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# Empowering minority students: a study of cultural references in the teaching content

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## ABSTRACT

Using references to the world outside the classroom is an intrinsic part of teaching content. Cultural references, however, might present a challenge for minority students. This paper investigates how teaching can contribute to the empowerment of all students through a qualitative observational case study of two Norwegian primary and secondary schools. Plenary teaching in two classes at each school was observed for two weeks. Using an abductive research process inspired by linguistic translatory research and Bildung-centred general didactics, we developed categories of universal and particular cultural references in classroom teaching. Universal references are general topics concerning all human beings, while particular references presuppose knowledge of specific cultures. The results are discussed in relation to multicultural research, as well as the ‘postcolonial paradox’. The article concludes that teaching can contribute to the empowerment of all students by combining universal and particular cultural references so that different realms of the human condition are displayed. The challenge for the teacher in this endeavour is to increase the use of non-Western references and to be aware of the postcolonial paradox as an inevitable dilemma when teaching in culturally diverse classrooms.

## KEYWORDS


Minority students; primary and secondary school; empowerment; teaching; general didactics

## Introduction

Mastering the dominant culture and language has been regarded as a dominant condition for students’ success in school (see, for example, Bernstein, 1975; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Cultural and linguistic minority students might not have the same cultural experiences and cultural references as majority students. Teachers might not recognize minority students’ cultural competence and experiences and may be unaware of whether students have the expected cultural references underlying new teaching content (Hilt, 2017). Even if these challenges are related to cultural minority students, they can also be a challenge for most students and their experiences of social class and even gender.

This paper studies cultural references in teaching from a Bildung-centred general didactic perspective. The linguistic concept of ‘reference’ deals with the relationship between the meaning of the word and what it refers to in the outside world, i.e. culture and society (Lycan, 1999), or universe (Ricoeur, 1991). In humanistic studies, references are comparable to the hermeneutic concept of ‘preconception’ (Gadamer et al., 2012), which means a kind of context and an assumption about human understanding. Cultural references underpin the fact that the individual’s references are culturally decided and dependent and vary between cultures, social groups and generations.

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In educational research, the tradition of *multicultural education* originated in the United States where it addressed cultural issues to empower Afro-American students (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1994/2009). Today, conceptual debates in the field reflect on different dilemmas arising from the various concepts of the *intercultural*, *the multicultural* and *diversity in education* (Gorski, 2006; Grant, 2016; Mikander et al., 2018). This paper aims to make an empirically based contribution to this conceptual debate. We will argue that the essence of the dilemma is related to what Gustavsson (2014) in line with Fanon (1952/1971) calls the *postcolonial paradox*: There are pitfalls when underprivileged groups advocate for being recognized as a particular group, but also for not being recognized as a particular group: Focusing on cultural groups' *particularities* involves the risk of victimizing them by essentializing their culture. The opposite position, focusing on *shared human universality*, such as the celebration of *diversity*, risks becoming relativistic and de-politicized (Gorski, 2006; Grant, 2016; Mikander et al., 2018).

Bearing this in mind, we ask: How can teaching contribute to the empowerment of all students through universal and particular cultural references? The concept *cultural references* are sometimes mentioned in intercultural and multicultural literature, but it is rarely elaborated as a term. Most of the research on cultural references originates from literature, art, and media studies, and mainly from linguistic studies of translatology and subtitling norms for television, films and literature (Hatim & Mason, 1990; Larsen et al., 2015; Lafrenz, 2017; Pedersen, 2011; Zojer 2011), consequently we include concepts from subtitling research in this paper's general didactic perspective.

We present data from a qualitative case study in two Norwegian primary and secondary schools to answer our research question and discuss the results' contribution to the research field of cultural diversity education. We start by introducing the concept of cultural references from a subtitling research and general didactic perspective.

## Theory: concepts of cultural references to the particular and the universal

Subtitling research has found that linguistic transfer and the building of bridges between cultures are necessarily interwoven (Pedersen, 2016). Translation is a negotiation between language and culture (Wolf, 2022). Research on subtitling considers cultural references in terms of *culture-specific elements* and *extralinguistic cultural references*. Ranzato (2016), Vlahov and Florin, pioneers in the field, provided the classical definition of *culture-specific elements* in 1969:

words or composed locutions typical of a geographic environment, of a culture, of the material life or of historical-social peculiarities of a people, nation, country, or tribe and which, thus, carry a national, local or historical colouring and do not have precise equivalents in other languages (Ranzato, 2016, 153).

