Multicultural education as policy and praxis in Finland: Heading in a problematic direction?

L'éducation multiculturelle, politique et pratique en Finlande : Une voie problématique ?

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Multicultural education as policy and praxis in Finland: Heading in a problematic direction ?

Gunilla Holm & Jan-Erik Mansikka¹

Résumé

Dans cet article, nous nous penchons sur la mise en place d'une éducation multiculturelle sur le terrain et dans les textes officiels, en Finlande. Bien que l'immigration augmente chaque année, elle demeure bien moindre en comparaison à d'autres pays européens. Mais on parle beaucoup du multiculturalisme dans la société finlandaise comme dans les médias. Les programmes éducatifs officiels l'intègrent également et ce de manière quasi systématique. Toutefois de nombreux chercheurs affirment que les enseignants ne sont pas toujours bien préparés pour faire face à la diversité dans la classe. Dans notre contribution, nous confrontons les lois et les textes officiels en relation avec le multiculturalisme en pratiques dans l'éducation finlandaise, à partir notamment d'expériences d'enseignants stagiaires et des points de vue d'enseignants à propos du multiculturalisme. Nous suggérons à la fin de l'article que l'éducation finlandaise devrait pouvoir proposer davantage d'espaces de négociations et de rencontres pour promouvoir le dialogue interculturel.

Immigration is still a fairly new phenomenon in Finland. Immigration is also still of a very small scale compared to other European countries. Since it is a new phenomenon it is discussed much at all levels of society. In education some teachers are struggling with ethnically and linguistically diverse classrooms. The teacher education does not seem to always prepare teachers for teaching in culturally diverse classroom. Interestingly many argue that despite the unpreparedness at the practical level Finland has laws and a national curriculum that can be interpreted as very supportive of a multicultural education (Holm & Londen, 2010; Saukkonen, 2010). We are interested in exploring how supportive these laws and policies are and how they are played out in practice.

In this article we focus on the relationship between, on the one hand, laws and official documents regarding issues concerning multicultural education and, on the other hand, discriminatory practices, students' experiences of as well as pre-service and practicing teachers' conceptions about multicultural education in Finland. We lean on a discourse analysis of the rhetorical policy level including the national curriculum. This analysis is compared to empirical findings about students' experiences regarding multicultural and social justice issues as well as with practicing teachers' awareness and knowledge about multicultural issues in classroom settings.

1. The importance of multicultural education

Multicultural education in this context refers to a more critical multicultural education perspective focused on social justice, discrimination and structural changes as well as the infusion of cultural diversity issues in education (Sleeter & Grant, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Sleeter & Bernal, 2004). At the bottom of the realm of multicultural education is a philosophical dimension of encountering otherness, the relationship between the Self and Other, or with Us and Others. A problematization of this relationship is visible in postcolonial tradition, trying to formulate a theoretical perspective about how our understanding of differences and otherness is not a part of

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the natural order but rather a social construction. An important area of focus of this tradition is the sensitiveness to every form of social mechanisms that, in our own society, maintain and create differences and otherness (cf. Hall, 1999; Balibar, 2004).

Such a position claims, furthermore that subjects are constituted through the repression of the “Other”. It holds that we are always embedded in particular interpretative systems that, more or less, silently repress radical differences by not taking into account views that stand in contradiction to our own conceptions. As Popkewitz (2008) has argued, even the notion of cosmopolitanism can be seen reflecting a certain cultural ideology with a particular emancipation narrative that both includes and excludes. This implies that pondering what a cosmopolitan attitude in education might entail today, one also has to consider the limits of one’s own perspective. We have argued elsewhere that cosmopolitanism in education requires a pedagogy of suspension: openness towards exceptional situations as well as openness for re-reading one’s own cultural narrative (see Mansikka & Holm, 2011a).

