Tobias Pötzsch

Forskardoktor, lektor i socialt arbete
Post-doc. Researcher, Lecturer in Social Work
Swedish School of Social Science (SSKH)
CEREN, Centre for Research on Ethnic Relations and Nationalism
tobias.potzsch@helsinki.fi

Critical Social Inclusion as an alternative to integration discourses in Finnish and Canadian Integration Education Programs

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This article represents a synopsis of research findings obtained during multiple case study fieldwork in Finland and Canada (2015-2017) examining implementations of critical social inclusion in integration educations, specifically Swedish for Immigrants (SFI) and Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC). Anti-oppressive methodologies (AOP), as well as perspectives integrated from Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) and Critical Migration Studies (CMS) with their ideals of challenging structural racism and working for social change inform critical social inclusion as well as the study's research design. The empirical findings show that social inclusion within SFI and LINC programs was tangled, episodic, and far from straightforward. Its implementation depended upon a number of enabling and disabling factors such as the role ascribed to language acquisition and critical citizenship perspectives in curricula, interrogations of civic integrationism and institutional whiteness within programs, as well as the prevailing political climates outside of the classroom. A pivotal conclusion is that if critical perspectives of social inclusion are to become a lived reality for all program participants, then majorities must also be subjected to integration regimes.

Integration and Inclusion are labels describing processes. They are fluid and multifarious yet attached to persons labelled immigrants where immigrant is perceived as a static condition of existence rather than a pattern or description of movement (Back & Sinha 2012). "Immigrants" are acted upon to act in ways that correspond to what we mean by the labels or what we imply the labels to mean. What is left out and absented is as important as what is communicated by them. Sara Ahmed (2012, 183) states that, "the very promise of inclusion can be the concealment of exclusion." Thus, describing the process of social inclusion matters, because a change of labels can be cosmetic serving to conceal hegemonies and extend exclusions. It is the description of this process of social inclusion of adult migrant learners in integration education programs in its myriad of interpretations which constituted the core of my doctoral thesis (Pötzsch 2020). It explored inclusion's fractured, interrupted vicissitudes through which the position of migrant students as betwixt and between belonging and othering comes into view. Akin to traversing different rooms, migrants wander in and out of spaces of belonging and non-belonging on their educational journeys (Askonas 2000). The paradoxical liminality of their position within the stop-gap of integration programs is that they seem to have all the time in the world and yet experience that time is running out for them.

Turning to a description of research environments, the Finnish case studies consisted of SFI programs at The Swedish Adult Education Institute (Arbis) in Helsingfors and The Civic Institute (Medis) in Mariehamn while NorQuest College's (LINC) program in Edmonton, Alberta represented the Canadian case. Methodologically, my study incorporated anti-oppressive research designs which embody a participant-centred approach where accountability of process and outcome are to be collectively shared (Brown & Strega 2005). Accordingly, I spent extended fieldwork periods ranging from three to six months in Helsingfors, Edmonton and Mariehamn engaging participants in discussion and dissemination sessions throughout the research stays. I chose in-depth interviews, group interviews and participant observations to represent the views and experiences of contributors as these methods facilitate sufficient immersion within the research environment and generate spaces for co-creating meaning. The material consists of 52 in-depth interviews with teachers, administrators and support personnel, 20 small-group interviews with 87 adult migrant students and 14 weeks of participant observations in various learning environments. Interview transcripts and observation logs generated a multifaceted qualitative database which was analyzed using descriptive approaches of content analysis with the help of ATLAS.ti (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). Anti-oppressive methodologies as well as perspectives integrated from CWS and CMS founding the study are linked in their critique of the objectification, "naturalization" and problematization of migrancy and re-situate "immigration problems" within the social values, political ideologies and institutional structures of white Western nation states. As such, they constitute perspectives which are not commonly integrated within social work or educational practice in Nordic countries.

Before initiating my study, I had somewhat expected that NorQuest LINC would serve as an emulative model when it came to how "inclusion should be done." I imagined that Canada's long experience with immigration and integration policies, favourably based upon a multiculturalist foundation, would signal that one had come further along "inclusion road" than the Finnish SFI educations, given their relatively recent inception and limited engagements with immigration. It was therefore surprising, that although distinct differences in program formulations and inclusion practices existed, these were less pronounced and certainly less qualitative than I had expected. One perceptible difference was the general societal preparedness for inclusion predicated upon cultural diversity being a "lived" social reality in Canada. The fact that the ethnic constitution of the LINC classroom corresponded visibly to the cultural diversity outside of it, narrowed, at least on the surface, the majority — minority divide. This generated a readiness for working pragmatically with questions of migrant education and employment but without the disingenuousness of immigration debates characterizing Finnish social and political discourses where such issues are culturalized as "immigrant" instead of "societal" problems (Hage 2000). In the quotidian interactions within classrooms or schools, however, implementations of social inclusion in LINC and SFI shared many similarities. In fact, all three programs espoused liberal values as national values, these serving as boundary mechanisms in "excluding to include" migrant learners. Perhaps the nature of civic integration as interpreted within the liberal framework of Western nation states, where "good" migrant citizens are reified by demonstrating language proficiency, filling economic niches and accepting said canon of liberal values, speaks for the similitude in education aims and practices.

