

Article

Mother Tongue Instruction: Between Assimilation and Multicultural Incorporation

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Abstract: For many students with migrant backgrounds and newly arrived students, their mother tongue is not only a knowledge and a school grade issue, but also a reflection of their identity and a sense of belonging, which are shaped by political structures. In this article, we analyze the role of mother tongue in Swedish policy documents and the way teachers and students see the role mother tongue in two Swedish schools: how do school professionals and students view the importance of mother tongue? What measures are taken to encourage the mother tongues of students with a migration background and newly arrived students? What are the implications of and obstacles to studying one's mother tongue? We will look at levers of integration where school staff, as well as policy documents, encourage modes of incorporation, but also do identify obstacles concerning the practice of mother tongue instruction. Our article shows that although students long for a double cultural belonging, the policy documents are ambiguous and create an unclear promise for migrant students and their mother tongue teachers concerning multicultural incorporation. In practice, they have little evidence that maintaining their cultural background represents a strong value in Sweden. Ambiguous attitude towards mother tongue can be seen as a symbolic response to Sweden as a country which took a turn regarding its migration policy. The integration of residents with a migrant background is constantly questioned in the media and became a central issue in political debates. The implementation of mother tongue instruction reflects Sweden's current state of discussing migration concerning integration policies somewhere between recognition and stigmatization. The data are drawn from student interviews, interviews with mother tongue teachers, and field notes in two schools in one of the biggest cities in Sweden.

Keywords: mother tongue instruction; modes of incorporation; belonging; power; migrant students; Sweden



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1. Introduction

It is a Monday afternoon, past 4 p.m. It is late fall in Sweden. Outside it is already dark and almost everyone at the Magnolia School has left for the day. Six students have stayed for their mother tongue instruction in Turkish. They are waiting for their teacher in a well-lit classroom. Their teacher Selin greets them with a big smile, “Merhaba arkadaşlar!” (In English, “Hello friends!”). Students reply: “Merhaba Hocam!” (In English, “Hello professor!”). Selin conjugates verbs, “Çok kolay arkadaşlar, olumsuz için -me ekliyoruz” (In English, “It is very easy friends, if you want to make it negative, just add an “me” at the end of the verb”), she says, and notes are taken. Selin refers to her students as “friends”. When Oral, who is one of the authors of this article and was born and raised in Turkey, remembers her school days in Turkey, the teachers referred to students as “kids” but not so much as “friends”. She is reminded of how students and teacher's relations in Sweden are of a horizontal character, and, there is a relaxed, calm, and fun atmosphere in the class. The students know each other well and enjoy each other's company. As they discuss how to build interrogative sentences, one student yawns and says, “Hocam bugün erken bitirebilir miyiz?” (In English, “Teacher, can we end the class early today?”) Selin smiles,

knowing that her students are tired. She tells them that she just wants to show them a video on YouTube, but she will let them do the exercises at home. The video is featuring Hamdi Ulukaya, an immigrant from Turkey living in the United States. He created the yogurt brand “Chobani”. The video, with the title “Yoğurt Macerası” (In English, “the Yogurt Adventure”), is a success story of coming from nowhere to become a successful businessman. Ulukaya, who tells his story in Turkish, might have been chosen in order to show that dreams of a successful life should be cherished, and that having knowledge of your cultural heritage can be a resource in your new country. The lesson ends with Selin and the students saying “görüştürüz” (In English, “see you”) to each other, all knowing that the story of Ulukaya will be re-visited as the students will watch it again to find sentences that are conjugated differently. A week from now they will meet again with the opening phrases: “Merhaba arkadaşlar!”, “Merhaba Hocam!”.

This fieldnote illustrates an example of mother tongue instruction (MTI), its schedule, and the atmosphere of friendship between the teacher and students and among students. It shows how a lesson on grammar is interwoven with cultural knowledge with the message that a future in the new country can build on the knowledge from the country of origin.

Mother tongue is a symbol for belonging. People usually do not feel the urge to defend the role of and the need for other courses, such as English or Math in school, however during our fieldwork we have found that MTI has a vulnerable position that requires legitimizing practices. This demonstrates a need to analyze the meaning of MTI from a cultural sociological perspective where the relation between MTI and power is acknowledged. We call our article “Mother Tongue Instruction: Between Assimilation and Multicultural Incorporation”, a title chosen on the basis of our theoretical lens and empirical findings. Our theoretical take integrates Fanon’s statement [1] on the fundamental importance of language as politics and power with the theoretical framework of modes of incorporation [2] working towards a moderate theoretical generalization [3], bringing new cultural sociological knowledge on what the symbol of MTI is concerning inclusion of migrant students. From MTI’s perspective, this could be illustrated by a situation where the migrant students are allowed to speak their mother tongue to a rather high degree, and different students learn words from each other’s mother tongues, but it is still a marginal language in the formal classroom setting.

Sweden is known for receiving immigrants from different parts of the world. In 2020, 26 percent of the population in Sweden was either foreign born or had two parents born abroad [4]. (These numbers are official statistics, meaning that individuals with an immigrant origin living as undocumented residents are not included). As a crucial part of integration, emphasis has been put on education of migrant children, both in terms of pedagogical and social inclusion [5]. MTI is part of this discussion, and it has been underlined as a human rights issue [6] and a way to secure economic and political status [7].

Despite the agreements on the academic, social, and cultural benefits of a mother tongue, what is said in the policy documents and its implementation in school context is affected by institutional routines and practical issues and the way MTI is intermeshed with culture and power. Therefore, we ask ourselves: What is the meaning of mother tongue instruction, and why does it matter for migrant students?

In order to capture the migration aspect, in this article we are not focusing on all students who are eligible to study MTI, but rather migrant students and newly arrived students who take MTI (in Sweden, “newly arrived students” are a legal term to refer all students, irrespective of their migration status, who had been resident abroad and who immigrated to Sweden after the ordinary school start (age 7). Students are considered newly arrived up to four years after their arrival). We do not have adopted children or national minorities in our sample. Sweden has five national minorities and their cultures and languages are protected by law. The official minorities and minority languages are: Jewish people and Yiddish, the Roma and Romani Chib, the Sami and the Sami language, the Swedish Finns and Finnish, and the Tornedalers and Meänkieli.

We are utilizing a cultural sociological perspective to see how the experience of MTI is connected to policies concerning mother tongue instruction and modes of incorporation. Our question is supported by two empirical focuses: (1) Mother tongue teachers' thoughts and experiences of MTI and (2) Migrant students' thoughts and experiences of MTI.