It is possible to see translation from one language to another both as a metaphor and a real mechanism for recognition and mutual understanding – for ‘gifting’ oneself to the other – but translation is also always embedded in power relations. Just as language exists only in a plurality of languages, so humanity exists only in a plurality of cultures. There is no neutral translation from one language to another. All translation is immediately an interpretation. We must therefore also accept the polysemy at the bounds of every translation, openness towards potential new meanings opening up. This usually requires the art of compromise: to agree to work things out, suspend the difference of opinion, without judging difference by one test only (Scott-Baumann, 2010). We hold that this metaphor of translation is important for education – especially in the modern society permeated by globalization and plurality.

At the heart of multicultural education is thus a question of encountering others – within a plurality of views and values. This brings up another point to be made: We cannot look at questions concerning social justice and equality without looking at the institutions that mediate these values. The heart of the question is thus very much a matter of how the values of education are implemented in a productive way in our educational institutions. Paul Ricoeur has stressed the importance of interpersonal and institutional mediation in talking about development of human capacities. In an important sense politics is setting the stage for the achievement of human potentialities, or “without institutional mediation, individuals are only the initial drafts of human persons”. Their belonging to a political body is necessary for their flourishing as human beings (Ricoeur, 2000, p.10). Institutions and our public sphere mediate the way we encounter others.

2. The Finnish context in the light of multicultural education

The school system as well as the entire societal structure in Finland is based on the principles of equality and equity. This emphasis can also be seen in practice since the comprehensive school (grades 1-9) is entirely free of charge with free school meals, books, health care and school transportation. Especially students with special needs are provided with a variety of support already in early childhood education (Sahlberg, 2009) which contributes to that 99,7% of all children complete their basic education (National Board of Education, 2009). The school system is decentralized and nearly all children go to public schools since there are only a few private schools in Finland. The comprehensive school is not tracked and therefore there is no special education for the gifted. All students are expected to meet the standards of the comprehensive school.

The underlying values of equity and equality in Finland are said to lead to very small differences between schools. In other words the quality of education should be independent of where the students live. Schools should provide maximum opportunities for all students independent of socio-economic background (Darling-Hammond, 2009) or in fact school should compensate for

socio-economic differences and thereby eliminate the achievement gap between social classes. In fact, socio-economic class, ethnicity, gender and language are not crucial factors for overall school success but do have important consequences for some groups.

When migration to Finland started to grow in the 1980s there was already a tradition of minority rights. For example, Finland is a bilingual country with two parallel school systems in Finnish and Swedish. Finland also has two national churches (Lutheran and Russian Orthodox) as well as rights for the Sami indigenous group.

The number of immigrants has been small in Finland compared to many other European countries. It is not until very recently that migration was raised as a major political topic, i.e. in the government election in spring 2011. One party, *perussuomalaiset* (True Finns or the Finns today), increased their support in a very short time backed up by their main political message, which was to promote *Finnishness* and oppose migration. This has brought forth a much more deep-sited discussion on issues concerning multiculturalism and migration. It also brought forth something else. A great number of people in Finland who dislike cultural pluralism and modern globalized development became much more visible, participating in the political sphere. It also polarized the discussion about multiculturalism into a tension of *pro et contra*.

3. Multicultural education in Finland at the policy level

Since 1970's, the goal of internationalism and more recently multiculturalism has in one way or another been expressed in the national curricula of education. It is, however, only in recent years that a more systematic implementation of this area has been given priority. Today, the laws and policy documents in Finland are supportive of equality and equity in Finnish schools (Holm & Londen, 2010). In the constitutional law it states specifically that people cannot be treated differently based on sex, age, origin, language, religion, conviction, disability or based on another reason connected to the person (Constitution 731/1999 6 §). The law about equal treatment forbids in addition to the above discrimination based on "age, ethnicity or national origin, nationality, health... (and) sexual orientation" (Non-Discrimination Act 21/2004 6 §).

The core values providing the foundation for the national curriculum, include among other things multiculturalism, equality, human rights and democracy.