I draw a distinction between this type of civic integrationism and critical social inclusion. Civic integrationism, with its aim of inculcating values and customs defined by a dominant culture, or *Leitkultur*, in order to achieve social cohesion, is generally imposed upon the migrant Other (Lægaard 2007). In practice, it has been criticized as a thinly veiled attempt to assimilate cultural and other differences into the essentialist narratives of "homogenous" national cultures, which terminate in ethnic hierarchies and social exclusion. The domineering arguments used to justify assimilative integration measures are often couched in paternalistic terms which silence and disenfranchise migrants. The underlying attitude of "we know what's best for immigrants" robs the latter of their critical agency creating relationships of dependence for which they are later chastised (Goldberg 1994).

Conversely, critical social inclusion shifts the burden of responsibility for adaption from migrants to society by emphasizing the proactive role of public and private institutions in addressing structural obstacles to migrant inclusion such as racism and discrimination. The inclusion challenge is to conceive of society as one in which the boundaries of people's lives are contested by diverse groups with unequal access to sources of power and persuasion; and to recognize this inequality as largely structural, while attempting to mitigate against it (Crul, Schneider & Lelie 2012).

A key contention of the study is that if critical perspectives of social inclusion are to become a lived reality for *all*, then majorities must be subjected to the "integration spotlight." This demands answers to some rather awkward questions such as, "How well integrated into a modern, global reality of cultural hybridity are educational stakeholders and white majorities?" and "How culturally diverse are curricula, societal networks and staff compositions?"

The following quote by "Zala," a student from a visible minority background, echoes the sentiments of many migrant learners on the absention of their own cultures in integration educations while encapsulating the central debates of the study:

> We try so much to integrate and give of ourselves to the community to become a part of this society. Sometimes I tell my husband, 'My culture is disappearing.' My culture is so down right now because I have to make a double effort for integration. I speak Swedish and have to go home and listen to the news in Swedish. When I do something, it is with this culture. So that's why sometimes we have to take down our cultures. Sometimes I feel like it's just disappearing inside and it sounds so scary. I have, and love my own identity but our cultural identity, we have to suppress it to take on this culture.

Zala describes the outcomes of colour-blind integration regimes whereby diminishing migrant life experiences and competences result in suppressions of identity — of self. Instead of expounding the reciprocal gains of cultural diversity in which new and old seamlessly coalesce, it speaks of living with a profound sense of loss as an integration outcome. In so doing, it problematizes civic integrationism's masked assimilation where in order to be considered the "right kind of minority" you do not assert your difference. By asserting that "to take on this culture," migrant learners are forced to suppress their own culture, "Zala" alludes to the implicit nature of integration as a kind of governance. It represents a process of bringing those who have been named as "strangers" into the nation, as they are compelled to consent to the terms of integration (Ahmed 2012). The excerpt also unequivocally illustrates the sense of being "in limbo" that characterized the lives of many adult migrants in LINC and SFI. Their liminal positioning as migrant learners in integration educations — waiting in the present for their lives to restart, — place them in a specific category that perpetually

(re)configures the relationship between inclusion and exclusion. To reflect the protean interdependency of the inclusion-exclusion nexus, I have coined the concept of *Inclusectionalities* (Pötzsch 2020). Inclusectionalities denote the intersections of inclusion and exclusion through which liminal spaces are revealed in which migrant students are positioned. It affirms that all measures intended to "include" have the capacity for generating exclusionary outcomes (Atac & Rosenberger 2013). How students are positioned depends greatly on who is empowered to serve as an arbitrator over which expressions of migrant diversity are judged as beneficial or as obstacles to inclusion.

The empirical findings of my study reveal that both enabling and disabling factors shaped implementations of critical social inclusion within LINC and SFI. Firstly, educational programs that equated host country language acquisition with integration often lost sight of the broader "real life" focus political, social and economic inclusion necessitates. Secondly, where a normative narrative — as in, "WE will teach YOU how to live here" — justified prevailing power and racial hierarchies, it stood in the way of reciprocal learning and student agency in reshaping inclusion efforts. A third factor concerned how willing staff, administrators and other stakeholders were to turn the majority gaze inwards in interrogating their own white privilege in maintaining structural inequalities. By diverting this gaze, inequalities became institutional background and "common sense" views of culture and learning eluded critical analysis. The fourth factor refers to the prevailing social and political climates in which integration programs were embedded. Where these climates emphasized controls and compliances which racialized and othered migrants, they served to dis-integrate. Lastly, social inclusion necessitates robust expressions of joint political agency, yet LINC and SFI were generally characterized by a politics of apoliticality. Because educations were not developed around critical citizenship foundations but emphasized more "neutral" incarnations of language and cultural learning, they extended limited sanctioned opportunities for teachers and students to collectively challenge social injustices.

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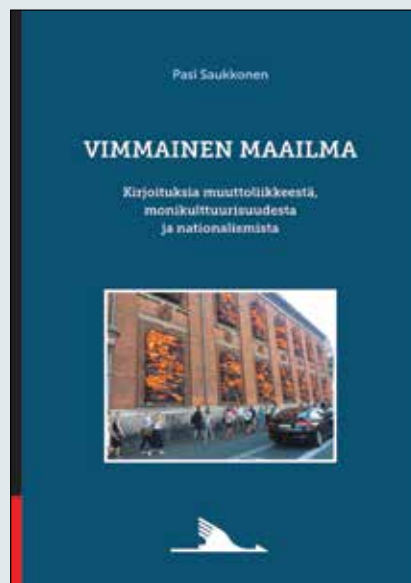Pötzsch, T. (2020) *Critical Perspectives on Social inclusion in Integration Education Programs for Adult Migrants*. Helsinki: Unigrafia.