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Intercultural education in transition: Nordic perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Over the last several decades intercultural education has played a key role in many educational policies and practices, both across the Nordic countries and internationally. In this article we examine current conceptual discourses on intercultural education with an emphasis on developments in the Nordic research context. The analysis shows how the concept of intercultural education and its focus on “culture” has been criticised in the Nordic countries and internationally for the pitfalls of essentialism and relativism. This criticism is linked to a perceived lack of focus on power issues in education, which undermines the development of a social justice-orientated intercultural education. However, the analysis within the Nordic research context shows signs of re-conceptualisations, which includes a widening of the field and the emergence of new and more critically-orientated approaches.

KEYWORDS

intercultural education;
diversity; social justice;
intersectionality; cultural
essentialism

Introduction

Over recent decades intercultural education and multicultural education have become key concepts in Nordic educational policies and practices (Horst & Pihl, 2010; Kirsch, León Rosales, & Rodell Olgac, 2016). Different views of what intercultural education as well as multicultural education represent have been widely discussed over the years. A challenge is that terms such as “multicultural” and “intercultural” are vague and polysemic, representing floating signifiers in educational discourse (Colombo, 2015; Guilherme & Dietz, 2015). Both multicultural and intercultural education represent a broad field of solutions and practices that cannot be clearly distinguished from one other, yet both include superficial as well as more critical versions (Holm & Zilliacus, 2009). Superficial versions of intercultural education focus on supporting and celebrating diversity without a social justice or power perspective (Grant, 2016; Osler, 2015). Critical intercultural versions can be defined as educational approaches that aim to support cultural diversity and social justice as well as to counter marginalisation and discrimination in education and society (Zilliacus, Holm, & Sahlström, 2017). Within these approaches, power relations between the dominant majority and marginalised groups are recognised as having a central role in education and society. Palaiologou and Gorski (2017, p. 354) argue for a more transformative role for multicultural education and ask, “[i]n what ways do we need to reformulate our conceptions of multicultural

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and intercultural education to be more inclusive, more anti-oppressive, more responsive to contemporary forms of local and global injustice?” In this article we take Gorski’s description of multicultural education as our basis for exploring conceptualisations of multicultural and intercultural education. Gorski views multicultural and intercultural education as “grounded in ideals of social justice, education equity, and a dedication to facilitating educational experiences in which all students reach their full potential as learners and as socially aware and active beings, locally, nationally, and globally. Multicultural education acknowledges that schools are essential to laying the foundation for the transformation of society and the elimination of oppression and injustice” (Gorski, 2010, para. 1).

Along with the different approaches in the field of multicultural and intercultural education, parallel emerging and interlinking discourses are also present. In recent years, discourses on social justice education, multilingual education, global education, cosmopolitan education, inclusive education and sustainability education have gained increasing importance, and all represent growing fields of research. This makes the field of multicultural and intercultural education wider than the conceptual use presupposes. For instance, the Council of Europe (Beacco et al., 2016) promotes “plurilingual education” along with intercultural education; the two are seen as interlinked, and the importance of a language perspective in all education is emphasised. Notably, social justice education is increasingly gaining ground (Ayers, Quinn, & Stovall, 2011), and is closely linked with the aims of critically-orientated multicultural and intercultural education.

In this article we examine the discourses on intercultural education in a Nordic context. In the Nordic countries both multicultural education and intercultural education have been used; however, the term intercultural education dominates discourses in Nordic educational research. We therefore use “intercultural education” unless we are specifically referring to research that uses the term multicultural education (Coulby, 2006; Holm & Zilliacus, 2009; Tarozzi, 2012). Common in Nordic education is the notion of education as serving the common good, with a focus on social justice, equality and equity, values that lie at the heart of critically-orientated intercultural education. This tradition is still evident, even if a more individualistic view of education and neo-liberal reasoning have increasingly gained ground since the 1990s (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Isopahkala-Bouret, Lappalainen, & Lahelma, 2014; see other articles in this special issue). In this study, we explore how the concept of intercultural education and related concepts are used in the Nordic context as well as the conceptual shift in the understanding and use of intercultural education and social justice education. We also ask what soci(et)al implications such a shift in concepts might entail. We begin with a review of the general conceptual issues, which have been highlighted in both Nordic and international research on intercultural education.