Culture-specific elements, an overarching concept in subtitling, are further defined by Pedersen as being 'entities outside language' (2007, 30). Meaning that even for a native speaker, some names, places, foods, institutions, customs and so on, may be unfamiliar if you are not previously informed about them. Pedersen (2007) defines these entities as *extralinguistic cultural references*. These references can be *monocultural*, known to the original audience and unknown to the target audience, *transcultural*, known to both audience groups, and *infracultural*, known by neither of them. Extralinguistic cultural references are typically nouns (but in some cases adjectives and adverbs), as will be shown in this paper's findings section. In the following we will argue that the extralinguistic cultural references teachers and students bring to the teaching situation play an essential role when it comes to inclusion and empowerment.

In the *Bildung*-centred general didactic tradition, the quality of teaching depends on the teacher's ability to interpret the teaching content into topics that the classroom's unique students perceive as meaningful (Hillen et al., 2011; Klafki, 2000a, 2001; Westbury et al., 2000). Cultural references play an essential role in this transformative or translatory process. The research traditions of translation and general didactics stands in this respect on the same ground; hermeneutic and literary interpretation for the sake of communication and understanding. In practice,

this semantics of teaching may be explained as follows (Willbergh, 2015): Reality is not present in the classroom; it is *represented* by content and communicated by aesthetic objects, such as words, pictures, media and so on (Herbart and Stern 2002; Menck, 2000; Pestalozzi, 1977). The content is interpreted by *referring* to reality through a cultural reference elicited through, for example, words (Auerbach & Said, 2003), which is similar to translation. What makes this reference a pedagogical act is the fact that if the students are to experience the content as meaningful and relevant, they must imagine that the content refers to their prior cultural experiences and subject-matter knowledge (Willbergh, 2015). Hence, quality teaching starts with the students' experiencing recognition, that they can recognize the topic and connect it to their preconceptions. This possibility depends on teachers' ability to refer to students' preconceptions, their previous cultural knowledge base. These preconceptions can be *particular*, referring to the local and culture-specific. Or they can be *universal*, referring to the commonality of *being human*. In an earlier empirical classroom study, this didactic perspective revealed that typical strategies in classrooms involved providing references to common knowledge bases, from the local to the global, and actualizing topics on being human within the political, economic and existential realm (Willbergh, 2016).

Further, the goal of the semantics of teaching in Bildung-centred general didactics is that students gain a new perspective on present and future worlds, which is conceptualized within the frames of the term *Bildung* (Klafki, 2000a). In teaching, this can be explained as a matter of providing new perspectives on the recognizable and familiar, through interpreting teaching content in the classroom (Willbergh, 2015, 2016, 2021). *Bildung* denotes the goal of every educational effort in this tradition, namely, to contribute to students' development into autonomous democratic citizens (Klafki, 2000a, 2001; Westbury et al., 2000). Teaching can only contribute to this regard: The outcome of the student's individual interpretations of content is unpredictable and impossible to survey for the teacher (Willbergh, 2015). But teaching can contribute through gradually introducing the students to knowledge of the world and making it relevant to their present and future lives. In the perspective of Bildung-centred general didactics, the concept of 'autonomy' denotes the ability of taking responsibility for world and society, and in this sense, the concept corresponds to 'empowerment' (Willbergh, 2015). Klafki states that *Bildung* for our time focuses on what concerns us all and on all the dimensions of human capacities (Klafki, 2000b). Consequently, from a Bildung-centred general didactic perspective, cultural references can be made to particular cultures (*monocultural references* in translation research) and universal topics concerning humankind on a global or existential level (*transcultural references* in translation research).

In sum, this study's main concepts are cultural references to the particular and the universal, inspired by translation research and Bildung-centred general didactics. In the methods section we will see that the concepts also are empirically based. But first, we provide a short review of educational research on cultural references.