Our contribution to the field is to provide an analysis on the role of MTI from both staff's and students' points of view and to explain how policies of MTI corresponds to the lived experience of teaching and learning mother tongue. We also focus on how modes of incorporation highlight power dimensions connected to MTI thus illuminating the gap between what teachers and students want, multicultural incorporation, and a practical reality that is grounded in hyphenation and sometimes even assimilation.

The following sections explore the policy context and literature on MTI and present the conceptual and methodological approaches used in the article before demonstrating our findings.

2. Mother Tongue in Policy Documents

In Sweden, all children who speak a language other than Swedish at home are entitled to MTI. However, it is not a compulsory school subject within the Swedish curriculum; it is an elective course.

Swedish educational policy documents demonstrate support, encouragement, and recognition for MTI. Chapter 10 Article 7 in Skollagen, the Education Act, [8] (p. 800) states that "a student who has a guardian with a mother tongue other than Swedish shall be offered mother tongue instruction in this language if 1. the language is the student's daily language of communication at home, and 2. the student has basic knowledge of the language." This clearly underlines that every child who uses a language different than Swedish at home has the right to attend MTI. In Sweden, all languages other than Swedish are considered in this category if they are used by the children at their home.

The right to mother tongue is underlined by Skolverket, National Agency of Education [9]. The Agency states that mother tongue plays an important role in children's language, identity, personality, and development, so that if the student is given the opportunity to improve their mother tongue, it would help them learn new languages as well. The school is given the responsibility of organizing the MTI in order to help improve both their mother tongue and Swedish. The aim of MTI is "to give the student the opportunity to develop knowledge in and about their language" [9] (p. 11).

Policy documents recognize that newly arrived migrant students and students with migrant backgrounds are heterogeneous groups with a knowledge of different languages, and their needs regarding preservation of their mother tongue and improving their Swedish changes accordingly. However, the school organizer is not obliged to offer MTI to students if the number of students that have a specific mother tongue is less than five. Another limitation is that a student cannot choose to study more than one mother tongue in school, even if there are more than one mother tongues spoken at home [10] (p. 85).

Some MTI-teachers also provide multilingual classroom assistance [studiehandledning] when students need pedagogical support in their own mother tongue in a school subject that is taught in Sweden.

In 2019, a report published by the Swedish government [11] (p. 18) reviewed the current state in multilingualism, knowledge development, and inclusion from the perspective of MTI and multilingual classroom assistance in mother tongue in compulsory school education in Sweden. In this report, it was proposed that MTI should be given a guaranteed teaching time, planned in the timetables, and regulated in line with the school's other activities. Regardless of the number of students who want to participate, every student should have the right to participate in MTI.

In line with this report, some drawbacks in the implementation of MTI have been underlined when it comes to the organization of it [12]. For example, the mother tongue lessons are once a week with a 50–60 min session scheduled often either early in the morning before the other classes start or late in the afternoon/evening when all classes end.

Furthermore, MTI is also criticized for being not properly integrated with other school subjects [13], (Hyltenstam and Milani 2012 cited in) [14] (p. 109). Reath Warren [15] examines the MTI syllabus for Grades 7–9 and through referring to the challenges in its enactment. She concludes that organizational aspects of curriculum as well as attitudes can shape student outcomes and play a role in restraining MTI's efficacious implementation in many contexts.

3. Mother Tongue: Recognized but Somewhat Marginalized

Previous research in Sweden and beyond show different perspectives on mother tongue. First of all, MTI is a symbolic subject. It is important for language skills and identity. It does, in our case, also tell a story about Sweden and status related differences. Although Sweden is a superdiverse context characterized by a complexity of migration-related differences [16–18] with a historical, four-decades-long support for MTI, it is still a society with a “Swedish only” norm [19]. In a comparative perspective, there is a strong support for MTI in policy documents in Sweden compared to other countries [20] and MTI is offered to minority children irrespective of the language they speak or their ethnic background. This is, for example, not the case in neighboring Denmark, where students with a non-European background are not offered MTI [21]. MTI illuminates political struggles concerning nations' interest in different modes of incorporation and individualization [19].

Although there is a support for MTI, the argument for why it is important has shifted. Between 1966 and 1988, a social democratic notion of the importance of school equality was dominant and enhanced the importance of the fact that different languages and cultural backgrounds would benefit all students. The goal was an intercultural and bilingual school [19]. In the period between 1989 and 1999, the Swedish school moved towards a quasi-market logic and the degree of decentralization increased. A parallel development was an augmented presence of conservative values, and less attention was given to the ideal of general equality. The legitimization of mother tongue tuition shifted to a tool for integration for minority children rather than being a value for all students in school and MTI was motivated by its role as a gateway for knowledge in other subjects [19]. Bajcinca [19] summarizes the last period of analysis, 2000–2017, as a stage of decline of MTI in the Swedish school system. MTI is held inside the school but in a rather external way, as it is not automatically integrated into the ordinary schedule. The responsibility to keep and develop a mother tongue has become more of a question for the individual rather than being the responsibility of the society [19], and may be contributing to the increased presence of supplementary schools during this period (cf.) [22].

Reflecting historically, it is important to mention that different types of agents have been participating in the development of MTI. In a comparison between Sweden and Denmark, it becomes clear that academic scholars in Sweden have served as experts concerning MTI and their knowledge have been respected by politicians in a way that their colleagues in other parts of the world have not been [21]. Hence, interactions between the political and the academic fields have been influential in different degrees in the historical struggle for MTI [21]. For example, MTI in Sweden is currently under debate from the point of view of anti-immigration sentiments. Populist right wing and conservative parties use MTI as a pawn in the political game, where ideas connected to assimilation and demands for sameness through homogeneity instead of multicultural incorporation are promoted [23].

Language is connected to status, ethnic, and racial hierarchies. Some languages in schools, as well as in society, are de-valued and are connected to racist structures linked to notions of the non-western immigrant dense neighborhoods, skin color, and Islamophobia (cf.) [24]. Mother tongue's discursive depiction in policy documents has been analyzed as an exclusionary practice by pointing out minority students' languages as something else and hence in an othering way in comparison to majority language [25]. While some languages are part of the Swedish schools' language education, such as English, French, Spanish, and German, and can be chosen by all students irrespective of ethnic background, other languages coded as students' mother tongues are only open to those

who have the language as part of their family life or who are national minorities. This means that a student who has Swedish as his/her mother tongue cannot choose to learn Somali or Turkish in the compulsory school system. It could be argued that a true mode of multicultural incorporation would recognize languages coded as mother tongues as possible choices of language for everyone in school (we would like to thank Andrea Voyer for highlighting this analytical point to us). However, in general, how policies and institutions think about mother tongue illustrates hierarchies of worth through how different languages are valued and hence, the “social worth of different speakers” is determined [21] (p. 607). The limited time given to MTI during a school week and the placement in the schedule also reproduces the marginal position of MTI [13]. Most of the time, MTI is offered early in the morning or late in the afternoon after the “ordinary” school day. This may discourage students from participating in the lessons [26].