The pitfalls of cultural essentialism and relativism in intercultural education

The word intercultural consists of two parts, *inter* and *culture*. As opposed to the prefix multi- in multiculturalism, *inter* has been considered more active, less static, focusing on the dynamic relation between social groups rather than merely stating that there are

many groups (Zidarić, 2012). However, in previous research (Holm & Zilliacus, 2009), we showed that this distinction is not consistent throughout intercultural and multicultural education studies. For example, critical multicultural education in particular can be more active and dynamic than traditional intercultural education. Sunnemark (2016) suggests that “inter” is problematic, as it places difference at the centre of the logic. In discussing interculturality, there is an implied notion of interaction between essentially different cultural groups. In an essentialist view, cultures are seen as fixed and cultural identities as “natural”, an essence within an individual or group, whereas in a non-essentialist view, cultures are rather seen as “liquid” (Bauman, 2004; Verschueren, 2008). Instead of cultural identities being considered essential traits, they should be seen as situated constructions within discursive practices in concrete geo-historical and political contexts (Shi-Xu, 2001). Without an essential kind of difference, there would thereby be no need for the term “inter”. Thus, even if there is critical reflection on one’s own position, the concept of interculturality might blur the fact that cultures are complex and dynamic. There can be no “inter” without a difference between “me” or “us” and “them”. However, the idea of difference is not necessarily a problem in all forms of intercultural education. Pihl and Skinstad Van Der Kooij (2016, p. 5) show how difference can be used as a theoretical starting point in intercultural education. Following the Deleuzian concept of multiplicity, they argue that difference can be elevated to a higher status in the theoretical foundation of interculturality. Instead of viewing difference as reserved for “the other”, the idea of multiplicity entails that every population, the majority as well as the minority, is diverse with regard to its variations, for instance in class, language, religion, gender, ability and interests. The concept of multiplicity places difference at the centre of identity, but also at the centre of knowledge (Pihl, 2015). It is an ontological assumption that challenges the idea of difference as inferior, since there is no prior concept of difference. Difference then becomes more of a definition of identity than its antagonist. For classroom practices, this can be seen as a motivation for offering intercultural education, even in seemingly homogeneous groups. For the theoretical development of intercultural education, the idea of multiplicity provides tools with which to challenge the ideal of one common identity or standardised idea of knowledge. From the point of view of multiplicity, the idea of “inter” is not problematic, since all relations are in some way relations between differences.

The latter part of the word intercultural has been subjected to more discussion than the first part. As suggested by Jacobsson (2017), it is necessary for researchers to address their understanding of culture in order to problematise the relations between concepts such as multicultural, intercultural and others, like postcolonial. In the words of Phillips (2007), culture is made and remade by people who negotiate and struggle over its meaning, and still we often fall into the trap of seeing cultures as secured within national borders. We find that criticism of culture stems from two main positions: culture seen as leading to essentialism and culture seen as leading to relativism. The risk of seeing culture as essentialist is pronounced in intercultural education. Gorski (2016) argues that there is the risk that a focus on culture becomes a diversion, not a stepping stone, in the search for educational equity. He sees cultural essentialism as widespread in schools and considers it a risk that educators use students’ cultural backgrounds to predict their behaviour. This can lead, for example, to organising multicultural fairs as a

response to inequity and injustice, when, as Gorski suggests, these attempts may in fact turn attention away from these matters.