## Cultural references in educational research

In educational research, the multiculturalism tradition is connected to cultural issues in school through the concept of *culturally responsive education*. *Culturally relevant teaching* and *cultural awareness* are other key concepts posited in Ladson-Billings' work on African-American children (Ladson-Billings, 1994/2009). Ladson-Billings' project is to empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically. Gay (2018) explores how *culturally responsive teaching*, using 'the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them' (2018, 36). According to Aronson and Laughter (2016), the vision of Ladson-Billings and Gay is to teach social justice through constructivist methods of connecting students' cultural references to teaching content. They want to bridge the gap

between home and school and appreciate and build upon the social and cultural knowledge students bring with them to school. This implies contributing to students' cultural competence, their critical reflection on life and society, and their awareness and critique of power.

Many studies within the field are based on project work or individual work. Students are supposed to participate in community work (Civil & Khan, 2001) or to bring local knowledge into classrooms. In some studies, teachers incorporate culturally relevant texts (Robbins, 2001) or texts connected to students' personal lives and local environments (Dimick, 2012; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Ensign, 2003; Stovall, 2006; Tate, 1995). Other studies are based on narratives originating from students and teachers (Ortega, 2003), and on critical conversations in the classroom that reflect inequalities, discrimination and broader societal structures (Adams and Laughter 2012; Gutstein, 2003).

Furthermore, inspired by critical and postmodern theorists, Banks claims that 'personal, cultural, and social factors influence the formulation of knowledge' (Banks, 1993, 5). Positions and frames of reference (norms, ideologies, human interests and so on) influence the construction of knowledge and interpretation. This bias in knowledge construction must be acknowledged, particularly in the mainstream understanding that colours our perspectives and views 'diversity as deviance and differences as deficits' (Banks, 1993, 6). The Eurocentric orientation has led to unfair and excluding learning conditions for minority students and students from lower social classes (Bennett, 2001).

In the Nordic countries, *intercultural education* is a more frequently used term than multicultural education. According to Mikander et al. (2018), multi- and intercultural education are equivalent approaches nearly impossible to distinguish. Other suggested terms are *social justice in education*, *transcultural education* and *multi-ethnic education* (Mikander et al., 2018). In Norway, *inclusive education* is a more prevalent term. Concepts such as normality and neutrality in teaching and textbooks are questioned in the light of a postcolonial analysis. Issues considered to be neutral or standard in the Nordic textbooks are, in reality, Western. They are issues the Nordic countries have benefitted from and within which the idea of whiteness is dominant (Mikander et al., 2018). Researchers have also claimed that the Norwegian society is deeply rooted in the ideology of egalitarianism and 'sameness', an ideology which also pervades schools (Chinga-Ramirez, 2017; Pihl, 2010; Stokke, 2019).

Consequently, studies in multicultural and intercultural education expose significant challenges to equity and empowerment. The power relation between majority and minority student groups in school plays a vital role in these approaches. However, a critical issue in these approaches is the essentialist view on culture. Paris (2012) criticized multicultural research for being essentialist and deterministic with respect to certain racial or ethnic groups. Intercultural educational research has a similar critique (Mikander et al., 2018). Challenges are often addressed for culturally 'fixed' categories of student groups, such as Afro-American students, Latin students, Native-American students and so on. Today, increasing diversity worldwide results in student groups from different immigration cultures, being more or less integrated in the majority culture. Research on minority youth shows diverse ways of forming transition cultures (Fangen, 2006; Kaya, 2014; Prieur, 2004) despite minority students' native cultures. Paris (2012) points out that the school's purpose in a pluralistic society is to offer access to the dominant cultural capital and competence. The challenges of essentialism and mixed-minority student groups actualize the so-called postcolonial paradox mentioned in the introduction: Advocating for the particular can be essentialising, and universalizing can lead to de-politicization. Both are potentially suppressing (Gustavsson, 2014). We will return to this premise in the discussion.

The current analysis aims to explore critical issues regarding the postcolonial perspective and the essentialistic understanding of culture. The focus will be on plenary teaching, not student-centred learning methods, which often are the main focus in multicultural education research.

