From understanding others to acting for social justice

Within Finnish education, multicultural education has developed since the 1990's as a field concentrating on how to receive immigrants in school and integrate them into our society (see, for example, Dervin et al., 2012 and Riitaoja, 2013). There has been a quite established thinking of "us" encountering the "culturally different Others", and how to tolerate, understand and communicate with these Others (see also Helakorpi, 2020). This is of course mainly made with good intentions, but still, both in international research (see, for example, Gorski, 2008; Sleeter, 2018) and in my own research on Finnish multicultural education, a more critical look shows that this kind of approach might in itself provide unequal positions for those seen as immigrants, and maintain a societal hierarchy of "us", the Finns, and "them", the immigrant Others. Thus, there is a need for critical self-reflection when working in the field of education and integration.

In my doctoral thesis I analyse critically how Finnish multicultural education contributes to or hinders social justice. Here, I will share some of the main findings and implications.

Historically, multicultural education started as a movement for social justice, and especially racial justice, in the US in the 1960's and 70's. It was the concerned and marginalised groups themselves who demanded equal rights in education. However, on the way these critical roots have faded away and multicultural education has in many contexts developed into a field of education defined by those who are privileged and belonging to the norm, designing ways of taking diversity into account and celebrating differences (Grant, 2016; Sleeter, 2018). These approaches of multicultural education have been called conservative or liberal (Gorski, 2009; Sleeter & Grant, 2007). From the point of view of a privileged person working in education, a liberal approach is easier than a critical, since it does not question our own doings, practices or policies. Within a liberal approach of multicultural education it is possible to stay "positive", since the demand for equal access to power and educational outcomes is not present as it was in the original movement. However, the positive diversity focus is alone no guarantee to equal rights or treatment in education or in society from the point of view of a marginalised person, in the context of multicultural education often someone who is perceived as an immigrant and/or racialised as non-white (see also Kandaswamy, 2007).

When I studied discourses on multicultural education in Finnish teacher education, I found that among the teacher educators, a liberal multicultural education approach was the most dominant. In the liberal approach they were positive towards diversity and understanding differences. The liberal approach differs from a critical approach in the sense that it does not take power issues and unequal structures into account. This means that a liberal multicultural educator can sometimes unintentionally reproduce stereotypes or for example hierarchies of "primitive" and "civilised" people.

In Finnish teacher education there was also to some extent a conservative approach to multicultural education, reinforcing a construction of us on one side and the immigrants on the other side, and articulating multiculturalism as a challenge. Both the conservative and liberal approach risk to over-use "culture" (Gorski, 2016) as an explaining factor for things that would need a more intersectional lens. It meant for example describing "multicultural" schools as having more problems, when the "problems" might in fact relate to social class or other marginalising factors, and not "culture".

"Culture" and "cultural difference" also risk being hidden ways for talking about race (see also Lentin, 2014). Race is a historically, politically and socially constructed category, but is still made relevant everywhere in the world, also in Finland. Finnishness is still very much connected to being white (Krivonos, 2021; Lappalainen 2009), which is something that has been pointed out and problematised in both research (see for example Juva & Holm, 2017) and antiracist activism (see for example the work of Ruskeat Tytöt Media) in recent years. In my research this was seen for example in how teacher educators mentioned visible difference (from whiteness) as a factor that implied the existence of diversity or multiculturalism, in contrast to Finns. It was also seen at the school level in how the pupils talked about one another as either "Finns" or "refugees", depending on if one was being racialised as non-white and/or speaking another first language than Finnish, and/or having a migrant background in the family – compared to being white, speaking Finnish as a first language and having ancestors from Finland.

As other research has shown, it matters if you are considered a Finn or not in how easily you get employed (Ahmad, 2020; Krivonos, 2021), how easily you find housing (FRA, 2018), how easily you get stopped by the police (Keskinen et al., 2018), how you get treated in school (Halme et al., 2017) and how you get encouraged to continue to higher education (Kurki, 2019; Non-Discrimination ombudsman, 2020). This means that it makes a difference if you are seen as a Finn or not during your school years. It also implies that all means that are taken regarding integration of people who migrate to Finland, whether called multicultural education or something else, should actively strive to disrupt this kind of dichotomy of Finns and immigrants, as well as the structural injustices that those perceived as non-Finns encounter. For this there is a need to talk openly about racism in all its shapes, listen to the voices of those concerned (see also Alemanji, 2021), and change practices accordingly. This is why I argue for an explicitly antiracist stance within multicultural education (see also Nieto, 2018), and the field of integration.

In my thesis I ask us to re-articulate Finnishness so that everybody can be included, as well as to always, in every encounter and every policy text, apply an intersectional and dynamic view of identity. This means that we remember that as much as I belong to some, or differ from some, norms in society; as much as I belong to many groups and contexts; as much as I can develop and change from one time to another; as much does also the one I might encounter in one certain circumstance with the etiquette of "newcomer", "immigrant" or "refugee".

Another main implication of my thesis, and of most critical educational approaches with the aim of promoting social justice in education, is that good intentions are not enough (Gorski, 2008) and that everyone is complicit with the unequal structures, and thus it is our responsibility to critically analyse what we are doing to disrupt them. This critical approach was also present in Finnish teacher education, but to a smaller extent than the liberal approach.

Doing critical self-reflection means asking questions such as: How am I giving space for somebody less privileged than myself, not only as a side actor or a "resource of diversity" but as an equal? How am I actively resisting racism (and other forms of oppression) taking place in the institutions I am a part of? How am I making others realise these issues also when it means being a killjoy?

As an educator, it means articulating both oneself and students of all ages as agents for social justice. It means providing them with critical glasses with which they can see the world, and understand how the world looks different depending on with what features and in what

circumstances you enter it (see also Ahmed, 2007), and then from that position question these inequalities and ask for change. It means saying out loud that the ideal of "everybody is equal" is not yet realised in Finnish education or society. It means providing space for the students to tell when they encounter injustices, and together envision how to resist them. It means always examining own materials, interpretations, explanations and practices with these glasses and being prepared for getting challenged.

It means being prepared to admit own mistakes and apologize when being unintentionally normative. Or feeling guilt and shame at times when realising one's own privilege and blindness towards certain oppression that one is not personally touched by (see also Kishimoto, 2018). In the case of Finland and multicultural education, if being racialised as white oneself, it especially means understanding how central whiteness is as a norm and privilege – and how to use it constructively. Being an agent for social justice means getting out of one's comfort zone and questioning one's own habits and practices together with others. It is not the easy educational recipe we sometimes would like there to be, but if we want to get closer to the Finnish educational ideal of "everybody's equal", it is the only way forward.

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