For similar reasons, Dervin (2014, 2015) prefers that intercultural education focus on “inter” rather than emphasising “culture”. He suggests that we pay more attention to the process of identification than to culture. This position can be challenged by pointing out that no-one is without culture. What, then, is “inter” without “culture”? Perhaps there are reasons for focusing on culture, not as an essential entity, but as a relevant factor for identification. Culture is then seen as consisting of everything that makes up one’s identity, such as class, gender and religion, not just ethnic origin. Importantly, culture is something that everybody has; a middle-class identity and an able body as well as poverty or disability are all cultural markers that influence one’s identity development. Some of our cultural background is visible to others, while some of it is not; however, that background still affects our view of ourselves and of others. It is thus notable that Dervin (2014, p. 204) asks if electronic encounters (that is, online discussions) could be “the first step to ‘real’ intercultural encounters, i.e. encounters beyond extremely reductive marks of identity”. This indicates that an intercultural encounter is more “real” the less visible is the cultural background of the people involved. However, people cannot be stripped of culture even in online settings. If we therefore accept that the “emphasis should be on what is happening between people when they co-construct actions, discourses, identities, etc. rather than on the old, tired, and simplistic concept of culture” (Dervin, 2014, p. 193), then there is a risk that we do not see that what is considered neutrality is a kind of norm. If we were to approach others without any marks of identity, we would most likely still have a preconceived idea of the other person’s identity, based on the dominant norms in the societal context of the encounter. Additionally, the above-mentioned quest for real or unadorned intercultural encounters chimes poorly with the recognition of power. If we are encouraged to hide our own positions and not know anything about the positions of others, how can we become aware of power aspects? How can we contextualise, historicise, or politicise intercultural relations (Andreotti, 2011)? If we focus on identity exclusively as a construction formed by the current context without historical baggage, we miss out on structural aspects of power that make some aspects of culture more privileged than others in interactions and society.

The idea that no-one can exist outside culture takes us to the criticism of the concept of culture as relativist. If cultural difference is considered a main explanatory mechanism, how do we deal with materialism and power? In response to the philosophical debate about cultural recognition (Honneth, 1995), Fraser (2003) argues that the recognition of cultural difference does not in itself contribute to social justice whenever injustice has material foundations. There is a risk that emphasising culture leads to a relativist approach whereby all cultural aspects are seen as worthy in their own right and as equally valid or true. A focus on culture might mean that structural and power relations are ignored. Grant (2016) suggests that in the language of social justice, multiculturalism and multicultural education is depoliticised. As Grant (2016) argues, a general depoliticisation of multicultural education can be seen when such education is watered down to celebrations of diversity. Superficial and conservative rather than critical and transformational types of multicultural education undermine the political core of multicultural education. Since the millennium, the neo-liberal turn in the Nordic countries has contributed to this process of depoliticisation whereby issues of

social justice are superseded by aims of efficacy and competition in education (Imsen, Blossing, & Moos, 2016; Isopahkala-Bouret et al., 2014).

The criticism of using culture as a diversion sheds light on the question of whether there are limits to the concept of intercultural education. According to Phipps (2014), who studied attempts to engage in intercultural dialogue in Gaza, increased awareness of cultural differences did not provide any solutions to the situation, since it did not challenge the structural violence that maintains inequality. Phipps asks whether it is possible to engage in intercultural education with someone whose life is threatened and suggests that concepts that have arisen in the context of peace are not suited to conditions of conflict and siege. It is therefore relevant to ask how intercultural education which lacks a perspective of social justice and power can help someone who is subjected to violence or is suffering from economic injustice. To some extent, this way of thinking about the limits of intercultural education could even be extended outside conflict zones. Considering the differences in life conditions among young people in Europe, with problems such as increasing economic inequality, refugee children facing deportation and trans-youth at the risk of violence, a valid question is, if intercultural education does not engage with power, then what good does it do?

The word “culture” has, to some extent, witnessed a form of general backlash in many countries. There are signals suggesting that the concepts of multicultural and intercultural education, and perhaps particularly the culture part, have decreased in value in the sense that they have more negative connotations than previously. In their study of school textbooks, Carlson and Kanci (2017) noted that multiculturalism is still a word with positive connotations in the rhetorical arena in Sweden, but in the arena of political praxis the situation is different and full of tension. In Europe the backlash against the multiculturalism concept has become stronger since the early 2000s, with politicians from different parties disassociating themselves from multiculturalism, despite the fact that there is no empirical evidence of multiculturalism having “failed” (Lentin & Titley, 2012; Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010). Still, there is strong official promotion of intercultural education among supranational organisations such as the Council of Europe. Yet there is a gap between the supranational and the national levels as well as between national policies and school practices. As Tarozzi (2012) argues, the consensus on intercultural education as it is officially enforced nationally across European countries appears somewhat peculiar, considering the conflicts in national political debates on immigration and related policies. Hage (2008), writing from an Australian perspective, considers these conflicts to include the multiculturalism backlash marked by rising white insecurity and the defensive reaction to cultural differences at large. Another critical issue linked to intercultural education is that it has been perceived and practised in schools only as a formal and vague approach. This leaves intercultural education resembling a “ghost model”, which lacks a theoretical and political framework as well as radicalness (Tarozzi, 2012).