## Methods

In 2020, 18.5 % of the public in Norway were immigrants or Norwegian born with immigrant parents. The largest immigration group is from Poland, followed by Lithuania, Somalia, Pakistan, Sweden, Syria, and Iraq (Statistics Norway, 2020). Immigrant students perform lower than non-immigrant students in OECD, 2016 (2016). However, the picture is sharply divided: Even if minority students are overrepresented among students with low grades and drop-outs in upper secondary school, many minority students perform well at school and attend higher education (Støren, 2010). Migrant Integration Policy Index describes Norwegian schools as having a 'well-developed equity policy (to) help all types of children to achieve and feel safe', even though 'intercultural and diversity education could be better reflected in the curriculum' ("MIPEX," 2020, p. 3). The frequent use of Christian and humanist values in the curriculum documents, is according to Osler and Lybaek (2014) an excluding factor which sustain asymmetrical power relations. *Minority language students* is the legal concept for minority students in Norwegian schooling (Burner & Osler, 2020), which may conceal the occurrence of racism in school (Osler & Lindquist, 2018; Pihl, 2010).

The data material in his study has been collected from observations of teaching in classrooms. The study draws on ethnographic techniques but differs when it comes to time spent in the field and the fact that there is less comprehensive data material. Epistemologically, we consider the study to be participatory and interpretative, even when the participatory position inherent in ethnography is limited in a formal setting, such as classrooms, as one important aim is to not disturb the teaching.

The study, carried out in four classrooms in two schools, collected data in years 5, 6, 7 and 8 (10–13-year-old students) in Norway. One of the schools is situated in a rural area and has a limited number of immigrants. The other is in an urban area and has a multicultural student group. We studied two classes in each school, where the observation in each school class lasted over two weeks, with two researchers in each classroom in all the subjects during the research period. The four classes varied in having one or two class teachers, and additional teachers could also be present in some lessons (mainly music and physical exercises).

The methodological focus of the research was plenary teaching communication, denoting 'teachers' and students' talk about the subject matter in whole-class teaching' (Aasebø et al., 2017, 274). All teachers' and students' classroom speech on the subject matter in the whole-class or plenary activities was recorded, comprising communication between teachers and students, wording of examples, references, concepts, comments, questions and answers. Events and sequences in the lessons, exercises, and resources (textbooks, films, pictures and digital work assignments on smart boards and computers) were also reported to supply context to classroom speech. All in all, the observations comprise 157 lessons.

The time spent on fieldwork will depend on the research topic and questions. Long-lasting fieldwork ensures the validity of the data due to the possibility to assume that the observed can 'be typical of what *always* happens there' (Hammersley, 2006, 5). Shorter fieldwork may often have a stage in the data collection at which the data material is saturated, meaning that the researchers will no longer obtain new information (Fangen, 2010). Our experience as educational researchers tell us that teaching and lessons in school follow certain patterns that can be detected over a few weeks. In the current research, conversations with the class teachers made it reasonable to assume that the two weeks in each class were typical of their lessons.

Our outsider role as researchers in the classroom might have led the teachers to adjust their teaching to the research issue, in this case diversity in teaching. The researcher role here is different from the insider role often obtained in a long-time engagement (Hammersley, 2006) where an emerging trustful relationship might develop between the researcher and participants (Parker-Jenkins, 2018). However, due to the frequent use of two teachers in the lessons, the presence of the students who usually comment on irregularities, and the point that two weeks are a long time in an educational context, we assume that the data is valid.

The analysis process has been abductive. First, we coded the references from classroom teaching according to issues emerging from the data material, such as family, nature, sport, historical events and so on, using *NVivo* software. Then, inspired by a *Bildung*-centred didactic perspective, and Gustavsson's (2014) discussion on the postcolonial paradox and the division between a cultural group's particularities and shared human universality, we developed two main categories: A *universal* category, serving as a non-culturally specific category, which corresponds with Pedersen's (2007) transcultural references, and a *particular* category, serving as a culture-specific category, corresponding with Pedersen's monocultural references. For our purposes here, we developed seven groups under the main categories: 'human' and 'global' as universal references, and 'school and classroom', 'local community', 'Norwegian', 'Western', and 'non-Western' as particular references. We are aware of that categorizing the data material in this way entails some challenges. 'Human' references are based on common human experiences such as illness, family, or eating breakfast, however, within the category there might be some normalizing aspects not referring to prior cultural experiences for all students. References labelled as 'Norwegian' will always be in transition and may be apprehended in different ways. 'Western' references may appear more homogenous than they really are. Nevertheless, we do not regard the categories as epistemic categories, they are pragmatically developed for the purpose to catch the whole construct of references in the classroom.

