – is a pre-requisite for being able to see oneself in the right context.

### **Multilingualism necessary:**

*All languages are important*

Today, English holds a unique position at school and even in society in general. German, French and Spanish are other prominent languages at school. But even other languages are arising at school, e.g. Portuguese, Italian and Russian. Other languages are not generally seen as assets. We must change our view in this respect. All languages are important, and all languages shall have a place in school.

The mother tongue is always important. It needs to be used and confirmed throughout life. A knowledge of languages is valued highly in society today. It is the key to a functional multicultural society with many international contacts. It contributes to an openness and an understanding of other cultures, values and ways of thinking. Different languages have a different standing in Sweden and are valued differently. A mother tongue that is functional is a pre-requisite for learning other languages. Children and youths with a mother tongue other than Swedish have good pre-requisites for functioning well in a multicultural society and are also at an advantage when it comes to developing multilingualism on a high level.

### **Language as a tool for learning:**

*Maths in Persian?*

Not reaching targets may depend on the question of language. Language is a tool for learning. A good knowledge of languages is not just a goal in itself, but also a means of developing skills in other subjects. Teaching different subjects in a student's mother tongue is a way to improve his or her results and future opportunities when it comes to studying. The National Agency for Education is of the opinion that students with a mother tongue other than Swedish should be offered the opportunity of receiving instruction in subjects through the medium of his or her mother tongue whenever possible.

## **All Research Points to More Languages**

If everyone wants to see improvements in mother tongue instruction, why has nothing happened? Could it be that many feel that immigrant children attain quicker results in school if they concentrate on learning Swedish? That assumption is incorrect. All research points to the fact that mother tongue instruction increases the chances of reaching targets at school.





Allowing children the right to receive assistance in developing their mother tongue is an effective way of raising their results in other subjects too. Making an effort to integrate mother tongue instruction in school is an investment for each student, for reaching targets and for society in general.

### **International research**

Being taught in one's mother tongue gives the best results – not just receiving mother tongue assistance. Virginia Collier and Wayne Thomas, two American researchers who lead the world in this field, have been following 40,000 children for 20 years. Their research clearly shows that a strong mother tongue together with a strong majority language – i.e. the language spoken in the country in which the children live – are basic pre-requisites for children succeeding in their studies. This gives them a greater desire to learn and much better pre-requisites for going on to upper secondary school and for carrying out academic studies. The most effective method is to integrate language studies with other subjects, so that students receive parallel instruction in these subjects in two languages by two teachers. It is not enough for teachers of the mother tongue to just come and assist students for one hour or two each week. The mother tongue teacher shall work together with teachers of mathematics, general science and social subjects, and shall be seen as a resource in teaching children.

Similar results are shown by researchers of bilingualism the world over. Several studies show that schools do not take advantage of the special knowledge and language ability of multilingual children. All such studies point out the need of supporting these



children in their situation at school. Among other things, they point out the fact that the cognitive development of such children, their learning ability and the development of their identity is furthered by being taught in both languages. Teaching methods shall be linked to the student's language and experiences. Contacts between the home and school are of great significance. Here, the child is the uniting link that must be able to communicate in both languages.

### **Swedish research**

The results of Kenneth Hyltenstam's and Veli Tuomela's research in Sweden agree with the American results. They say that research on the language development and school results of minority children provides a clear argument for mother tongue instruction in some form. They also feel that it is important for children to develop both their mother tongue and the Swedish language, and that it is significant when it comes to acquiring knowledge and for children to feel confident about developing their ethnic identity.

Swedish research shows that students who regularly partake in mother tongue instruction

- have higher marks in Swedish, English and mathematics
- have a better command of Swedish than other multilingual students
- are more confident and enjoy school better than other multilingual students
- have a better understanding of abstract concepts than other multilingual students
- learn a lot about their new country
- constitute a bridge for integration into the new culture.

Researchers agree on the fact that a strong mother tongue is of significance when it comes to developing one's identity, which means that the development of mother tongue instruction is profitable for both the individual and for society.

### **What Changes Need to be Made?**

It is necessary to reinforce the conditions at pre-schools for helping children with a mother language other than Swedish to actively develop their bilingualism.

It is also necessary to make changes at school to provide these children with better opportunities.

This can be done by offering them both instruction in their home language and by instructing them in different subjects in that language.

### **The National Agency for Education's proposal**

Greater demands must be put on school administration departments and schemes, so that plans, follow-up activities and quality development work take each child's needs and pre-requisites into consideration. The National Agency for Education also wants students, teachers and parents to co-operate to work out individual development plans for each child, including measures for improving results and language development. Municipalities and schools shall work to integrate mother tongue instruction into the daily school schedule. In order to create better environments for learning, children with the same mother tongue might attend certain pre-schools and schools together for a trial period.