Social justice education: Shifting the focus from culture to justice

One concept that questions power relations in education without emphasising culture is social justice. To a large extent, the debates around social justice education are equivalent to those around intercultural education. There is a focus on both the content and

the process of education, and the intention is to enhance equity across social identity groups as well as to foster critical perspectives and promote social action (Carlisle, Jackson, & George, 2006). However, Tarozzi (2012) criticises intercultural education for having mainly a limited and non-elaborated concept of equality as cultural equality, which is relative. Social equality, on the other hand, includes the idea of justice more explicitly by including issues of power distribution and resources. Thus, for social justice education the key question is what kind of theoretical view of justice is used and how this view can be reinforced in practice.

Sleeter (2014) sees four dimensions of social justice teaching as relevant for learning, starting with the demand for teachers to identify and challenge structural inequality. This means rejecting the deficit perspective of students and interpreting problems of marginalised students as personal failures. Secondly, she considers the need for teachers to build relationships of trust with students, bearing in mind that those from marginalised communities might have learned not to trust teachers and schools. According to Boylan and Wolsey (2014), this means that teacher education for social justice would need pedagogies of discomfort, inquiry, compassion and respect. Educators might need to exit their comfort zone and start questioning assumptions that they have taken for granted due to their own privileged perspective. Thirdly, Sleeter (2014) discusses one of the dilemmas concerning social justice education and the content of teaching. High academic expectations can be considered a cornerstone of social justice education; however, a focus on the standard curriculum often means less attention to culturally responsive and student-centred approaches that would empower students. The solution could be to engage in curriculum development to challenge mainstream ideas that uphold a dominant view of knowledge. The final point made by Sleeter is about developing democratic activism to prepare students to analyse and challenge the forms of discrimination they face. She also considers social justice education to be relevant in classrooms and communities that are regarded as homogeneous or privileged. Often classrooms regarded as homogeneous are still places where there is inequality, for instance with regard to gender or ability.

It could also be argued that what has just been presented could still be considered multi-/intercultural education and that social justice education has only become a popular word for intercultural education. We do not see the concepts as opposites or synonymous, but rather as different perspectives. Social justice education includes a range of different and not always commensurable perspectives, which are not always articulated in research. Studies drawing on human rights or on minority, anti-racism, anti-colonial, feminist, class, gender, queer or democracy perspectives may all be labelled social justice studies, despite theoretical differences (cf. Ayers et al., 2011). In this view, social justice education, similar to critically-orientated intercultural education, does not stand for a specific and common theoretical position on social justice, but rather indicates the centrality of social justice-orientated theories and perspectives in education and research. Thus, like intercultural education, it includes the discussion of relations and interactions between “cultures” in education. However, intercultural education also includes a strand of culturally-orientated intercultural education that does not have a social justice focus. Hence, the challenge in social justice education is to determine what is meant by justice.

Nordic conceptual developments

For this article, we started by examining Nordic research published between the years 2013 and 2017, predominantly within the Nordic Centre of Excellence “Justice through Education” (www.justed.org). Of all these publications, we limited the material to peer-reviewed articles, books and chapters. We further limited the material to publications written in English, Swedish, Finnish or Norwegian. In all, 595 texts were examined. We then searched the articles, books and chapters for studies that focused specifically on intercultural or multicultural education or broadly on equality and cultural aspects in education, such as ethnicity, language, religion, ability, race and class. The screening was made on the basis of a publication’s title and abstract. This yielded a sample of 79 research publications from the Nordic countries. Even though the articles were written from Finnish, Swedish and Norwegian perspectives, several were cross-Nordic, including results from different countries in one publication. The studies include empirical as well as theoretical investigations of intercultural education, policy studies, investigation of teaching practices in comprehensive and secondary schools, as well as study of teacher education. After analysing these articles, we connected each issue or theme raised in these texts to other Nordic and at times international research in order to obtain an in-depth understanding of Nordic discourses on intercultural education.