"The underlying values of basic education are human rights, equality, democracy, natural diversity, preservation of environmental viability, and the endorsement of multiculturalism. Basic education promotes responsibility, a sense of community, and respect for the rights and freedoms of the individual. The basis of instruction is Finnish culture, which has developed in interaction with indigenous, Nordic, and European cultures. In the instruction, special national and local attributes, the national languages, the two national churches, the Sámi as an indigenous people and national minorities must be taken into consideration. The instruction must also take into account the diversification of Finnish culture through the arrival of people from other cultures. The instruction helps to support the formation of the pupil's own cultural identity, and his or her part in Finnish society and a globalizing world. The instruction also helps to promote tolerance and intercultural understanding [...]. In the instruction, the diversity of learners is taken into consideration, and gender equality is promoted by giving girls and boys the ability to act on the basis of equal rights and responsibilities in society, working life, and family life. In basic education, instruction is nondenominational and politically neutral [...]. Basic education must also support each pupil's linguistic and cultural identity and the development of his or her mother tongue [...]. In order to ensure social continuity and build the future, basic education assumes the task of transferring cultural tradition from one generation to the next [...]. It is also the mission of basic education to create new culture" (Finnish National Board of Education 2004, section 2.1. and section 2.2.).

The national curriculum as shown through this excerpt is progressive from the standpoint of multicultural education. Various languages, minority groups, the indigenous population, gender and religion should all be part of the instruction which should also promote intercultural understanding and support students in their identity development. Hence, it pays attention to the individual and minority groups but also to the community. The national curriculum provides the value foundation and guidelines for schools, teachers and the instruction. It provides guidelines for what should be learnt in each grade but it is up to the teachers how they teach and assess the students. There are no standardized tests in the comprehensive school.

The national curriculum is very supportive of students with immigrant background. The instruction should take into account the students' background, reasons for immigration, duration in the country, language skills, etc. They should receive instruction in Finnish or Swedish as their second language and the schools can also offer mother tongue instruction for students with immigrant background. Students should be supported in becoming active participants not only in the Finnish language and cultural community but also in their mother tongue language and cultural community. However, the national curriculum does not provide specific guidelines for how these goals should be implemented in school. Furthermore the municipalities can receive extra funding for providing mother tongue instruction but are not mandated to offer mother tongue instruction for students with immigrant background.

Religion is taught in Finnish schools as a subject. Most of the students (93%) take the Evangelical Lutheran instruction (Statistics Finland, 2011), but if there are three students of another registered denomination, the school district has to provide them with instruction in their own religion. According to the national curriculum the aim is to strengthen students' religious identities by offering instruction in their own religion (National Core Curriculum for Basic education, 2004).

The constitution provides for a parallel but separate school system for the Swedish-speaking students because the country is bilingual. There are only minor differences between the two school systems, but the Swedish schools have, for example, their own university level teacher education and school materials. The curriculum is also very supportive of the Roma and according to the law (Constitution 731/1999, 17 §) the Roma have a right to their own language as well as to develop and maintain their own culture. The national curriculum states that "the instruction must promote knowledge of the Romany pupils' own history and language, as well as an awareness of Romanies as one of the important minorities in Europe and the entire world" (section 6.2). For the indigenous Saami students "the school must provide the pupils with conditions conducive to developing healthy self-esteem so that they will be able to preserve a Saami identity without being absorbed into the main population" (section 6.1). Saami students living in the Saami home regions can receive their education in one of the three Saami languages or receive Saami mother tongue instruction.

An interesting aspect of the national curriculum is however that the bilingual Swedish-Finnish speaking students are not included in the parts discussing multilingualism and multiculturalism even though a large proportion of them are clearly bilingual and bicultural. The Saami and the Roma are not either included in the discussion about multicultural education and bilingualism. This omission creates a border or a chasm between the existing minority groups and the more newly arrived students with immigrant background.

Overall there is much support in the laws and policies for students with migrant and minority background in education. From a distance all students are treated equally well, but we want to explore how the policies compare to the practice.

