

”Organized tutoring of pupils in lower secondary school: a Red Cross activity in Oslo defined as a humanitarian need” by Heidi Biseth, M.Phil. student in Comparative and International Education, Institute for Educational Research, University of Oslo

Introduction

The Red Cross is an organization often associated with humanitarian aid when huge catastrophes or war occur. This is also in accordance with the organization’s expressed values, such as humanity and impartiality, which makes its task to discover, prevent, and alleviate human suffering and distress, no matter who are the victims and where it takes place (Norges Røde Kors, 2002, 2004). How then is it possible to define tutoring of pupils in a rich and developed country like Norway as a humanitarian need for which this organization finds it necessary to initiate action?

This paper intends to take a closer look at this question by analyzing the intentions and goals set for the Oslo Red Cross Resource Centres, attempting to relate this to the Norwegian official educational policy for linguistic minorities, and present a short theoretical background for the arguments. In addition there is a chapter with reflections of my own experiences as a volunteer in the organized tutoring at one of the Resource Centres. But first of all it is necessary to take a quick look at the history of the Red Cross in general and the Resource Centres in Oslo in particular.

History of the Red Cross and the Resource Centres in Oslo

Henry Dunant experienced the atrocities of war in 1859 on a battlefield close to Solferino in Northern Italy where 30 000 men died and 10 000 were wounded without access to medical help. He organized the women of a neighbouring village to care for the wounded and churches were temporarily turned into hospitals (Pollard, 1995). Thus Mr Dunant realized the need for a plan to help wounded on a battlefield, and since he had experienced how people volunteered for this as long as someone organized the work, he saw the potential for using volunteers in this humanitarian task.

In 1863 representatives from 16 countries met in Geneva to discuss Mr Dunant’s visions. Two resolutions were agreed upon which marked the foundation of the Red Cross, and organizations of volunteers were established. They were recognized as neutral in war-time when wearing their white armbands with a red cross. These volunteers were to assist the medical companies on the battlefields. Ambulances and hospitals with the red cross on a white flag were also to be considered neutral and given access to the battlefields. The Red Cross was established in Norway in 1865 (Norges Røde Kors, 2004) and today there exist Red Cross or Red Crescent organizations in almost every country in the world.

Today the overall objective of the Red Cross is not only to assist in war-time but to initiate action whenever humanitarian needs occur. According to Gulowsen (1988) the Red Cross often acts as a buffer between new humanitarian tasks and the public responsibility to help. For example when unexpected, relatively large, numbers of refugees and asylum seekers arrived in Norway in the 1980’s, Red Cross opened reception centres for asylum seekers because the public sector did not possess the capacity to handle this situation. The Norwegian Red Cross also runs emergency services and visitor services. In addition, Oslo Red Cross has refugee guides who help the newly arrived to get to know Norwegian culture and society, a phone with information about forced marriage, and other activities they consider necessary to cover the humanitarian need in the Norwegian capital (Oslo Røde Kors, 2004a).

Among these activities are the four Resource Centres of which the first one was opened in May 2001, the second in May 2003, the third in September 2003. The fourth Resource Centre will open in September 2004 and will continue from already existing

activities in Oslo Red Cross International Centre (Oslo Røde Kors, 2004b, 2004c). They intend to improve the conditions for children and adolescents growing up in Oslo, with the parents as their main partners (Oslo Røde Kors, 2004b). Activities offered are mainly internet cafés, organized tutoring, special evenings for girls, cafés with baby-sitting for women, and evenings for adults with special subjects on the agenda. The activities vary slightly in the different centres according to the special needs of the area.

The first Recourse Centre in Oslo opened in 2001 after a period of local investigation and the gathering of information about local needs (Oslo Røde Kors, 2001; Remfeldt, 2004a). A relatively high percentage of the target group are youth, with a history as immigrants or refugees, and some of these experience social exclusion. Hence there is a need for safe and including meeting points with adult role models who can contribute to the prevention of violence, racism and intolerance. The Resource Centres aim to have low threshold value environments, with a high adult profile. Due to the background of the users, the Resource Centres use a combination of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent as their symbol since they are both familiar and, to a lot of people, represent safety.

Organized tutoring as an activity at the Recourse Centres

According to Remfeldt (2004a) the only premise for the establishment of the first Resource Centre was that one of its activities would be organized tutoring. Oslo Red Cross International Centre was already experienced in tutoring at upper secondary level. Tutoring in primary school is usually covered by the municipality, but tutoring in lower secondary is a niche no one is taking care of. At this level in the educational system there are a lot of adolescents from linguistic minorities who work hard to succeed in their education but do not have the same starting point as pupils with Norwegian as their first language. Lack of opportunities and omissions on the part of the educational system, as well as politicians, leads to a feeling of lasting uselessness. This can be a threat to good growing up conditions for minority groups, and the road to crime of gain, drugs, and violence is considerably shortened (Remfeldt, 2004b). The current situation makes the adolescents frustrated by their own lives and the difficult society. Defining organized tutoring as a humanitarian need is thus based on an understanding of a society producing “losers” or social casualties, since linguistic minorities lack the help needed in the educational system to give them control of their own lives. Organized tutoring contributes towards providing more equal opportunities for these adolescents in relation to the Norwegians, and works for their integration in the Norwegian society (Moholt, 2000).