## Typical cultural references and the combination of references in the lessons

In this section we describe what characterizes the empirical data material with respect to universal (U) and particular (P) references and combinations of the two.

### Universal references

The universal category in this study has two sub-categories, the human and the global (see, Table 1). (1) *Human* references denote existential issues that refer to all humankind and have a parallel in Klafki's concept of *Bildung* as 'all the dimensions of human capacities' (Klafki, 2001b). Universal references occur more often than particular references in all the classrooms. Typical human references in this study are friendship, family, emotions, body, illness and so on.

The second sub-category of the universal category (2) comprises references to the *global* and refers to common topics resulting from globalization. It can be argued that references to the global denote 'what concerns us all' in *Bildung*-centred general didactics (Klafki, 2001b). Typical references to global issues in the study are crime, poverty, media technology and international events in our contemporary time. References to the global occur more often than references to the human in our empirical material.

**Table 1.** Examples of universal and particular references.

Universal references (U)		
(1) Human <i>body, nature, family, senses, friendship</i>	(2) Global <i>media technology, human rights, crime, sport, youth culture, craft, trade</i>	
Particular references—local (P1)		
(3) School and classroom <i>cafeteria, classroom interior, school excursions</i>	(4) Local community <i>buildings, local policy, persons</i>	
Particular references—national/international (P2)		
(5) Norwegian <i>traditions, historical events, persons, mythology, national laws, institutions, idioms and sayings</i>	(6) Western <i>science, historical events, persons, rituals, culture, places</i>	(7) Non-Western <i>contemporary events, persons, places</i>



### **Particular references**

The category of particular references has five sub-categories (see, [Table 1](#)). Two of the sub-categories are *local* references (P1) and refer to monocultural references (Pedersen, 2007) which the particular student group has in common: This means the student group's surroundings, such as their *school and classroom context* (3) and the *local community* (4).

Three sub-categories are *national/international references* (P2). They are categorized according to the multicultural perspectives on the dominance of Eurocentric orientation in education (Bennett, 2001) and the postcolonial critique of Western standards present in the Nordic textbooks (Mikander et al., 2018). Such monocultural references concerning societal, historical, traditional, and culture-specific items, persons and occurrences are categorized as *Norwegian* (5), *Western* (6), related to the Western world, and *non-Western* (7) related to the world outside the Western sphere.

In accordance with the multicultural claims, the Norwegian and Western aspects dominate in all classrooms when it comes to particular references. References to school and classroom, the students' local community and the non-Western part of the world, occur less. While the Norwegian and Western references contain such items as historical events, traditions, institutions and persons, the topics in the non-Western references are mainly focused on the name of countries or cities, with the exception of some examples referring to the Second World War atomic bomb explosions in Japan, and the contemporary Syrian War.

### **Combination of universal and particular references**

To obtain a more nuanced picture of the cultural references in the material we also examined whether one or several categories of references are present in each lesson, and whether the references occur in combination, and if so, we ask which combination is the most typical.

A combination of universal and particular references occurs in about three fourths of the lessons in all the classes, while one fourth has only universal references. Among the combination of references, the typical occurrence is universal references combined with national/international references (P2). As we have pointed out above, the Norwegian and Western references dominate this category. An example of such a combination of universal and particular 2 references is a lesson in science in year seven about the weather, where the students are to learn about warm and cold fronts and acquire the ability to explain the phenomenon of lightning (learning objective). In the lesson, universal references, for example, global references (science; positive energy; lightning conductor; submarines; cars; skyscrapers; football matches; log flumes) and human references (sky; nature; go fishing; family members struck by lightning), are combined with Norwegian references (the hammer of the God of Thunder, Thor; winning the Lotto-game; the lightning striking a (typical) Norwegian mountain cabin).

Combinations of references which involve non-Western references occur far more rarely, and when they occur, they are in combination with Norwegian and/or Western references in addition to universal references. Below we will present data from a lesson illustrating such combinations, and further discuss it regarding the question of empowerment.

The topic is 'war and peace' in a lesson in year six in the KRLE-subject (Christianity, Religion, Philosophy of Life and Ethics). The purpose of the lesson is formulated as getting the students to converse on present philosophical and ethical questions, as well as discuss challenges in respect to the topic war and peace. The lesson starts with the teacher claiming that many people come from countries experiencing war. This is an abstract from the teaching communication that occurred:

Student: Syria

Teacher: Do they feel good despite of the war?