Discourse analysis as a research method allowed for a recognition of language as constitutive rather than transparent. The analysis made use of Gee’s (2014) discourse analytic tools and focused on how discourses were built in the text. Particular attention was given to the situated meanings and figured worlds, that is, theories or assumptions that the text invites or assumes the reader to believe as typical or normal. In a first read-through of the documents, we focused our analysis on tracking key concepts, such as “intercultural,” “multicultural,” “diversity” and “equality,” which may be included in discourses on intercultural education. Thereafter, we moved to a deeper analysis of the excerpts where the concepts occurred and how they related to the theoretical perspectives outlined above. We asked how the articles presented the research problems, what concepts they used to describe the study and how they articulated the arguments and results.

Avoiding the term “intercultural education”

Although few studies in the reviewed material explicitly position themselves as intercultural, Swedish researcher Rosvall (2017), is an exception. He considers the intercultural approach to mean a “recognition that cultural awareness per se may not be sufficient to identify some important factors, that the wider socio-political context must be considered, and that monoculturalism may be meaningfully contested” (p. 4). Meanwhile, some studies have used the concept of intercultural education in their titles and approach the concept of culture from a more limited or essentialist approach. An example is the introduction to a Swedish book on intercultural perspectives in education (Lorentz & Bergstedt, 2016), which justified the need for intercultural education on the basis of the increasing numbers of refugees in Europe. In other words, without suggesting that culture should be viewed as essentialist, the text puts the focus of the concept of culture on the ethnicity of refugees.

A clear reason to refrain from talking about “the multicultural” lies in its negative connotations. As Bunar (2011) points out, a “multicultural school” in Sweden is closely associated with a problem school and with unsuccessful students. Lunneblad, Odenbring, and Hellman (2016) show how educators and students in an independent Christian school in Sweden downplayed the school’s ethnic diversity in order to avoid being categorised as an immigrant school. The study is an example of the prevalent and ambivalent discourse on multiculturalism as representing the Other, in this case, associating immigrant schools with low status, low grades and being unsafe. In a similar vein Zilliacus, Paulsrud, and Holm (2017) show that the Swedish national curriculum avoids categorisations of students through a very limited use of the term “culture” as an identity marker. The term “multicultural student” does not appear at all. However, by not addressing students’ cultural identities, the Swedish curriculum does not specify whether teachers should consider cultural aspects and differences in the classroom. At the same time, the Finnish national curriculum refers extensively to students’ cultural backgrounds. It explicitly defines all students as multicultural, which appears to be a way of distancing the curriculum from the use of multicultural as a differentiating and Othering concept.

Perhaps because of these negative associations related to the concept of culture, the material we reviewed shows that what might have been referred to earlier as intercultural (or multicultural) educational research now often goes by other names. Among the articles reviewed, we also found several examples of research that could very well be considered intercultural, yet without mentioning these words. For instance, studies on school choice and pupil selection (e.g. Berisha & Seppänen, 2017, in the Finnish context) are not identified as part of intercultural or social justice education research. However, these studies as well as a number of others engage with issues of social justice and equality and cover cultural aspects such as gender and ethnicity. Meanwhile, other concepts have taken the place that intercultural (multicultural) educational research used to occupy. Dewilde and Skrefsrud (2016) discuss a study in Norway, that appears to be fully in the context of intercultural education and in a culturally and linguistically diverse school. Yet intercultural education and multicultural pedagogy are only mentioned once; instead, the article situates itself in *inclusive education*. The study presents two students, described by the authors as *transcultural*, and traces these students’ auto-ethnographic stories, which were produced in alternative spaces to the Norwegian mainstream. Dewilde and Skrefsrud use the concept “transcultural students” to refer to students who moved in the middle of their school years “and thus draw on resources from several cultures and languages for meaning making” (p. 1033). This definition shows that the concept of transcultural seems intended to give the students more agency than if they had been called multicultural or intercultural students. It is also one of the few articles that refrains from using the word intercultural, yet includes culture among the concepts used. In Evaldsson and Sahlström’s (2016) study of children in school settings in Finland and Sweden, categorising and naming the Other, the concept of “multiethnic” is used to refer to the children’s peer groups. Here, multiethnic is a more precise concept than multicultural; however, the term “ethnic” still appears to include the same conceptual pitfalls as “culture” and easily implies essentialising and Othering. Majority children generally appear to have no ethnicity and represent the normal, whereas the (multi)ethnic children stand out as the Other.