The strategy of the Norwegian Red Cross 2002-2005 (Norges Røde Kors, 2002) is to address issues like this when they seek to “Promote tolerance and respect among people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds and to help create a society built on diversity and equality” (objective 1.2, page 4). Young people are considered to be an important resource in this respect. Another main objective is therefore the promotion of good childhood conditions by offering assistance to children (objective 3.2). The organized tutoring is such a contribution. Most of its users are adolescents who come from linguistic minorities. They need extra help with their homework because they often lack the possibility of getting adequate help at home due to parents’ limited knowledge of Norwegian language and society. Research (Sletten, 2001) also reveals that this group of pupils in general has lower grades in school. Despite this they have high ambitions regarding education and vocational occupation. This concurs with the experience of the organized tutoring at the Resource Centres since pupils of linguistic minorities are the largest group of users of this activity. The annual reports of 2003 from the Resource Centres (Oslo Røde Kors, 2004c, d, e, f) all reveal the same pattern; pupils return several days a week and work for many hours with their homework. They value this opportunity to improve their chances in education and, later on in the labour

market, by getting adequate help from volunteers, access to computers and space to do their homework. The use of organized tutoring at the Resource Centres confirms the need for such an activity, especially among linguistic minorities in Oslo.

Norwegian official educational policy for linguistic minorities

An explicit goal of the Norwegian government integration policy is that everyone regardless of background should have equal opportunities, rights and obligations in Norwegian society (Stortingsmelding 17, 2000-2001, point 7.1). Education is assessed as an important instrument in giving every individual the possibility to function in society on an equal basis (Stortingsmelding 17, 2000-2001, point 2.5). A report to the Norwegian Parliament (Stortingsmelding 17, 2000-2001) emphasizes the importance of good linguistic skills in Norwegian as a basis for social mobility. Circular 02/2003 and 04/2003 from the Educational Department of Oslo Municipality (Oslo kommune, Skoleetaten, 2003a and b), where 30% of the pupils are from linguistic minorities, give directions for special training in Norwegian, mother-tongue training, and bilingual training in subjects for linguistic minorities. These policy documents seem to create a good basis for the opportunities of linguistic minorities. Despite this situation, the National Department of Education (Utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet, 2003) describes a situation where 2/3 of the pupils in this group have achievements below the national average. In addition there exists a huge lack of qualified mother-tongue and bilingual teachers alongside teachers of the linguistic majority who have little competence in teaching linguistic minorities.

Analyzing these documents and looking at the title of the new strategy plan from the Department of Education – “Equal Education in Practice!”, suggests that there is a gap between policy and practice. In the classrooms of Oslo mother-tongue training and bilingual training in subjects are rarely, if at all, given. Pupils from linguistic minorities are offered “Norwegian as a second language”. This is a subject adjusted to the pupils’ limited competence in the Norwegian language and they are in addition exempted from the Norwegian secondary language form. Since the pupils are physically separated from the regular pupils in the school, they experience an organizational differentiation which can lead to stigmatization because their “differentness” is confirmed. In addition, this differentiation often causes selective interaction in school limited to pupils in a similar linguistic situation. Hence, linguistic influence from the majority is also restricted.

It is possible to speculate whether this situation is caused by lack of political will to carry out policies, lack of economical resources, pedagogical assessments or other factors, but I would like to emphasize the problems occurring for all the pupils lacking necessary help in their education. By not giving them a *little help in time*, they may become a greater economical burden on society later on when they need help due to unemployment, psychological problems, a criminal record, etc.

Some theoretical basis

Øzerk has conducted research on linguistic minorities in the Norwegian educational system and published several books on this subject (1992, 1997, 2003). He emphasizes the significance of *understandable* teaching of the pupils in order to secure their participation in their own process of learning (Øzerk, 1997). To achieve this it is important to have teaching *in* the pupil’s mother-tongue in addition to teaching *of* the mother-tongue. This is of great value because it recognizes the reality and culture of the individual pupil as relevant to the teaching situation. The present national curriculum (Læreplanverket for den 10-årige grunnskolen, 1996) emphasizes the need to use the pupils’ own previous experience and include the different backgrounds of the pupils in the education. By doing this, the educational system recognizes and gives value to the diversity of the pupils and contributes to

development of a confident identity. Even though this is recognized in the national curriculum, this is not always the reality in the classrooms of Oslo. The pupils are neither given mother-tongue instruction, nor bilingual teaching in subjects.