Student: Not happy

Student: They are afraid

Student: People are knocking on their doors telling them to escape

Student: They don't go to school

Teacher: They aren't happy, many of them haven't got homes, they live in refugee camps

Student: They used to have homes

Teacher: It's almost the same as we said about poor people, they haven't got enough to eat, no schools. Has anyone of you talked to your grandparents? On the Second World War in Norway?

The Second World War verbalizes a lot of different associations from the students. One of the students talks about family members who were honoured by the King after the war, another about all the German bunkers from the war which is still found in their local area. This is followed by a story of one student's own frightening experiences when he visited the bunkers. The teacher adds knowledge on the invasion of Norway (April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1940), says that there were made attempts to invade earlier than this date, and reminds the students of Jøssingfjorden (an historical narrative about Norwegian Second World War heroism). Some students bring in movies they have watched before the teacher interrupts and one student poses a question about Hitler's derogatory terms for the Jews. The teacher then turns the attention to nuclear bombs:

Teacher: We will not talk more about this now: However, what happened after the war? Something about America and the testing of the nuclear bomb.

Student: Hiroshima

Teacher: Hiroshima and Nagasaki. You must recognise these names. 90.000 people died immediately. In the following years, additional 90.000 died and even more people were hurt. Many young people were hurt by radiation. A two-years old little Japanese girl, Sadako Sasaki . . .

The teacher continues to tell the iconic story about the little girl who was stricken by radiation sickness and died of leukaemia. The story leads to a lot of questions and comments from students about leukaemia, medical treatment, nuclear testing today and the relationship between the United States and North Korea. The teacher closes the discussion and concludes that many things happen during a war - difficult relationships between neighbours, kids getting annoyed with each other's, etc. The textbook for the lesson presents an illustration of war displaying two girlfriends who start to fight, adding an alternative illustration of war. At the end of the lesson, the teacher ask the students to make a drawing of war and peace. The topic is to be continued next week with knowledge on Mahatma Ghandi.

The references in the lesson move back and forth between universal, particular 1 and particular 2 references, between the human references (fear; happiness; illness; leukaemia; family relations; neighbours), global references (war; escape; poverty; refugee camp; medicine; atomic bomb; FIFA-ranking), references from the local community (the local bunkers), Norwegian references (April 9th; the narrative from Jøssingfjorden; the movie 'The King's Choice'), Western references (World Wars 1 and 2; Germans; Jews; Hitler) and non-Western references (Syria; Hiroshima and Nagasaki; North Korea; Japan). Both teachers and students contribute to the construction of multiple references in the conversation. The dialogic and participatory form (Aasebø et al. (2017) gives students diverse opportunities to experience meaning from the cultural references. Most of the references in the conversation may serve as multiple gate openers to the topic 'war and peace', and particularly, elaborate on the human and existential experience of war, in past and present history, and in the national and the global context. Some of the references are further explained by the teacher (e.g. the consequences of the nuclear bomb; the bunkers from the Second World War; leukaemia and medicine; the nuclear tests in North Korea). Some occur in questions from students ('did Hitler

hate Jews?'). Some are taken for granted (the movies), and some are referred to as topics in earlier lessons (Jølssingfjorden). This does not mean that we, as researchers, can assess the references as sufficiently elaborated, which would have entailed knowledge about the students' earlier cultural experiences and expressions in the classroom. However, the extent of different references as well as the combination of different types of references (particular/universal, local/global/, western/non-western) gives all the students a better ability to recognize the new item through references they are familiar to.

## Empowerment through universal and particular cultural references

According to *Bildung*-centred general didactics, the value of cultural references lies in the students' chances to recognize a phenomenon as part of their preconceptions about the world, in other words, their previous cultural knowledge base (Klafki, 2000a; Willbergh, 2015, 2016). As student groups are diverse when it comes to preconceptions and cultural backgrounds, the more nuanced and multi-faceted the cultural references emerging from the joint interpretation of content are in a classroom, the more likely it is that the student can recognize one or more of the references (Aasebø et al., 2017). Bearing this argument in mind, we will describe how the combinations of cultural references in the above-mentioned KRLE lesson can contribute to empowerment for the students.