Mother tongue assistance shall be regulated by a parliamentary constitution and be obligatory for children in pre-schools if parents so wish. The National Agency for Educa-

tion shall continue its work in supporting the production of teaching aids in different languages and shall also make a proposal regarding the development of qualifications for teachers from pre-school up to upper secondary school. In order to raise the quality and status of education in this field, multilingual teachers shall be trained and integrated into schools.

One pre-requisite for succeeding with the development of mother tongue education is to see a change in attitudes. Civil servants and decision-makers must understand the importance of mother tongue instruction, both for the individual and for society in general, so that they can make decisions about measures that support mother tongue education from pre-school up to upper secondary school.

The National Agency for Education accepts the responsibility of:

- contributing to the dissemination of knowledge about the value of mother tongue education from the perspective of both individuals and society in general
- calling attention to the significance of mother tongue education in support and reference material about quality development and the improvement of results
- drawing up general guidelines and reference material to assist and instruct multilingual children at pre-school and school
- analysing and checking the status that language has in curricula and comparing this with international standards
- continuing to develop methods for evaluating the language development of multilingual children
- continuing to support mother tongue instruction through new techniques and teaching methods
- working to make the training of multilingual teachers more attractive.

## **Concluding Remarks**

The National Agency for Education's proposals do not constitute a new direction, but rather a re-direction – a new way of thinking and a re-distribution that will have a positive effect on children, students and the entire community – at a fairly low cost. These investments will pay for themselves, mainly in the form of the profits that these efforts will bring about.

A good knowledge of many languages is a skill that is in great demand. More students will reach the targets at school and thereby be able to carry on with a higher education. Such students will function better in Swedish society, and not only cost less in their need of social services, but also be able to contribute to our common social progress.

We are becoming more and more international. Boundaries are being erased and we travel more often. Today's youths see no limits with regard to their studies, or where they want to live or work. They are the ones that will live in and develop the multicultural society that we are in the throes of building up through the European Union and an increased international exchange between states and companies.

The costs that the National Agency for Education's proposal incur will pay for themselves on all levels. Children who feel more secure, and brighter students can lead to a reduction of costs in society. It is therefore in the interests of the national economy to take advantage of the potential knowledge that exists with those who have a mother language other than Swedish and that is unexploited because of language barriers.

The need for pre-school teachers and teachers will increase. How much this is going



to cost depends on the way in which assistance and instruction is organised. The best results and the lowest costs are realised by integrating mother tongue assistance and giving instruction in two languages. More multilingual teachers leads to lower costs. As more students achieve educational targets, they are less of a burden on school costs and contribute more as adults.

Having read this far, we hope you have learned more about the importance of mother tongue education. There is more information that supports our thoughts and proposals. If you would like more information, we recommend that you study the complete report compiled by the National Agency for Education. This report also lists reference material

## **“More Languages – More Opportunities: The Development of Mother Tongue Assistance and Mother Tongue Instruction 2002”**

### **Investigations and basic data**

In order to shed as much light as possible on the question of how mother tongue assistance and mother tongue instruction functions today, and how it has developed in recent decades, a report was published containing five substudies:

1. A nationwide survey of the scope and organisation of mother tongue assistance and mother tongue instruction in all of the country’s municipalities. This survey was carried out by Statistics Sweden in the form of a questionnaire that took up the questions of how the municipalities planned, directed, followed up, evaluated and

provided information about mother tongue assistance and mother tongue instruction.

2. An investigation regarding attitudes towards mother tongue assistance, mother tongue instruction, integration, diversity and multilingualism. This investigation was carried out by Kairos Future in the form of interviews in so-called focus groups, with children aged 5, 11 and 17, as well as parents and staff at a number of pre-schools and schools.
3. An overall study of current research on mother tongue instruction in Sweden, carried out by Veli Tuomela, Doctor of Philosophy, at the Centre for Research on Bilingualism, Stockholm University.
4. An overall study of the development of mother tongue assistance at pre-schools from 1970 to 2000.
5. A prognosis of how many mother tongue teachers will be needed up until 2020, carried out by Statistics Sweden.

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A reference group was formed consisting of 18 municipalities that comprise a little more than 60 percent of all the students that received mother tongue education in 2001. These municipalities were: Botkyrka, Göteborg, Haparanda, Helsingborg, Jönköping, Karlstad, Kiruna, Kristianstad, Lund, Malmö, Norrköping, Stockholm, Solentuna, Södertälje, Trollhättan, Umeå, Uppsala and Växjö.

This reference group has given a report on its experiences and discussed questions pertaining to attitudes, development and organisation. The group has also proposed measures that they feel need to be taken. The National Agency for Education has also obtained views, thoughts and information from union organisations, ethnic organisations, mother tongue teachers, parents, children and youths.

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