

Symposium: Inclusion and special needs education for immigrant students in the Nordic countries

Discussant

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Introduction

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The topic for AERA 2024 is Dismantling Racial Injustice and Constructing Educational Possibilities: A Call to Action. The call for a global conversation on race, racism, and its redress is long overdue for the world's largest education research organization. In other words, the call invites to critical conversations around attempts towards inclusion. The call asks us to address considerations that must be taken up in order to adequately support *education for all* within the various geopolitical regions.

Many attempts have been made seeking to attain educational equity, without success. In 2015, one more major step has been taken globally when UN realised moment towards 17 sustainable goals, and sustainable goal 4 is focusing on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (UN, 2022). If we look at the term education for all, there is no doubt that we mean all students and it is about to making sure that no one is left behind (Ainscow, 2021). Moreover, education for all means equity, and for us equity is linked to inclusive education meaning that every learner matters and matters equally.

However, according to Ainscow (2021; 2021a) inequity in education has increased which results in further disadvantaging those with an immigrant background who have fled their country of origin arriving in Nordic countries and other regions. Here, it is useful to remind

the reader that striving to embrace equity in education for, all especially in relation to multiculturalism, increased from as early as 1971. There are two reasons for this increase. First, the immigration and integration policies have intensified in the Nordic countries since the 1970s. Sweden was the first of the four countries to develop an explicit integration policy in 1974. Denmark followed in 1998, Finland in 1999, Iceland at 2000 and Norway in 2004 (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2018; Torslev & Børsch, 2017). According to the report by Torslev & Børsch (2017), the number of asylum seekers soared in 2015 and 2016 in all the Nordic countries. For example, in Iceland 10.8% of the total population were immigrants (Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2018). Sweden, Norway, and Finland were among the top five receivers of refugees in all of Europe (Torslev & Børsch, 2017). In 2022 the situation dramatically changed due to war in Ukraine. According to statistic from UNHCR (2022) the number of Ukrainian refugees is approximately 41519 in Norway, 50692 in Finland, 2239 in Iceland, 38538 in Denmark and 50 000 in Sweden. A greater part of those are below the age of 18. The arrival of a relatively large number of refugees, made it necessary to find proper modes of organization for reception and also implicated the necessity of reforming educational approaches (Bunar et al., 2021; Egeberg, 2019; Egeberg & Fulland, 2017; Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2018; Fandrem et al, 2021; Svendsen, 2021).

Furthermore, labour migration along with continued family reunification and people seeking asylum has largely increased (Torslev & Børsch, 2017). It means that the proportion of teachers working in preschools and schools which have more than 10% minority-language pupils is higher than the OECD global average (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training NDET, 2019). Despite Nordic countries' attempts to realise inclusion within the educational systems, teachers still see students with immigrant background to be at a pedagogical "disadvantage" (Hilt, 2016). Moreover, there is substantial evidence that the teaching practices adopted for this group of students are often considered irrelevant and inappropriate; and systems still have a long way to go when it comes to social adaptation and multicultural teaching (Goth & Kjelsvik, 2020; Gunnþórsdóttir et al., 2018).

Such inadequacies in teaching practices contribute to the performance gap between minority and majority students (Hilt, 2016; Goth & Økland, 2018). Students with immigrant background face higher barriers and lack sufficiently adapted education throughout their learning journey, which may contribute to a high rate of dropout from upper secondary education. (Bakken & Elstad, 2012; Opheim et al., 2013; Statistics Norway, 2022; Wiborg et al., 2011).

The OECD (2019) points to poorer education performance outcomes among students with immigrant backgrounds compared to those with non-immigrant backgrounds. For example, in Denmark, of the students who finished compulsory school in 2005, 13% of immigrants enrolled in the general programme had not completed the programme seven years later. For those enrolled in vocational educational training (VET), 62% had not completed the programs within the same time span. For non-immigrants, the rates were 9% (general programme) and 42% (VET) while for second-generation immigrants they were 11% (general programme) and 59% (VET). In Finland, early leavers from education and training (only basic education) included 14% of foreign origin (18% for boys and 11% for girls), compared to 7% of those from the host population (8% and 4 % respectively) (Official Statistics of Finland, 2020). In Sweden, 59.7% of immigrant students completed their school with a leaving certificate, compared to 78.2 % non-immigrant students (Torslev & Børsh, 2017). In Norway, 19% of pupils—nearly 1 in 5—have an immigrant background, a proportion that has more than doubled since 2004 (Statistics Norway, 2022). The data shows that 45% of immigrant students had dropped out VET, compared to 28% of non-immigrant students (Torslev & Børsh, 2017).