Universal and particular cultural references give opportunities for recognition in different ways. The lesson's universal references to the experience of being human (happiness, illness, family relations and being and having neighbours), opens for the students' recognition due to their general character. However, such references are also tainted by culturally specific meanings as family belonging or being neighbours means different things across cultures. Nonetheless, it is likely that the reference to these phenomena is known to most students, given that the topics are cross-cultural (or transcultural, Pedersen, 2007). The references to being human are characterized by calling for existential experiences, emotions, such as family love and grief caused by illness, and by having human encounters with nature (Willbergh 2017).

Universal references in the lesson to global issues (war, poverty, refugee camps, medicine, atomic bomb and FIFA-ranking), share similarities with references to being human, but the difference here is that they typically denote global topics, such as technological inventions and systems (medicine and the atomic bomb), or contemporary challenges to a global community (poverty or war). The universal references to global topics are characterized by potentially being recognized by the students through second-hand experience, meaning that they may have heard about the topic in the media or in their schooling. These are discursive cross-cultural topics as opposed to the existential nature of references to being human. From a *Bildung*-centred general didactic perspective, the global cross-cultural nature of these references has the potential of appealing to the students' sense of responsibility to our common world (Klafki, 2001). There is also of course a possibility that some students have first-hand experience of these topics, such as war and poverty. If this is the case, the teacher should be aware of this and extra alert when referring to them.

The particular references are culture-specific (Pedersen, 2007; Ranzato, 2016). The particular references in the lessons range from the Second World War bunkers in the local community to national and international topics (Norwegian war history, the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Syrian war, and North-Korean armaments). When the particular references are recognized, they typically appeal to the students' sense of identity and belonging (Willbergh 2017). Particular references therefore present the possibility of causing exclusion. They may appear alien to those students who do not experience recognition. The particular references presuppose familiarity with specific cultures or knowledge domains. However, this is exactly why the combination of references is crucial. In the example of the topic war and peace, there is a combination of local (P1) and national/international (P2) references. The local particular references have the potential to be recognized across the students' cultural groups because the students share the same local community (Aasebø et al., 2017). In the teaching, the Second World War bunkers in the local community are

linked to the Syrian war. This combination of references makes it possible for the students to experience new connections to the topic 'war and peace'. In this way, the topic is anchored in the local, the historic and the cross-cultural contemporary fields, opening for a multifaceted possibility of recognition.

The KRLE lesson has a multifaceted combination of cultural references. It can be argued that the dominance of Norwegian references in the lesson is an excluding factor, as the minority students do not contribute their grandparents' stories of war, the discussion is limited to the Second World War in Norway. However, the problem of exclusion is at least nuanced by the appeal of the totality of cultural references in the lesson: the reference to the existential side of being human, the responsibility to solve global issues and the fact that particular references point to identity and belonging. The lesson represents a diversity of topics and activates several aspects within the students (Klafki, 2001b). Consequently, we argue that the combination of different forms of universal and particular cultural references is an approach that can contribute to the empowerment of all students due to the combined appeal to the different realms of the human condition.

The limitation of this contribution to empowerment, is the limitation of teaching in itself: From a Bildung-centred general didactic perspective, the outcome of the student's individual interpretations of content, is unpredictable and impossible to survey for the teacher (Willbergh, 2015). In this paper, empowerment means contributing to students' ability to take responsibility for world and society, by making knowledge of the world relevant to present and future lives (Willbergh, 2015). We argue that combining universal and particular cultural references in teaching can create such a varied picture of the human condition, from coping with the emotional to taking responsibility for world and community (Klafki, 2000b).

To sum up, a combination of universal and particular references occurs in about three fourths of the lessons in all the classes. The Norwegian and Western references dominate this category. This does not necessarily mean that the possibilities of empowering the students are limited. However, such references could contribute to a greater diversity for the students and make further connections between the content and the students' cultural affiliation. We claim that the combination of different forms of universal and particular cultural references is an approach that can contribute to the empowerment of all students due to the combined appeal to the different realms of the human condition. In the following we will discuss what our results can contribute to the field of cultural diversity education diversity research and the postcolonial paradox.