The literature on MTI underlines that it is recognized as important, although debated, in the Swedish political context, but still marginalized when it comes to its implementation [13,27]. In Sweden, there is not one way of teaching MTI and it is not a disregarded activity. Patterns of collaboration and teachers’ relational agency provide students with hours, learning, and care in ways that teachers are not obliged to, and they can support migrant students’ parents through their intercultural competence [28] (pp. 10–11).

Research on first generation migrant students include different models used when tutoring in the mother tongue [29,30], how mother tongue classrooms can function as a transnational space [31], and spatially be a potential space for translanguaging and a room of dialogue between other classrooms in the school where a support of mother tongue in one classroom, as a safe space, increases the likelihood for a usage of mother tongue outside the actual mother tongue classroom [32]. But even if mother tongue teachers create an inclusive atmosphere and a translanguaging practice, it is not a given that the students will continue to explore their mother tongue outside the safe space of their MTI [33] (p. 51).

Exploring the everyday life of MTI is a sociological endeavor into the world of changes in a superdiverse context and in different local school contexts. Some schools are working to find paths where MTI can be integrated in ways that recognizes minority languages as part of a school’s everyday life.

A second strong theme in the literature on MTI is its role for cultural identity and belonging. Cummins summarizes what is at stake in one sentence when he states: “To reject a child’s language in the school is to reject the child” [34] (p. 19).

When it comes to developing one’s first language, successes and challenges are linked to contexts and experiences deriving from that [35]. In order to elaborate on discourses of immigration and belonging, as well as students’ identity discourses, Dávila [36] uses an ecology of language framework through which she examines language practices and attitudes and shows that mother tongue is a means for students to further their belonging within their communities and resist assimilation (see also) [26], as well strengthen a cultural identity [37].

Through looking at patterns of language adaptation by over 5000 generation students in south Florida and southern California, Portes and Hao [38] showed that among most immigrant nationalities, knowledge of and preference for English is nearly universal, and that only a minority remain fluent in their parents’ languages. Children learning English and parents staying monolingual can condition family strife and parents losing their parental power (Child 1943; Howe 1976; Phinney 1990; Zhou and Bankston 1996 cited in) [39].

Language as a symbol for belonging and its connection to modes of incorporation has also been analyzed by Portes and Hao [39] (p. 908) and they demonstrate that it is not the capacity to impart in English across different generations that prompts the most socially productive outcomes, but the “possibility of learning that language while preserving a cultural anchor in the family’s own past that leads to the most desirable results”. MTI supports identity and belonging (see also) [40] and some students with a Somali background in Sweden also state that they feel a responsibility to keep the language alive over generations [41]. The Somali language was mostly connected to its role for family

bonds, and less linked to being of value for school results, employment, and Swedish society [41]. Swedish stands out as the one-language-norm of an official front stage while Somali becomes a language for the backstage, in private settings (cf.) [35].

Belonging in school for students and their families can also be supported by mother tongue teachers and how they can be a bridge, a form of intercultural mediator, between migrant parents and the school. Being a mother tongue teacher is more than being a language instructor [42]. Parental involvement is a much-needed dimension in the support of migrant students' school development and can counteract educational disadvantages [20].

The last dimension in the literature on MTI reflects on its effect for children and for society. Scholars have showed that it is positive for students to participate in MTI for their language competence, especially regarding literacy in reading and writing [14,43–46]. Bilingual children and school performance are a good combination as languages nurture each other [20,34]. Linguistic and educational development as well as creativity in thinking is supported by keeping and developing bilingual children's languages (Cummins 1976 and Hakuta 1986 cited in) [39] (p. 890), as it brings wellbeing through belonging and recognition. Language skills and intellectual resources are of a great value for every society and something that brings positive effects on a societal level. Research also shows that a feeling for and a knowledge of one's background enhances positive feelings for and identification with the new country [47]. To be denied recognition as valuable is to be rejected as an individual. This means, as Schalley points out: "Mother tongue instruction thus directly contributes to the *social cohesion* of society" [47] (p. 338) (emphasis in original). MTI signals recognition from society overall.

Through the literature review, we have shown three strong themes in the research which underlined the political dimensions of MTI and connections to identity and belonging, as well as effects on individuals and society. As sociologists, we are mostly interested in considering mother tongue teachers' and students' experiences in order to understand what their mother tongue symbolizes for them. To combine both perspectives in one analysis is a strength with our article as previous research takes either the perspective of teachers or students into account [26,37,42]. By analyzing students' and teachers' experiences regarding MTI as well as the dynamics of MTI in two different school contexts, we can understand the meaning of MTI for teachers and students and the barriers they face and how they tackle these against the backdrop of the policy implementation of MTI in everyday school life. We agree with Wedin et al. [32] (p. 700) that policy is "official documents as well as implicit language norms and perceptions". Our qualitative approach makes it possible to give an in-depth and complex analysis of how tensions and potentials interact within the practice of the language policy of MTI.

4. Modes of Incorporation and Mother Tongue Instruction

Fanon [1] (p. 1) argues, "We attach a fundamental importance to the phenomenon of language", and underlines that "there are mutual supports between language and the community. To speak a language is to appropriate its world and culture" [1] (p. 21). Language is not a neutral phenomenon, it is a cultural symbol of belonging and power. In Sweden, languages such as French, German, Latin, and English have been self-evident subjects for the elite in the long history of the Swedish school system, and in 1946, English was appointed as the first foreign language in lower secondary school [realskola] [48].

From our perspective, it is important to remember that mother tongue is a subject in itself in the Swedish school system and should not need any specific legitimation for the benefits it can have in other areas of life. However, there is a legitimation process not only in the literature, but also in the field at the school level. We interpret this need as a sign of the vulnerable status mother tongue has, together with the minority groups in the Swedish society.