While some attention has been paid to the multicultural aspects of the educational systems, the implementation of special needs education (SNE) for those students have largely been neglected. The Nordic countries education systems does currently offer students with an immigrant background some special support in education, varying from introductory classes to supplementary language training (Bunar et al., 2021; Rosnes & Rossland, 2018). However, the research conducted so far in Nordic countries on SNE for students with immigrant background have been absent. A few studies point out that in practice those students are at risk of not being identified, or "over-identified" and placed in segregated settings even if they do not have specific difficulties/diagnoses. As such, the biggest risk for this group of students is the risk of exclusion (Bunar et al., 2021).

It's surprising why under the view of inclusion and vision of education for all, countries have overlooked the issue of SNE and have not provided participation and high-quality learning for all immigrant students, especially for those with special educational needs (SEN).

A broad consensus exists that a significant number of students with SEN leave school with no worthwhile academic, learning, or social qualifications. Kalahati et al. (2020) argue that for immigrant students with SEN it takes longer time to get into and complete their upper secondary studies. In addition, learning difficulties, limited linguistic skills, and inadequate

support influence the transition outcomes into the upper secondary education stream (Kalahati et al., 2020). Kalahati et al. (2020) indicate that various educational practices do not recognise enough the heterogeneity of students and can therefore be limitative and exclusive. Olsen (2021) claims that the space for diversity seems to be shrinking. Hausstätter and Vik (2021) expressed similar claims pointing at the increasing tendency of emphasizing human capabilities, and thus marginalizing students with SEN from equal participation in societal activities.

Based on this summary review, it is timely to repeat that ongoing tendencies challenge the core idea of inclusion that guarantees education for all. As such, inclusion and SNE for immigrant students represent a critical social aspect withing a society's social justice with an equalised and active citizenry (Ainscow, 2021). It is clear, that we need to transform our entire educational systems to build an inclusive culture and make education a space where every learner is given fair conditions, where all learn to live together and to value differences and to learn from each other. Therefore, the focus of this symposium is inclusion and SNE specifically for immigrant students, both of which should be seen in relation to each other in the symposium`s context.

It is our hope that this symposium will help reignite conversations about what inclusion is and should be not only in the Nordic countries, but also around the world.

Norway:

1) Towards inclusive language education for immigrant children in Norwegian schools: a translanguaging-driven perspective

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The purpose of this research is to highlight an intrinsic albeit somewhat obscured connection between inclusive language education policy and practice in Norway and the recent scholarship on translanguaging. The latter has been conceptualized as a theoretical framework for understanding multilinguals and multilingualism and as a pedagogical theory and practice that caters for the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students worldwide. Though the focus is on Norwegian schools, the study also draws on translanguaging theory and research in a variety of educational contexts around the world, with the aim of examining the

discourse on translanguaging as an inclusive pedagogy that valorises multilingual students' linguistic resources and practices in the classroom.

Norway, similar to other Nordic countries, has always been a multilingual society. According to the most recent statistics, close to 19% of the Norwegian population has an immigrant background (Statistics Norway, 2022). The number clearly indicates current linguistic and cultural diversity among students in the Norwegian educational system.

Both international and Norway-based research documented that immigrants and immigrant children struggle both academically and socially (e.g., Portes & Rumbaut, 2005; Nieto 2010; Özerk & Kerchner, 2014). Considering a paramount role that language plays in learning, socialization, cognition, identity formation, and communication, it is useful to reflect on the way minority language students' linguistic resources are perceived, valorised and utilized in (language) education in Norway. In this regard, the study argues for the tenets of the translanguaging framework to be integrated in the discourse on minority language students' right to receive high-quality language education that is adapted to their needs, abilities, and aspirations. The right to receive *adapted language education* is the key principle of inclusive language education policy and practice in Norway. The upshot of Norway-based research is that translanguaging-driven beliefs and practices are present in Norwegian classrooms. Building on these beliefs and practices through collaborative research, teacher education and teacher professional development courses may help steer language education in Norway towards more inclusive and responsive pedagogy and, eventually, policy. The study adds to the growing body of research that provides the impetus for adopting the translanguaging-driven perspective on inclusive language education as a dynamic process of addressing and responding to immigrant students' diverse needs. The translanguaging framework with its cogent theoretical core and ample international classroom-based empirical support as well as its concern for and focus on minoritized student populations, needs to be fully taken into account by educational policymakers, teachers, and teacher educators in Norway and elsewhere as a sign of the paradigm shift in our understanding of language practices and ideologies in classrooms and in society in general.