## Discussion

The postcolonial paradox, originally formulated in the book *Peau noire, Masques Blancs* (Fanon, 1952/1971), describes the dialectics of the colonizer and the colonized seen from the perspective of an African man in Europe (Gustavsson, 2014). The paradox illustrates the challenges of contributing to the empowerment of underprivileged groups, which in the perspective of this article is represented by children of immigrant and minority students in classrooms. In the case of enhancing the perspectives of a particular minority group in teaching, the groups' culture is in danger of being essentialized, interpreted as 'given', or constant, which can impede the possibility of empowering change (Gorski, 2006; Grant, 2016; Mikander et al., 2018). According to Fanon, there are challenges related to wanting the others to notice his black skin colour, as this could invoke prejudice (Fanon, 1952/1971; Gustavsson, 2014). In relation to the context of the research for this paper, it is problematic to distinguish between cultures, to essentialize, as the student culture in contemporary Norwegian classrooms is a mix of transition cultures (Fangen, 2006; Kaya, 2014; Prieur, 2004).

On the other hand, there are arguments for taking the opposite stand in the paradox, advocating that one should ignore cultures in the classroom and treat all students as universal 'equal' human beings. The parallel to Fanon in this case being that he also wants the others *not*

to notice his skin colour (Fanon, 1952/1971; Gustavsson, 2014). This can also impede the change towards empowerment of all students. By ignoring the fact that there are underprivileged students in the classroom, it is difficult to address the power relations that can prevent all students from having access to the dominant cultural capital and competence (Paris, 2012). In Norway, egalitarianism and 'sameness', is strong, which can lead to ignorance of power-structures (Chinga-Ramirez, 2017; Pihl, 2010; Stokke, 2019). Consequently, universalism must be balanced to avoid continued suppression.

However, the reason that this is a real paradox is that there are good reasons for seeing the particular and the universal stances as fruitful strategies for enhancing empowerment: The particular stance represents respect for particular cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1994/2009; Dimick, 2012; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Ensign, 2003; Stovall, 2006; Tate 1995), whereas the universal stance represents respect for the students as human beings. Both approaches taken by teachers have the potential to contribute to change, empowerment and autonomy (Klafki, 2000b).

So how can teachers cope with this paradox when teaching a diverse group of students? This paper has argued that the combination of different forms of universal and particular cultural references can contribute to the empowerment of all students due to the combined appeal to the different realms of the human condition. But when considering the postcolonial paradox there is also reason to believe that universal and particular references in teaching can 'neutralise' each other's change-obstructing effects. By combining the universal and the particular, it is possible that some students might be excluded or essentialised (by the particular references) and that some cultures and power-structures might be ignored (by the universal references). But at the same time, it is possible that the students might also experience recognition and meaning. Consequently, a contribution from this paper to the field of multicultural education is that the paradox cannot be solved, but that teachers need to take a conscious stand when it comes to the cultural references they choose to use in their teaching.

According to the multicultural and post-colonial perspective, the Eurocentric orientation in schools is grounded in the historical hegemony of the whiteness in policy, as well as in science and knowledge construction. The Eurocentric orientation is regarded as responsible for creating excluding learning conditions, unfairness and lack of empowerment for minority students (Banks, 1993; Bennett, 2001). The rare occurrences of non-Western references in this study's data material also indicate that the Western perspective dominates. This is in line with Mikander et al.'s (2018) claim that what are neutral standards in Nordic schools are in fact Western standards. It is impossible to deny the fact that there is Eurocentric domination in schools.

We argue that the idea of empowerment of the individual and the post-colonial critique of the dominance of whiteness in knowledge construction, can be two different discourses. Regarding empowerment, Norwegian schools have student groups with multiple cultural backgrounds, but the common purpose is to live their lives in this country, and mastering the dominant culture is fundamental to the students' future. The post-colonial critique of the dominance of whiteness seems to belong to a political reflection on the global world's development and the struggle against repression, inequality and poverty, which is important and relevant for all, regardless of cultural background in the global world. It can be argued that there is a potential tension between these two discourses. From the didactic perspective of this paper, recognizable references in teaching is important for empowerment. However, empowerment is also about expanding non-Western cultural references working towards the global goals of fighting whiteness.

We conclude that teaching can contribute to the empowerment of all students by combining universal and particular cultural references so that the different realms of the human condition are displayed. In this way, chances increase that each student can experience meaning from the teaching content. The challenge for the teacher in this endeavour is to increase the use of non-Western references and to be aware of the postcolonial paradox.

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