The concept of “culture” has been consistently criticised when it comes to international weeks and multicultural fairs and festivities in schools. Such activities are generally key points in arguments against superficial, depoliticised forms of intercultural education (Gorski, 2006). However, multicultural events are widely organised in Nordic schools and seem to strengthen the perception of “cultures” as essential to diversity in the Nordic educational context. In that context, Niemi, Kuusisto, and Kallioniemi (2014) have shown that multicultural theme days include reducing non-Finnish traditions in displays of Otherness. However, the authors call for more research, and argue that celebrations may be beneficial for an understanding of oneself and others if stereotyping is avoided and plurality within communities is acknowledged. Similarly, in a study of an international week in a Norwegian primary school, Dewilde, Kjørven, Skaret and Skrefsrud (2017) challenge the critical stance of the research on multicultural fairs and international weeks in schools. They give support to the argument that intercultural encounters do not necessarily contribute to reinforcing essentialist understandings of culture or simplistic views of “all cultures as one”. Instead, in the Norwegian school the international week included dynamic and reflexive cultural encounters in which traditional hierarchies and power relations in the school were altered and voices from the margins were given opportunities to be heard.

Another conceptual alternative is to use linguistic rather than multi/cultural categorisations. Zilliacus et al. (2017) show how the discourses on students’ cultural identities in the Finnish and Swedish national curricula have in recent decades developed a stronger emphasis on language rather than culture as a marker of students’ identities. Notably, the Finnish National Curriculum of 2014 frequently refers to “students with other linguistic backgrounds” as a way to create distance from the ambivalent concept of “multicultural students” or “immigrant students” used earlier. Language appears in this context as a more neutral marker. However, as From and Sahlström (2016) argue in the context of a Swedish-speaking minority school in Finland, the problems of essentialising are also apparent in the discourse of language identity and school language. The view of Finnish bilingualism leans towards “parallel monolingualism” whereby the minority and majority languages are separated in the school cultures. This is perceived as necessary in order to support the minority language and students’ minority identities. However, separating the languages is connected with essentialising discursive practices, which simplify identity constructions among students and create difficulties in promoting equal practices in terms of linguistic and ethnic diversity. Consequently, referring to language rather than to culture does not automatically solve the problem of essentialism.

Emerging alternative concepts to intercultural education

A different view is advanced by Swedish researcher Von Brömssen (2016), who considers culture as a key to understanding social categorisations and intersectionality (see McCall, 2005, cited in Von Brömssen, 2016). Intersectionality in education does not leave out “culture”, but rather looks at the complexity of culture and endeavours to promote social justice and social change in education. Intersectionality implies a focus on how different identity aspects inter-relate and cut across people’s lives and social relationships (Anthias, 2011), and are not new in educational research. However, Von

Brömssen (2016, p. 1) suggests the use of the concept of intersectionality rather than interculturality, partly because terms such as intercultural education and multicultural education have become ethnicised or racialised in many parts of the world. However, intersectional studies are demanding due to their multidisciplinary character and hence not widely pursued. A recent study using an intersectional perspective is Lappalainen and Lahelma's (2016), in which they investigated discourses on equality in Finnish upper-secondary education curricula from the 1970s to 2004. The study is not explicitly defined as being in the area of intercultural education, but it draws on different conceptualisations of equality and social justice as well as on feminist theories, and looks at equality issues intersectionally from the perspectives of gender, class and ethnicity. The study shows how the conceptualisation of equality has fluctuated, reflecting the political climates in which policies have been developed. It concludes that the discourses on equality are vague and unstable despite Finland's strongly asserted official agenda of equality in educational politics and policies.