2) “Then we had to analyse a picture” - blind immigrant student in upper secondary school

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Inclusion is a key principle in the Norwegian school system. Nevertheless, there are still a large number of students who feel that they do not belong in the learning community. The primary focus of this research is the immigrant student's own experience of support when learning difficulties were linked to visual impairments. In this study, I follow the thematic life history of a single student, in order to go in depth on this student's narrative. The perspective of the student is highlighted based on the blind student's self-reporting through an in-depth interview. The narrative has been analysed based on sociological theory, primarily Bauman's theory of the Stranger and togetherness.

The results show that inadequate adaptation and poor proportional support from the teacher lead to a poor perception of inclusion. It may seem that the sensory impairment is a more important reason for this than the fact that the student is an immigrant. The blind immigrant student is treated as a Stranger and is unable to assume a student role involving learning-promoting encounters with fellow students or teachers. The impetus for completing upper secondary school is to achieve a grade transcript rather than the motivation that could have been provided by a safe and positive learning environment.

Finland

3) Inclusion and special needs support for immigrant students in Finland

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Research shows that immigrant students are overrepresented in special needs education (SNE)

and often misdiagnosed with learning disabilities when they, in fact, not yet are proficient in the language of instruction and assessment. The focus of this presentation is the intersection of SNE and education for students with immigrant background in Finland. The aim is to analyze how the Finnish compulsory education supports immigrant students and how, and if, the current structures of inclusion and educational support meet the special education needs of immigrant students. Further the objective is to explore why immigrant students do not perform academically as well as non-immigrant peers.

We describe the education system in Finland and educational support available for immigrant students from a social justice perspective (Gorski 2016; Gorski & Dalton, 2020). The aim of education in Finland is to provide equal opportunities and equal access to education free of charge for everyone regardless of gender, ethnic origin, age, ability, and place of residence (Basic Education Act 628/1998). This includes a three-tiered support system according to each student's needs (FNAE, 2014a; 2014b; 2022). However, immigrant students do not achieve as well as non-immigrant peers (Harju-Luukkainen & McElvany, 2018) despite their positive educational aspirations (Holmberg et al., 2018), and policies promoting educational support and inclusion.

The methodological part consists of a qualitative policy analysis (Einbinder, 2010) of documents and Education Acts such as the Basic Education Act (628/1998), Act on ECEC (540/2018) and the Act on Compulsory Education (1214/2020) as well as the national core curricula and policy documents stating the educational support for immigrant students. Research conducted in Finland on educational support, including S2, preparatory education and the three-tiered support for learning and schooling were also analyzed. A total of 17 policy documents and 32 studies and reports were analyzed.

The analysis shows that many aspects relating to policy and practice of immigrant students, such as preparatory education and S2 instruction are in place, and the three-tiered support system provide additional support. However, the structures and current measures are not enough to support fully the inclusion and learning of immigrant students with special needs. The reasons for immigrant students' poorer academic performances are complex but deficits in preparatory education and S2 instruction combined with inadequate teaching material and language tests are contributing factors. These shortfalls affect the possibilities for immigrant students to develop the language proficiency needed for further learning and studies.

This analysis identifies aspects in the Finnish educational system that do not support students with immigrant background to reach their full academic potential. The review of the literature

also show that teachers are unsure of how to teach students in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms (Harju-Autti & Sinkkonen, 2020), that there is a lack of well-developed pedagogical practice on language support (Harju-Autti et al., 2018). More research is needed in Finland on teaching immigrant students (Vigren et al., 2022). For a change to happen, this topic also needs to be addressed in teacher education programs.

4) Finnish Perspectives on Ethnicity and Special Educational Needs: An Intersectional Follow-Up Study.

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Disproportionate representation of ethnic minorities in special education services is a well-documented issue in many countries. For example, in the United States students with African-American, Hispanic or Indigenous backgrounds are more often than students with White/Caucasian placed in special educational services and there are differences also related to the type of disabilities found common for these ethnic groups (Anastasiou, Gardner & Michail, 2011). While it is clear, that cultural differences may cause significant challenges for both teachers as well as students to find a common ground in terms of educational expectations and school behavior, it is unlikely that ethnic background alone should be the main factor in relation to the special educational needs. This is in particular true with those young people who may have spent most of their lives in their current country as second (or 2.5G) generation immigrants, which on the other hand means that they are actually first generation naturalized residents.

