

## Fakultetsopponenten sammanfattar

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Getahun Abraham – *Educating for democracy? Life orientation: Lessons on leadership qualities in voting in South African comprehensive schools*. (Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 2010)

One of the key concepts that underpin this study is the notion of educational reform in South Africa, the shift towards a more democratic education system and the curriculum reform that followed. In 1994 South Africa formalized the transition from apartheid to a non-racial democracy and set an ambitious agenda for social and educational reform. The key foci of the education reform agenda included policy, curriculum and finance reform. These reforms were initiated very early in the democratic transition and there has been much debate around their efficacy and effectiveness.

However, such analysis would have limited intellectual or practical value if it rested on the assumption that within 15 years there would be dramatic changes in the performance of what was, until recently, one of the most divided education systems in the world, entrenched for almost a century in the regressive practices of racism, sexism, authoritarianism, and inequality. The doctoral thesis of Mr Abraham also questions the effectiveness of the educational reform process specifically of curriculum reform.

The heart of school reforms since 1994 was the establishment of the comprehensive curriculum project called Curriculum 2005, a progressive model of education based on the principles of outcome-based education. In essence, this curriculum called for a form of learner-centered education which placed the teacher in the role of facilitator. Since its introduction in January 1998 into all Grade 1 classrooms, the curriculum was heavily criticized for the following reasons; a highly inaccessible and complex language; the under-preparation of teachers for this complex curriculum; large-scale discrepancies in resources and capacity between the few privileged schools and the large mass of disadvantaged schools with respect to implementation. All these findings are highlighted in the thesis with sufficient empirical data to substantiate the findings.

Mr Abraham looked specifically at a subject called Life Orientation. Life Orientation education is one of eight learning areas in the South African curriculum. It is taught at all levels from the first to the final grade. The grade

chosen for the study is Grade 3. The first three grades are referred to as the Foundation Phase, where the learners are between eight and ten years old. Studying this category of learners provides the knowledge of what kind of foundations for democracy children were given early in life. More specifically, the focus was on the assessment standards, leadership qualities and voting among learners in grade three. The study was restricted to four schools in the Eastern Cape Province, in the area of Nelson Mandela Bay – the schools represented the different population groups. The sample is adequate and the instruments used to collect data are appropriate given the qualitative nature of this study.

The thesis shows that the introduction of new ideology, new concepts and new working methods could influence teachers' understanding and interpretation of the contents of the curriculum. Those teachers who did not have their teacher education in post apartheid years could obviously be exposed to difficulties. Orienting themselves to the new curriculum, new guidelines, new textbooks, etcetera. and following up the rapid change in society with no or very limited help could constrain their work.

The Frame Factors Theory of Ulf P. Lundgren underpinned the study. In relation to curriculum, Lundgren discusses production, reproduction and pedagogy. According to Lundgren, the reproduction of knowledge and skills for production is intimately and inextricably interwoven with the re-creation of the cultural values and ideas which are essential for moral upbringing.

The society is being transformed from skin colour-based segregation to economic, social and cultural segregation. Those with economic, social and cultural capital/resources reproduce themselves. These inequalities are observable in the schools chosen for the study.

The implementation of the change in educational systems was explained in the thesis in terms of Lundgren's goal, frame and formal rule systems. To understand the education system and classroom reality, Basil Bernstein's theory on pedagogic devices was used in the thesis. Bernstein refers to what he calls the distributive and evaluative rules. In the classrooms it is clear there are different rules and regulations to be followed to facilitate the teaching programme and also teachers determine the content and sequence of knowledge to be transmitted.

Schools reproduce the socio-economic classes of the society. This reproduction could include both the culture and language of the different population groups of the society. The concept of *frame* helped in investigating whether the lessons follow strong or weak framing. When lessons follow strong framing, the teacher is the authority for learners to gain knowledge. When the frame is weak, learners are given space to come up with their own ideas, comments and questions. Weak framing facilitates a basis for better learning.

An ethnographic approach was used with participant observations and interviews. Documentary analysis and informal conversations provided further data. A qualitative strategy was employed in order to closely follow the practice of teachers and learners. The study found that schools focus very much on control and authoritative administration. In the classrooms, there

was strong teacher dominance. Teachers tended to give strict orders and learners just followed without questioning.

Although the desire for freedom may be innate, knowledge of how democracy functions must be taught and learned. Any society that wishes to remain free needs to ensure that its citizens are well educated in the practice of democracy. Part of the responsibility for such education lies with the schools, which may teach children not only through the formal curriculum, but also through the conduct of their institutional affairs.

There is evidence of methodological rigour in this thesis and the study has contributed to knowledge around democracy and social justice education in the foundation phase of public schooling. The candidate's understanding and use of both theoretical and methodological frameworks to highlight salient issues in the education crisis in South Africa is noted. However, the use of emancipatory and critical educational theories, given that the study was lodged within a postcolonial context, would have enhanced the study tremendously.