The theory of the civil sphere [2] reminds us of how boundaries between "us" and "them" are a continuous process of change depending not only on power, but also on "boundaries of solidarity" [2] (p. 3). However, myths of primordialism [2] interfere with

who is defined as belonging within the boundary of the “we”. Who are considered the “right” individuals or group to inhabit a place constructs the we-ness of a place. It can be built on a narrative of who first came to a specific place or has been constructed as a hero of the place, thus representing a group of people [2]. Norms, such as what languages are valued, are created. When immigrants come to a new country, they are affected by these national myths that define some groups as unproblematic and some groups as more or less problematic. In the incorporation process, three ideal-typical modes may be realized [2].

The first mode of incorporation—assimilation—is well known and involves the inclusion of individuals who must abandon any evidence of their membership in subordinated groups if they are to become part of public life. Thus, solidarity is not based on mutual recognition. Language can be some of this evidence. Is the language from the home country recognized as an asset in the new country or only allowed in private settings? Hence, we can ask whether assimilation is an asymmetrical mode that echoes the norms of the core group.

The second mode of incorporation, hyphenated incorporation, enlarges the boundaries of the civil sphere, i.e., the cultural ‘we’, to embrace subordinated categories, but still maintain a view that these included categories remain distinct and subordinate, while making contributions to society as a whole as a complementarity dimension to the norm [2] (p. 542). From MTI’s perspective, this could be illustrated by a situation where the migrant students are allowed to speak their mother tongue to a rather high degree and different students learn words from each other’s mother tongue, but their mother tongue is still a subordinate language in the formal classroom setting, which is recognized, however also marginalized at the same time.

Finally, the multicultural mode of incorporation acknowledges differences as equal “variations of the sacred qualities of civility” [2] (p. 452). In this mode, mother tongue is a valued and desired quality and a self-evident part of society that promotes “unity of difference”. In a school setting this could mean for students speaking their language without hesitation and switching between languages in all school contexts without being questioned. This last mode of incorporation is a powerful channel for social cohesion, where we respect and recognize each other as a matter of principle and in a shared understanding of being human [2].

Against the backdrop of our theoretical perspective, we conclude that Swedish education policy documents concerning MTI speaks the language of hyphenation. It suggests recognizing a belonging through mother tongue, however it is a conditioned belonging in the sense that policy does not lead to an efficient implementation of MTI. If these documents would have argued for assimilation, MTI would not have been provided, and the only institutional support would have been offering Swedish as a language course. This assimilationist approach can be found in anti-immigrant sentiments and politics in contemporary Sweden [23]. Hence, MTI can be seen as a political issue too where mother tongue can be used as a tool to exert power for one’s identity to oppose assimilation.

If the policy document for MTI, on the other hand, would have supported multicultural incorporation it would have integrated suggestions from the 2019 report [11], mentioned above in Section 2. Here, mother tongue is integrated in the ordinary school day, and it is not, as is the case now, a side subject to be taught after 4 p.m., as the introductory fieldnote reminds us of. It also gives the students with one or two mother tongue(s) an enhanced right to their mother tongue(s).

Described modes of incorporation are ideal types and can be present simultaneously. Our theoretical sight is set on the lived qualities of MTI inside the two schools in one of the biggest cities in Sweden where we did our fieldwork. We reflect on how modes of incorporation are done in practice through the lived experience of school staff and students as they teach and learn their different mother tongues.

5. School Contexts and Data Collection

This study is part of the interdisciplinary comparative research project “TEAMS: Teaching that Matters for Migrant Students. Understanding Levers of Integration in Scotland, Finland, and Sweden.” Empirical data for this article has been collected in Spring and Fall 2021 in two lower secondary schools [högstadiet] in one of the biggest cities in Sweden. One of the schools, the Pine Tree School, is located in an affluent neighborhood with socio-economically stable and majority white Swedish households. The school is composed of around 700 students from Grade 4 to Grade 9, and it has a small proportion of newly arrived migrant students. The other school, the Magnolia School, is located in a socioeconomically challenged multi-ethnic area. It is a multi-ethnic school with 240 students from Grade 7 to Grade 9 where approximately 95% of students have migrant backgrounds speaking many different languages.

Our data consists of semi-structured interviews with five mother tongue teachers (Table 1) and eight students who participate or have participated in mother tongue classes (Table 2), conducted by one of our authors, Oral, in Swedish, English, and Turkish. Field notes include observations by Oral through attending Turkish mother tongue classes. Chosen data for the article relates to the question we raised concerning the meaning of MTI.

Table 1. Characteristics of mother tongue teachers.

Name	Gender	Mother Tongue	Country of Origin	Moved to or Born in Sweden	School
Ahlam	Woman	Arabic	Egypt	Moved as an adult	The Magnolia School
Elham	Woman	Farsi	Iran	Moved as an adult	The Magnolia School
Mân	Woman	Farsi	Iran	Moved as an adult	The Pine Tree School
Nor	Woman	Arabic	Iraq	Moved as an adult	The Pine Tree School
Selin	Woman	Turkish	Turkey	Moved as an adult	The Magnolia School

Table 2. Characteristics of Migrant Students.

Name	Age and Gender	Mother Tongue	Country of Origin	Moved to or Born in Sweden	School
Andrew	14, Boy	Somali	Somalia	Born in Sweden	The Magnolia School
George	14, Boy	Turkish	Turkey	Born in Sweden	The Magnolia School
Ivory	14, Girl	Somali	Somalia	Moved to Sweden	The Magnolia School
Izzy	15, Girl	Swedish and English	Sweden and England	Born in Sweden	The Pine Tree School
MJ	15, Girl	Somali	Somali	Born in Sweden	The Magnolia School
Panagiotis	14, Boy	Greek	Greece	Moved to Sweden	The Magnolia School
Pizza	14, Girl	Moroccan	Tunisia	Born in Sweden	The Magnolia School
Rehan	13, Boy	Urdu	Pakistan	Moved to Sweden	The Magnolia School

We selected our informants based on their different backgrounds as we would like to include mother tongue teachers in different languages and students taking mother tongue classes in different languages. After that, we approached them to ask whether they would be willing to participate in our research. All informants approved our request. As we are interested in answering what the meaning of MTI that matters for migrant students is, we explore both mother tongue teachers’ and students’ perspective because they represent two different sides in terms of giving and receiving MTI. In order to learn about the meaning of MTI for migrant students, it is necessary to take both teachers’ and students’ point of views into account. The mother tongue teachers themselves have a different mother tongue

than Swedish, and they are in a constant interaction with the students in the classroom during MTI.

Oral observed three mother tongue class sessions in the Magnolia School as she has the same mother tongue, Turkish, with the students attending those classes. Being a native speaker in Turkish was an advantage of and for our research not only in terms of data collection and analysis, but it also made it possible to present Oral as “one of them” through sharing the same mother tongue, which gave her direct and indirect access to everything expressed in Turkish, both verbally and gesture-wise.