The material we reviewed includes many studies that could be considered as education related to social justice. Few of these use the concept of "social justice education" explicitly. For example, Erixon, Arreman and Dovemark (2017) express concerns that education provided by the secondary-school Swedish Introductory Programmes, particularly targeting newly arrived migrant students, in the marketised system is likely to limit the future opportunities for the target group, which is already disadvantaged. Similarly, Lappalainen, Odenbring, and Steen-Olsen (2013) also view social justice in education as being under threat across the Nordic countries from market liberalism and the values of individualisation, competitiveness and efficiency that this ideology has promoted. These studies are framed as being social justice orientated; however, they do not define themselves as representing "social justice education".

Alemanji (2016), writing from Finland, suggests focusing on the term *anti-racist education*, which emerged in British research in the 1980s. At the time anti-racist education was developed as a reaction to education that did not sufficiently address structural inequalities and the existence of racism (Griffiths & Troyna, 1995), a problem that still persists. Alemanji (2016) suggests that interculturalism or multiculturalism, even critical multiculturalism, does not question power relations. Meanwhile, anti-racist education necessarily engages with power. It examines diversity but also points out privilege (CARED, 2015). As an example, Alemanji argues that prejudice is seen as a violation of democratic rights in multicultural education, yet is an integral part of the social order. Alemanji suggests that anti-racist education can be a platform from which to approach intersectionality, and reminds us that there is still a need for an emphasis on power, privilege and history as essential variables. Anti-racist education would be a clearer concept than social justice education, even though it might overshadow other intersectional questions, such as ability or class. However, an explicit anti-racist education may be needed in classrooms; as Rosvall and Öhrn (2014) point out, students want to address racism in their schools. In Rosvall and Öhrn's research in a Swedish context, teachers answered calls for discussions of racism with silence or with decontextualised, politically neutral teaching. A more socially-just education would take up problems and experiences that are part of students' lives, not only on a theoretical, decontextualised level, but also by directly addressing them.

Another way to approach equality in education is by questioning *normality*. Emphasising the *normal* as an ideal for society (and education) is a phenomenon that entered the European languages in the nineteenth century. (Davis, 1995). The concept of norm-critical education has to some extent replaced intercultural education. Studying normality turns the gaze from “others” towards the ruling norm. It solves the problem with which intercultural education is associated, namely that the gaze is turned towards others and how “their different cultures” can be understood. The material we analysed includes articles that criticise norms and normality. In Juva and Holm’s study (2016), teachers constructed “non-Finnish” students as those who deviate from what the teachers’ considered normal. Students who did not identify as Finnish were seen as at risk of being marginalised, and students who made identities other than Finnish visible in school were considered problematic and deviating from the idea of a normal student. At the same time, the teachers considered the Finnish school to be an equitable and neutral space. Lempinen (2016) and Vaahtera (2016) also discuss the role of normality, in their cases, from the point of view of specialised education and ableism. In Dovemark’s (2013) study Swedish teachers wanted to “normalise” students by having them acquire a white, middle-class identity, achieved by educating them about equality and restricting the use of their mother tongue. The idea of normality is connected with neutrality, both of which need to be problematised in education. As Nordic researchers have shown, there is a need to question the idea of neutrality in the school infrastructure, such as classrooms and textbooks (Carlson & Kanci, 2017; Mikander, 2015, 2016a, 2016b; Mikander & Holm, 2014; Mikander & Zilliacus, 2016; Riitaoja, 2013; Riitaoja et al., 2015). What is considered neutral or normal in textbooks is often connected with Western or national culture. Rosvall (2017) recounts how the students he interviewed in Swedish schools asked for their backgrounds to be taken into account in the teachers’ practices and in the materials used, but this was rarely done. Importantly, the study of what and who are considered normal or neutral is not only about turning the gaze away from “others” to the prevailing norms, but also about recognising the importance of power relations in school. What is considered normal and neutral is necessarily linked with the power to define what is ideal.