In the Nordic countries, the special educational research has so far only occasionally focused on the students at the intersection of special educational needs and ethnic background. In this presentation the focus is more specifically on the stories of a group of immigrant-origin youth in Finland, who have been placed in Tier 3 (special support) level special education and they have completed their compulsory education as a student in special educational group. These young people have been participating in a larger follow-up study (see Kalalahti, Varjo & Jahnukainen, 2017) tracking the transitions of immigrant and native Finns from the end of the compulsory education to the upper secondary education. The aim of this study was to investigate the intersecting features of their special education placement by describing their own stories of their educational transitions and experiences of special education support.

Methodologically their stories were contrasted with two classmates from native-born families. This presentation describes the stories behind of these migrant young people's special education placement, educational transitions, and their own experiences of those services offered to them. As an outcome, intersection of ethnicity and special educational needs will be discussed especially within the themes of 'timing' and 'language proficiency' and highlight the need to develop and research the 'language aware' pedagogics in special needs education.

Sweden

5) Special education and the development of learning environments for immigrant students – descriptions by Swedish Special Needs Educators

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This study aims to deepen our knowledge about Special Needs Educators (SNEs), their work and the development of learning environments related to special needs education for immigrant students. The results are based on responses in a questionnaire directed to 483 Swedish SNEs. As a second step, free text responses from one of the questions in the questionnaire were extracted and analyzed through conventional content analysis. The results from the study indicate that SNEs are somewhat detached from the direct work with immigrant students. Instead, SNEs devote time to administration and supervision. The direct support is provided by tutors in the students' mother tongue, and class and subject teachers (Johansson, Klang & Lindqvist, 2021). When SNEs describe developments of learning environments for immigrant students at their schools, small groups and individual teaching for language learning appear to exist in parallel with general solutions (i.e., "one size fits all" approach) (Johansson, 2022). The results are discussed using Skrtic's (1991; 2005) concepts of bureaucracies and adhocracy in the school system. This is done to highlight opportunities as well as to unveil obstacles in the development of learning environments and in the school system in general. The obstacles in the development of learning environments are found in

special solutions, lack of efforts and unclear areas of responsibility, while successes are found in educating school staff and enhanced collaborations in joint professional work. The study also discusses to what extent the Nordic model (see Hanssen et al., 2021) characterized by an ambition to create democratic learning environments and inclusion, can be applied on the Swedish school system regarding special needs education for immigrant students.

6) School(s) for all?: Inclusion, special education and multilingualism at the intersection of disability and migration in Sweden.

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This study addresses the educational and social needs and rights of students with diverse backgrounds – in respect to first language (other than Swedish), ethnicity, culture and migration-status – enrolled in the Swedish school system. Disability Critical Race Theory in Education (DisCrit) is the framework used to examine policies and practices regarding inclusion. The concepts of *ableism*, the discrimination that results from regarding disability as negative and abnormal, and *linguicism*, the discrimination of languages seen as undesirable or of having a lower status (linguistically argued racism), are used to interrogate how education responds to migratory effects and how this response impacts on access to equitable education and for these groups. A School for All is the political vision that the Swedish education system welcomes all children and youth and that instruction is adapted for students' individual conditions. School(s) for all in the title indicates that there is an increasing trend to question the ideal of inclusion. To begin with, Sweden has long had different school forms and in addition, the organization of instruction for students with varying abilities and needs is increasingly based on different types of diagnoses and categorization.

The first part of this study will focus on disproportionality in relation to compulsory school for students with intellectual disability and migration background focusing on previous research and patterns in enrollment over time. The second part of the study deals with different aspects of language in relation to special needs education in the Swedish school

context. The study's last part will provide a description of the organization and practice in a 'resource school' and the emergence of new local practices. Together, these signs of discriminatory practices and hindering structures in the intersection of linguicism/racism/ethnicism and ableism reveal a pattern from the inside of school segregation. Disproportionality, disparities between policy and practice, and disregard of the importance of multilingual approaches in special education measures are presented. Diagnosis practices are a double-edge sword for segregating schools and the disproportionality reveals that misdiagnosis as well as 'missed diagnosis' seemingly occurs. Students do not receive multilingual classroom assistance and mother tongue instruction despite school policies and research advocating for such measures as successful routes for learning. This is an expression of disproportionality, namely, underrepresentation in receiving apt accommodations addressing the student group. This is due to persistent monocultural understandings that do not acknowledge the basic facts of heterogeneity in the student body and the assumed norm of Swedishness left uninterrogated will determine the response of the school system and increase ineffectiveness and inequality. The concluding discussion in this examination lays the groundwork for the emerging research field at the intersection of migration and disability in education.

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