Another benefit of our research overall comes from being able to conduct interviews in different languages by providing a richness in the sense that we were able to access students from different backgrounds.

Students’ and teachers’ pseudonyms in this article were chosen by the participants themselves and are used in order to provide confidentiality. The schools’ names are also fictitious. The project is approved by the Ethical Review Board in Sweden. As we started fieldwork for TEAMS Project in Spring 2021 in both of our schools and continued to collect data in Fall 2021 for the purpose of this article, we already managed to establish rapport with our research participants. They had seen us during fieldwork many times and they knew about our research. Our acquaintance with our informants did not have any effect on our findings as our relation to them was only based on research.

Student interviews are about 40–50 min, staff interviews are between 1 h and 40 min and 2 h and 15 min. Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and later the interviews were transcribed verbatim.

The material was coded by Oral and analyzed by both authors in order to find its meaning [49,50]. During the analysis, there was a shift between two ways of coding. Line-by-line, or focused, coding and context or pattern coding [49,50]. Keywords and smaller details concerning the meaning of MTI was found in the line-by-line focused coding. When we were looking for more context based meaning we looked at bigger chunks of transcribed text. In the end, we discussed how the different ways of coding could be analyzed and be awakened by a theoretical lens. In practice this meant that the data in this article was analyzed by re-visiting codes in relation to Alexander’s [2] and Fanon’s [1] work, but also by re-reading all full interviews in relation to the purpose of this article [51].

Although our interview sample is rather small, we found that recurrent patterns concerning the role of mother tongue as a value for the future and for questions of identity and belonging became saturated rather quickly. It was also the case for the barriers that mother tongue teachers emphasized concerning a lack of organizational infrastructure, familial support structures and students’ own motivations. This shows that although we have not been working towards the goal of generalization of our findings in quantifiable terms, we can say that we have managed to saturate the meaning of MTI from different perspectives in both of our schools.

6. Findings

In this part, we empirically address our research question—What is the meaning of mother tongue instruction that matters for migrant students?—by first going through what MTI teachers think about MTI. Subsequently, we present students’ views on MTI.

6.1. Teachers’ Thoughts and Experiences

Mother tongue has been depicted by MTI teachers as an asset, although they also noted certain barriers for MTI.

6.1.1. Mother Tongue as a Door to the Future

One thing that teachers underline when they are arguing for the importance of MTI is that a mother tongue is important for the migrant students’ future. According to the MTI teachers, it enhances the possibility to have a strong CV for the labor market. Mother tongue lessons are also seen as time invested for a multicultural society and a global world.

Ahlam talks about fluency in one's mother tongue, such as Arabic, as a strong force that will open doors: "You have something, a weapon, in a positive way that you can raise in the future and get the best job ever." Elham underlines the significance of mother tongue as an "ability" for an individual if they can write or read Farsi, which can be put in their CV in the future. It can also be a good way to find a temporary job as a young adult as language competence is a sought-after quality in the city. Mån says: "If you would like to have a summer job, you have Farsi, Turkish, a lot of nursing homes need help with those who speaks those languages." Mån explains to her students that their mother tongue is a resource:

"[It is like] an extra bank account, think that you must take care of it because there is a lot of money in that, but if you waste it, then you just waste money."

Another aspect which is underlined by teachers is that if migrant students do not see the long-term value of mother tongue for their CV, it is also a waste of a possibly better grade once they choose to not take MTI or, as one of the teachers says, a grade with less "costs". Students in lower secondary schools [högstadiet] have to make an important decision for high school [gymnasium]. The average level of the grades from lower secondary school can be a gatekeeper for high school programs and different high schools from which the students have the possibility to choose and decide. MTI can be seen as a way for students to improve their grades in general (if a student is pleased with his/her final grade in mother tongue subject, that grade can replace a grade in another subject). MTI counts for the student's chances for an overall better grading document from lower secondary school [11] (p. 206).

According to the teachers, mother tongue is also a route to a deeper understanding regarding regular school subjects. For example, an enhanced knowledge of grammar can be helpful in understanding and learning other school subjects. Mån explains how grammar is a general knowledge which is necessary for all languages: "It can help you understand Swedish because all languages have grammar, it is in all languages." Selin's experience is similar: "The bigger the student's vocabulary in Turkish is, the better they remember something they learn in Swedish because they know what it corresponds to." Hence, Mån and Selin underline what previous research also has found (see for example) [20,34].

The importance of a mother tongue is not limited to what it can mean for knowledge acquisition, grades, and the CV. Mother tongue has a strong meaning for the mother tongue teachers, which will be our next point.

6.1.2. Identity and Belonging

Mother tongue is an important symbol for the self-evident right to belong in the new country (see for example) [34,37,47]. It is a sign of a society that supports a multicultural mode of incorporation through enabling its different communities to express themselves in their own mother tongue and enable different minority groups to keep a positive view of their own group-identity alongside adaptations to the new country in general, for example when it comes to schooling. Such an integration strategy has also shown to lead to the best outcomes for subjective well-being among minorities [52]. As expressed by Frantz Fanon:

"A man who possesses a language possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by this language. You can see what we are driving at: there is an extraordinary power in the possession of a language" [1] (p. 2).

The work of teachers towards convincing migrant students of the importance of MTI is bringing forth the reality that MTI is not something to be taken for granted in the sense that the need to develop it should be emphasized. Historically, there have been cases where losing one's mother tongue led to feelings of a double non-belonging, as was the case during the World War II for some of the unaccompanied minors from Finland who were sent to Sweden [53].

This social and existential level of MTI is communicated to the students by emphasizing how they may be at risk of losing their identity as a result of forgetting their mother tongue, i.e., their heritage and a collective memory. The hope for a self-evident position of

a double cultural belonging, of a unity through difference, is actualized. However, it can be stressful to have a migrant background. As Elham explains: “When two cultures clash with each other, [it is] not easy for students because they have something else at school, and we think something else at home, you see, it is not easy.”

According to Nor’s experience, the mother tongue “helps students know their culture, the difference between their culture and [the one] here in Sweden and the identity”. The acknowledgment and understanding of differences create a sense of freedom and a wider scope of action. Elham makes a connection between MTI and identity, and say that it can help students with seeing the benefits of two cultural belongings:

“It is good that a child understands her identity, for example in different cultures. We have different advantages or disadvantages. You can choose different benefits from different cultures.”