Some Nordic research has pushed for *postcolonial analysis* in intercultural education (Aman, 2015) and for questioning the idea of Nordic exceptionalism (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012, 2014). Postcolonial perspectives in education investigates how colonial ventures have shaped the worldviews in the Nordic countries, constructing hierarchies between people and a notion of colonial perspectives as considered important knowledge about the world. As Loftsdóttir and Jensen (2014) suggest, the Nordic countries are considered a globalised space in which there is wide engagement with the rest of the world, both historically and recently. Questioning Nordic exceptionalism means challenging the idea of innocence with regard to colonialism (Keskinen, Tuori, Irni, & Diana, 2009). As Loftsdóttir and Jensen (2012) show, the Nordic countries not only took part in the epistemic construction that was a product of colonialism, but also benefitted from it economically. Another field of research related to postcolonial studies is the area of (*critical*) *whiteness studies* (Ahmed, 2011; Dyer, 1997; Ignatiev, 2009). This field is also of increasing interest to researchers in education and adjacent fields in the Nordic countries, particularly in Sweden (Hübinette, 2017; Hübinette & Lundström, 2014; Lilja, 2015; Mattson, 2016). Postcolonial and whiteness studies provide methods

for turning the gaze towards the majority population and the norms that uphold marginalising structures in school and society at large.

The studies analysed suggest that research on education, for instance in schools, cannot be limited to viewing the school reality apart from the social context. Von Brömssen and Risenfors (2014) found in their study in a Swedish school that some high school students resisted the staff's suggestion to dismantle the place considered the school's "immigrant corner". The students are reported to have laughed and questioned why they would need to be integrated into the school since the whole town was segregated. This is a strong reminder that educational contexts cannot be viewed as being separate from society. Lindblad's (2016) study in Sweden on young people with migrant backgrounds also points to the need for schools to be more connected with the surrounding society.

Conclusion

In this analysis we have discussed how intercultural education as a concept seems to have lost ground in current Nordic educational research. We have shown that researchers prefer to use concepts other than intercultural education to approach questions of social justice, diversity and equality in education. We have seen that what used to be called intercultural education goes by many names today. We view this differentiation as a development in Nordic research. It can be argued that research, even within the same contexts such as the same classroom setting, can look very different, depending on whether the perspective is, say, multilingual or postcolonial. The concepts of intercultural as well as social justice education are broad or work mainly as umbrella terms, with neither being connected with a particular theoretical framework. Nordic researchers in the field of intercultural education wrestle with somewhat muddled concepts. A general implication is that Nordic policymakers, schools and teachers who desire to include intercultural education in policies and practices are required to draw on a number of different fields of research, not only those called intercultural or multicultural. Having a wider understanding of intercultural education requires drawing on research done in areas such as normality studies, postcolonial studies and anti-racist studies. A positive consequence of this conceptual turmoil is that the diversity and at times the contested nature of the field are recognised. It is also evident from the analysed research that alertness, caution and a critical and reflexive attitude are continuously required in the use of the term *culture* in education and in how difference is to be taken into consideration. As argued by Palaiologou and Dietz (2012, quoted in Palaiologou & Gorski, 2017, p. 353), intercultural education needs to "respond in more transformative ways to hegemonic transformations that continue to marginalise some groups as 'other', while privileging already-privileged groups as 'normal' and deserving of their privilege".

Likewise, there is a need to engage in further research, questioning what intercultural and social justice education imply in different educational settings as well as how structural inequalities, power relations and oppression influence equality and equity in education. Equality and social justice constitute core aims of intercultural education in general; however, the questions of what intercultural and social justice education entail can be answered differently depending on what theoretical and specific

educational context is chosen. However, despite different theoretical moorings, intercultural education needs to “directly address issues of racism, sexism, classism, linguicism, ableism, ageism, heterosexism, religious intolerance, and xenophobia” (NAME, 2017, para 2) in order to stay true to its roots.

In closing, intercultural education as a concept continues to be contested and subject to different kinds of criticism. Yet the fundamental quest of intercultural education as a field of research, namely to support social justice and diversity, still shows its vitality and timeliness, internationally as well as in the Nordic context. The fact that it is pushed towards reconceptualisations and more critical orientations can be considered a sign of a dynamic field of research.

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