To learn Norwegian is considered a prerequisite for active participation in Norwegian society. The governmental or official view is that first of all pupils from linguistic minorities should learn the Norwegian language, and then participation in Norwegian linguistic environments is made possible (compare with the subject “Norwegian as a second language”). Hence linguistic teaching is regarded as primary in the education of linguistic minorities, and the teaching of subjects suffers. According to Øzerk (1992), this is a linear way of thinking because it does not catch the reciprocal influence between development of linguistic skills in Norwegian and participation in Norwegian linguistic environments. This makes up a policy which is contradictory: pupils are given ‘supportive’ education in Norwegian language because they do not master this in a satisfactory manner. At the same time the theoretical education in subjects is given in Norwegian, i.e. in the language they do not master adequately. The results are pupils of linguistic minorities lagging behind in the educational system, or even failing, creating a situation which makes the Red Cross definition ‘humanitarian need’ valid. Consequently, the organized tutoring provides an additional arena for reciprocity between development of linguistic skills and participation in a Norwegian linguistic environment.

My own experience

I have worked as a volunteer in organized tutoring at one of the Resource Centres in Oslo for about a year. My motivation was curiosity about the “real” educational situation for adolescents from linguistic minorities since I in my undergraduate studies wrote papers on integration of immigrants by use of the educational system. I had read policy documents, research reports and different educational and sociological theories, but never experienced the “real life”-situation. The opportunity of working as a volunteer gave me a chance to get close to the pupils about whom I had already written. It was fascinating to meet pupils this highly motivated towards success in education. They deserve all possible respect for their hard work in a complicated situation, with little or no help from their parents regarding their homework, limited space for schoolwork at home due to large families, and an educational system which does not provide optimal opportunities.

My experiences concur with the annual reports from the Resource Centres (Oslo Røde Kors, 2003c, d, e and f) in the sense that we often see the same pupils returning again and again, and remaining throughout the opening hours. Some of them are refugees arrived a couple of years ago which are struggling with their Norwegian linguistic skills. Despite that some of them have very high ambitions regarding their education and future occupation, and the parents are very supportive of this. In addition to acquiring knowledge in the Norwegian language, the pupils toil and moil with the syllabus in other subjects, such as mathematics and English. Since they are not given bilingual training, i.e. in their mother-tongue and Norwegian, they lag behind. An illustrative situation is the refugees arriving from countries where English is not taught in schools, e.g. Syria, Iraq, and Iran. In Norway, English is on the syllabus from the 1st grade. If the refugees arrive in Norway starting in lower secondary, they have to catch up several years of English. It seems to me that the educational system is unprepared for a situation such as this since their main occupation is to train the pupils in Norwegian linguistic skills. Other subjects suffer and the pupils experience series of set backs since the evaluations and exams are based on a national level and apply to all pupils with no regard to their background. According to the national syllabus (Læreplanverket for den 10-årige grunnskolen, 1996), every pupil has the right to training adjusted to their individual needs and abilities. I have often heard pupils, who really work hard with their education and

have high ambitions, telling me that their teacher asks them to be satisfied with grades below average. The frustrated pupils themselves do not know why they don't get better grades. Is this really the adjusted training they are entitled to according to the law?

Another interesting observation during my work is how the adults and volunteers are role models in this environment. The ratio of adults to adolescents is much higher at the Resource Centres than in school or youth clubs. This is due to the intention of Oslo Red Cross (2004a) to offer an environment in which adults create a safe and caring atmosphere. Hence, organized tutoring generates interpersonal relationships. The pupils are curious about the volunteers, why they engage in this kind of work, their occupation, family life etc. When volunteers open up and tell a little bit about themselves, the pupils engage. Since I am a student, I have often heard questions about my own education, results from my exams, what it is like being a student at the university, etc. Allowing the pupils access to information about our own circumstances, how life is not a bed of roses even though we belong to the linguistic majority, and how it is possible to achieve results through hard work, might encourage the pupils in their own lives.

Concluding remarks

Is organized tutoring covering a humanitarian need in Oslo? I find it difficult to give an unambiguous 'yes' to this question because it is also dependent on the definition of the concept. The situation for linguistic minorities in Oslo is of course not comparable to that of people suffering the atrocities of war or catastrophes. However, experienced circumstances are, undoubtedly, difficult for adolescents from linguistic minorities. Oslo Red Cross is again acting as a buffer between the needs of the population and the public responsibility to help. Hopefully the organized tutoring at the Resource Centres will contribute to increasing the value of education given in a way that empowers the pupils to become well functioning citizens in Norwegian society. Their initiative is one of a kind in the world and is highly respectful.

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