According to Ahlam, belonging needs a mother tongue. Reducing it to a passive language will not enhance integration. Incorporation will be contracted instead:

“They [students] don’t belong to their own country if they don’t have their own language, they will never belong anywhere else. If you do not love where you are coming from, you will never love to be in Sweden. You have to belong. It is a part of you. How can you be a part of Sweden if you don’t care about your language? As they say in Swedish: “Ett språk är ett land” [A language is a country].

Mån points to the risk of becoming “half-half” if the mother tongue is left aside. She makes an analogy of having bowls; instead of having two full bowls the individual may face precarity’s emptiness. A weak mother tongue creates a weak knowledge in cultural background, so that a sense of pride of someone’s roots is gone, followed by a loss of self-respect, and hence a disorientation in life may follow. Mån explains:

“We have a huge cultural heritage. You can tell people we have a rich culture. But when you lose that, then you become semi-linguistic. Then you are neither the one nor the other, you cannot change home language, mother tongue, and Swedish, you are semi-linguistic and come nowhere because it is half-half.”

Mån can self-identify with how it feels to not have a deep cultural meaning of certain things in her new country, Sweden. She thinks about her encounter with traditions such as Christmas, Lucia and eating ginger-bread, however it is not the same for her as for those who have been socialized with it: “I cannot penetrate their culture in me.” Therefore, it is important for her to be “an ambassador, to represent what we have” at the same time as “we learn this culture that we live in”. It is a richness to keep both cultures strong and healthy, she argues. The languages of the new country and the mother country becomes symbols of well-being. The risk of feeling “empty” and having “nothing” is reduced with mother tongue. Her experience of having “two full bowls of words and concepts” is important because, according to her, “then the weight is even”. Having a migrant background can be a balance between being culturally here, in Sweden, as well as there, in the country of origin (cf.) [39].

Mother tongue strengthens the identity of a double cultural belonging. Through that, an increased possibility to build new relations and to nurture old ones is made achievable, as the social meaning of mother tongue travels over national borders to relatives and friends in the home country.

MTI can also make connections between peers in a community and how networks are built. Nor gathers students from different schools within her mother tongue class:

“Because they come and meet the students of their community and they speak the same language and they do activities with each other. Then they become friends and they also teach each other how it is in their school.”

Peer-relations are strengthened and new cultures are explored with the help of MTI. Mån also points to how MTI facilitates meaningful relations between youth and their older relatives:

“I have students who have a lot of expressions and a large vocabulary because they have it [mother tongue] at home and mom’s parents, and dad’s parents call them and talk

to them, so I actually try to show these examples [to students that need motivation to study their mother tongue].”

As shown from the mother tongue teachers’ point of view, there is a consensus on the role of the mother tongue in the sense that it is not only important for the future of the student, but also for here and now as a gateway to a double cultural belonging and strong communities within and beyond national borders. However, it is not always easy. Barriers are to be found as well.

6.1.3. Barriers to MTI

There are three barriers that the mother tongue teachers encounter: Organizational infrastructure, familial support structure and individual motivational structure. The organizational infrastructure of MTI does not speak the language of political importance (see also) [13,26,27]. It is scheduled to one hour per week. Ahlam thinks that MTI is “weak” because “one hour per week is nothing”. It was reported by the teachers that they create extra time outside their defined working hours to help MTI students, either through teaching them in their ordinary class (if possible by creating an extra group within the ordinary school day) or through phone apps where communication concerning homework and informal chats in their mother tongue is happening.

In most of the cases, the weekly scheduling of MTI either in the morning, before classes start, or late in the afternoon, after the ordinary school-day creates a dilemma. It is emphasized as a challenge because the students are either sleepy or tired. One example would be Pizza, who was born in Sweden and is in Grade 8. She has relatives in Tunisia. She took MTI when she was in Grade 7 and she thought it was fun, but she is not taking it anymore. As a response to whether she would like to start again, she said “No, because it is in the morning.” Hence, students do not always feel motivated to start their day earlier than their peers who do not take mother tongue lessons with them.

It is important to note that at the Pine Tree School the mother tongue classes are not held at their own school, which become an additional time task for the students to handle. A bus takes them to another school for their lesson. Mân stated that it would be much better and more effective if mother tongue lessons would be within the daily course schedule instead of in the late afternoon when the school day is over, and students are already tired. She emphasized that because the lessons are in the late afternoon, it has a negative impact on students’ motivation: “I have to find a time which fits everyone, if I put it in the early morning, it will be again difficult to wake up early and come to the lesson.”

Another dimension of the organizational infrastructure can be the lack of relevant teaching material. Mother tongue teachers pointed out that they are either looking for teaching material that can be interesting for students on the internet, order it online, or bring it themselves from other countries. This shows that the teachers are themselves very motivated to teach the lesson and they use their own resources in order to find teaching material.

The organizational infrastructure creates another dilemma which is connected to the different niveaux of knowledge among students in the same class. Elham highlights this as a challenge “I have 40–45 min, and in one part I have to repeat the alphabet and in one part I should explain the culture, for example why we have Eldfest” (In Farsi, “Chaharshanbe Suri”). It is celebrated in the evening of the last Wednesday before Nouruz, Persian New Year).

Ahlahm invests one extra hour from her own time for her students because of the different levels in her class so she can concentrate on one group at a time:

“[There are] those who cannot even A-B-C, the basics, and those who can write, read and talk like a native. And you have to work with both of them but I have divided them into two different groups, normally the system doesn’t say like that.”

One common explanation for the different levels among students is the role of their familial support structure, i.e., whether they use the language at home or not. Different interests from their students’ home milieus are a challenge for the mother tongue teachers.

They highlight the role of the family of the student, as to whether they encourage their child to learn it and whether they use the mother tongue at home and if yes, to what extent, all of which make a difference in the student's level in mother tongue. When it comes to families, there are dedicated parents who want their kids to learn, whereas there are also some who are either uninterested or are not involved.

Selin says that in addition to encouraging parents, she got negative responses from some parents:

"The father of one of my students is opposed to Turkish mother tongue courses, "Learning Turkish, for what?" his attitude was like that, "[it makes] no difference whether my child learns it or not.""

Dilemmas created by the organizational infrastructure and the various levels of strength of the familial support structure underlined by mother tongue teachers lead to students having a clash of interests and also a lack of motivation. For example, in Grade 9, there can be a serious amount of homework and tests to prepare which makes it harder for the students to prioritize their mother tongue lessons. Elham sends assignments via WhatsApp for these students that cannot come to her lessons.

Another reason why some students do not take mother tongue lessons is because they have activities outside school and mother tongue lessons are not prioritized in their limited time. Mân tries to reschedule the lessons when there is an overlap between them and her students' other commitments, so that her students can have both their activities and their lessons. She sees it as an important cultural duty:

"I have a group which goes occasionally, they have piano, and then choir, so if Thursdays don't work, then I create a group for Wednesdays. I think that as a mother tongue teacher, I have a responsibility to retain the culture and the language."

Elham mentions that some students are less motivated:

"[Some] students do not take Farsi seriously. I have to run after them. It is very tiresome for me."

Ahlam says that students have different motivations, some students "are coming to get grades, not to learn". For her, this can be frustrating as it goes against her own belief in the importance of mother tongue: "They have a treasure I would say, [but] they do not know the value."

Our data demonstrate that barriers are on different levels. Policy documents support MTI only to a certain hyphenated extent, in the sense that it creates an organizational infrastructure that is not adjusted to how MTI could work for teachers and learners. The importance of MTI can also differ due to the various levels of strength of familial support structures, where some families are living more in line with an assimilative mode of incorporation than others through not seeing mother tongue as an important value for their child.

6.2. Students' Thoughts and Experiences

In this section we begin with how students talk about the value of MTI regarding knowledge acquisition and the contribution it can make to their school career. Then, we show the link between MTI and belonging from the students' perspective.

6.2.1. Knowledge Acquisition and a School Career

Students share the same thoughts with mother tongue teachers when it comes to the role of mother tongue for knowledge acquisition and the future. Rehan, for example, thinks it is important to speak in Urdu as it provides an opportunity in the class to understand the information you need as a learner:

"It is very easy for me to talk [Urdu] and it is a great help if there are some people from Pakistan and they are in my class, they can help me if I don't understand what the teacher says, then they can help me. It is a great help."

Izzy stated that she looks forward to going to her mother tongue lessons on Thursdays and it helps her to "read more between the lines and get a better understanding of

everything” she does. Her mother tongue helps her expand her learning. Moreover, in terms of having two different languages as her mother tongues (Swedish and English), Izzy feels that “I can do more, I can expand more, I can talk to more people”.

Students notice that they can get a high grade easily in MTI which can improve their scope of action in the Swedish school system. George was born in Sweden whereas his parents were born in Turkey. He and his family speak both Swedish and Turkish at home, although it is Turkish most of the time. George underlines, “when it is more difficult I speak Turkish, when it is easier, I speak Swedish”. On a question whether it is him or his family who wants him to take Turkish mother tongue lessons, he says, “me” and explains “because of extra merit point, to start at a good high school”.

Izzy takes mother tongue classes because her parents told her to take it “to just learn and keep it going”. She states, “at first, I absolutely hated it, I did not want to go, I thought it was a waste of time but now I really like it. I realized I can have that extra grade as well”. Izzy emphasizes that when she applies for a high school, she can replace her lowest grade in another subject with her grade in mother tongue so that the lowest grade is canceled out.

In addition to the pragmatic reason to improve their grades, students emphasize the importance of MTI for social relations and belonging.

6.2.2. Feelings of Belonging

Feelings of belonging concerns relations within school, relations outside of school and through the connection that is made to culture and memory, and finally as a right to belong, on one’s own terms, in a new country.

Rehan finds that a shared mother tongue is good for creating peer-relations at school. He says that in his class there is only one more person and that he wishes there were more students from Pakistan in his school because “it is good to talk [in] mother tongue and do fun [things]”.

Izzy’s experience of MTI exemplifies that peer relations can be developed between different schools in a neighborhood as well. Her mother tongue class is at another school in the same neighborhood and there are around fifteen students from different schools who take the lessons: “But it’s really nice, you get to meet people, learn even more and everyone in my mother tongue class is really nice and we have come closer.”

Relations outside of school and across borders are also emphasized by the students when they describe the meaning of MTI. MJ was born in Sweden and her family is from Somalia. When she was three years old, they moved to England, then came back to Sweden for three years and moved abroad again, this time to Egypt for four years. She was fourteen when they came back to Sweden. She describes her lessons in Somali as “fun” and attends mother tongue classes because she needs to strengthen her language. MJ explains: “I’ve never been to Somalia before and people would think it is crazy but I’ve never been there since its war.” Her motivation to develop Somali is connected to family reasons, as “it is around my family everywhere, they talk to me in it, my father, I don’t speak to him in any other language except Somali”. In addition to the benefit of being able to talk to her father, she wants to visit the country her family originate from: “If I ever went to Somalia obviously they would talk Somali so I would talk Somali with them too, like my family.” She also finds that her mother tongue creates a deeper understanding of one’s roots. Language symbolizes memory and identity as MJ illustrates: “I just think it’s good to know [your mother tongue], it’s always a reminder where you come from. You never forget where you come from.”

Ivory was born in Somalia. When she was three weeks old, her family moved to Uganda. When she was one and a half years old, they moved to Sweden for some time, and then moved back to Somalia until she was nine years old. Then they moved to Uganda and she moved back to Sweden when she was thirteen years old. She speaks both Somali and English with her family because some of her siblings who live outside Somalia do not speak Somali. She states that she is not good at writing, but she is fluent in speaking. She wants to be better in her mother tongue and says that “it is really important”:

“I have a lot of relatives that can’t speak any English so I still want to communicate with them and I don’t want to forget my mother tongue. I still want to get better at it because when I left Somalia, I was like nine years [old] and I wasn’t so good.”

Strengthening of peer relations is one dimension of belonging, and having the possibility to communicate with relatives is another. Language builds relations and creates a sense of belonging. To remember and develop one’s language is to remember and nurture not only one’s own past, present, and future, but also a collective one.

A similar experience is shared by Andrew whose parents are from Somalia and moved to Sweden from England. The meaning of MTI for him is closely related to cultivating a double cultural belonging, because he is born in Sweden. At the same time, the connection to Somalia is a self-evident part of his socialization process. He treasures this and has a strong will to strengthen his bonds to what he calls “my country”, and thus pointing out that Sweden is not necessarily the first place to define as his own. When he reflects upon the choice to study Somali as a mother tongue, it is grounded in the following reason:

“In order to know more about my country. Because, you have a background, of course. Outside of this [the Swedish context]. How do you say? That you want to learn more about your country that your parents come from.”

Panagiotis moved to Sweden from Greece four years ago. He tells that he is taking mother tongue lessons although it is not compulsory, because:

“I want to have MTI because I speak Greek at home. I speak Swedish here [at school] and the more I learn Swedish, the more I forget Greek and I want them to stay at the same level. [. . .] This is why I am going, so that I do not forget.”

Mother tongue is about memory and emotions. Rehan says that he likes MTI “very much”. For him, Urdu brings a light to his life that the Swedish language cannot do yet: “If I read my mother tongue books and it is funny, then I laugh, but if I read Swedish books and it is fun, I do not laugh.” Urdu creates a feeling of being emotionally comfortable through which he can be himself.

Students’ reflections on studying MTI provide insights on how different perceptions of mother tongue’s worth are illuminated through its usage. For some, it can be used as a cultural capital. For example, English is regarded as a dominant language from a cultural perspective. This competence can be used as a strategy to achieve status in a way that Urdu or Somali is less likely to do. Izzy shares her experience of feeling “more Swedish at school” where she puts on “that kind of face”, whereas in some places she strategically chooses to show her English face:

“If you meet someone, say you are at a vernissage, like an art place and if someone says “this is from bla, bla.” “Oh, yeah I am from England actually, I know”. It’s a little bit, I feel like showing off: “Yeah, I’m English.””

To be from England is not a face one needs to think twice about to show, in the sense that it is a secured and embraced migrant background which is rarely questioned in and by the Swedish society.

According to these students’ accounts, it is recognized that MTI is important in different ways. Students are aware that mother tongue lessons can help them improve their knowledge in other school subjects, as well as help them receive better grades which benefit their school career. Another aspect underlined by them was mother tongue helping them in their social interactions and in enhancing feelings of belonging in different settings including their parents’ home country and Sweden.

7. Conclusions: Between Policy and Practice, between Assimilation and Multicultural Incorporation

In this study, we interviewed teachers and students that are either teaching or studying their mother tongue. Our observations and our interview questions covered ways in order to find out the meaning of mother tongue for migrant students and how teachers facilitate and think about the importance of mother tongue. Observations from the beginning of our fieldwork, where we worked more exploratively, pointed to the role of mother tongue

in the schools in order to underline how mother tongue was argued for, by whom and its legitimacy at the school in general. Our analysis of the meaning of mother tongue for migrant students built on a thematic analysis of qualitative data we draw from observations and interviews through being interpreted alongside previous research. Although we are aware that we cannot generalize against the backdrop of our data, we do have a general theoretical point, or a moderate generalization [3]. In that sense, mother tongue is seen through the lens of modes of incorporation, which can be used as a strategy to uncover how politics and power can become visible through the practice of language policy.

Our article showed that although in Sweden the state supports the right to MTI, its implementation has drawbacks as reported by mother tongue teachers and students who have different reasons for being interested in and having motives for MTI. However, both mother tongue teachers and migrant students talk about mother tongue as closely related to a will to nurture a double cultural belonging and thus, resist assimilation. It emphasized that different cultural backgrounds and languages create an atmosphere of conviviality [54].

Although policy and its implementation are mutually dependent on each other, what we found out in our data points to a discrepancy, which has been underlined in other research as well (see for example) [55,56]. One of the organizational challenges in MTI is the limited time allocated to the lessons and differences between students' level of knowledge in mother tongue. Moreover, the time is fixed regardless of how many students are in the classroom. Fifty minutes sessions once a week combined with heterogeneous student groups from different classes who are not on the same niveaux demonstrates a dilemma in the practice of MTI. Although policy documents underline that mother tongue education is recognized, supported, and encouraged, the organizational challenges we have described highlight a different reality.

Our data demonstrated that a mode of hyphenation characterizes the policy of MTI. Turkish, Urdu, Somali, and Farsi are all seen as unique qualities making valuable contributions to society. However, as the MTI is hidden before and after the ordinary school day in a non-obligatory way, it points to the subordinate position of not just different mother tongues but to migrants' position in society overall.

MTI have the potential to matter more for migrant students than what it currently does. Students, in general, appreciate MTI and see its value for identity and belonging on one's own terms, and mother tongue teachers are a highly motivated and morally dedicated professional group. Motivation and competences are there, however the political will is not entirely realized.

Then, what is the meaning of mother tongue instruction that matters for migrant students? From the point of view of different modes of incorporation, we can conclude that students want multicultural incorporation, i.e., a double cultural belonging, but instead they receive hyphenation. The latter is an incorporation form that is not recognizing the full potential of MTI and hence, is a mode between assimilation and multicultural incorporation.

Moreover, ambiguous attitudes from some parents' as well as students' points of view towards MTI can be regarded as a symbolic response towards Sweden considering the U-turn it took in its migration policy after the "long summer of migration" (also known as the 2015 "refugee crisis"). The integration and compatibility of migrants have been questioned in the media and utilized as a political tool in the narratives of anti-immigration parties. Therefore, the urgency to persuade migrant students, independent of their migration status, to keep up and develop their mother tongue through MTI should be seen in the light of migration politics in which language and power are directly linked to each other.

At the time this article has been written, there was a recent wave of migration from Ukraine, which was depicted in the media in a more positive way using the solidarity discourse of Europe being united against the war initiated by Russia towards Ukraine. Therefore, we believe that our article will be especially helpful in understanding mother tongue and its role in different migrant communities, educational policies, schools, and as a tool in enforcing and preserving identity in the hosting state.

As we are not researchers in linguistics or pedagogy, we are aware that we are not contributing to the field with a new knowledge concerning MTI from the point of view of successful teaching practices, its impact on cognitive capabilities, or literacy proficiency. What we can do is to analyze the role of mother tongue from a cultural sociological perspective. Then, however, why is it important to study MTI from the perspective of cultural sociology? Our answer is because MTI is connected to power and belonging.

MTI is not a private or individual undertaking, but a collective one through which it offers a remembrance and materialization of memories of historical and contemporary struggles, both in the new country and in the country of origin. The political ground of MTI acts as a symbol for the incorporation form a specific state it stands for, or in Fanons words, the “weight of a civilization” [1] (p. 2). Students can have different possibilities to develop their mother tongue, whereas mother tongue teachers can vary in their motivation to teach mother tongue classes. In Swedish, there is a word: eldsjäl (in English, “a soul on fire”). This word points to how, for example, specific policy goals are upheld due to very engaged individuals which can be applied to MTI. If MTI should come to its full capacity for young individuals’ future career, social relations, and cultural belonging, then it may need more time and creative solutions than the organizational infrastructure it provides. Eldsjälar are valued, and are not to blame. However, there is always a risk with a system that relies on individual teachers that goes an extra mile without organizational back-up. Fires can burn out and students can receive unequal MTI. In order to prevent that, policy and implementation should go hand in hand.

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