4. Challenges to the Finnish school as a school with a multicultural curriculum

Since 2001 Finland has been known for doing well in the PISA evaluations in literacy, mathematics and natural sciences (Hautamäki & al., 2008). In 2009 Finland was second best among the OECD countries in both literacy and mathematics and best in natural sciences (Sulkunen & al., 2010). Hence, it is clear that Finnish students continue to be very knowledgeable in many ways. However, all students in Finland do not do equally well. Even if immigrant students do better than immigrant students in other countries they still do less well than ethnic Finnish students (Hautamäki et al., 2006). With increasing immigration today it will be a major challenge for Finland to maintain their PISA performance unless new and practicing teachers quickly learn to work well with immigrant students and not view them as an extra burden. In this context we point to five areas, closely related to multicultural education, that tend to be glossed over in the discussion about Finland and PISA. We will examine (a) teachers' and pre-service teachers' attitudes towards cultural diversity, (b) existing socio-cultural differences in schools, (c) education of traditional minorities, (d) discrimination and social exclusion, and (e) religion and plurality.

■ *Teachers' and pre-service teachers' attitudes towards cultural diversity*

There are some empirical studies about how teachers and pre-service teachers in Finland relate to multicultural issues in education. On a general level, teachers in Finland are well educated with Master's degrees, but little preparation is done for working with changing and challenging socio-cultural issues. Over all, teachers tend to think that it is challenging and difficult to teach students of different ethnic backgrounds (Talib, 2005). Teachers tend to be reluctant to change their own ways of teaching even if the classroom composition changes. The fact that students can get home language instruction as well as instruction in their own religion take care of the multicultural education aspects according to the teachers (Soilamo, 2008). This view was also supported in a study by Mansikka and Holm (2011b) where practicing teachers were supportive of multicultural education at a rhetorical level but unwilling to change their own teaching. In addition teachers adopted a colorblind approach, which contributes to the unwillingness of schools to deal with racism, and discrimination.

In a study made by Jokisalo, Kukkonen and Simola (2009) about the pre-service teachers' (N=197) conceptions about multicultural issues shows that the majority of the teachers in the eastern regions of Finland have little experience with students with international background. The majority of the students nevertheless think there should be more issues related to multiculturalism present in their studies. Regarding what multicultural education is about, the majority also held going into the "characters of different cultures" as topical, something the researchers saw as problematic and one-dimensional. The topic of racism was not particularly relevant, but here was a noticeable gender difference – the female students were, at large, much more willing to explore the themes of multiculturalism and racism than the males.

In another ongoing study of 5th year Master level teacher education students we found that there is a lot of ignorance and misconceptions regarding multicultural education. Primary school pre-service teachers were somewhat knowledgeable about the impact a culturally diverse classroom might have on their own teaching. Secondary and upper-secondary pre-service teachers were ignorant about the concept multicultural education and were unaware of how aspects such as ethnicity, social class and gender might matter in teaching and learning. Hence, no quick change with regard to teachers being knowledgeable about multicultural education is foreseeable in the near future. Teacher education is not keeping par with educational policy (Holm & Talib, 2012).

■ ***Existing socio-cultural differences in schools***

There are some remarkable socio-cultural differences in Finnish schools. The gender differences in literacy are the largest in Finland of all the OECD countries. This means that since Finland places at the top in literacy (just after Korea but not with a statistically significant difference) the girls' literacy skills are extremely good and the boys' are mediocre. Gender differences also intersect with language difference. For example, the differences between girls and boys in literacy in the Swedish-speaking Åland Islands region are the biggest in the OECD. Overall a high proportion of the girls place at the highest levels while an unproportionate number of boys place at the lowest levels. Basically the girls are one and a half school years ahead of the boys in their literacy skills. The gender difference in mathematics to the boys' favor is only three points while in natural sciences the girls outperformed the boys with 15 points (Sulkunen & al., 2010). Hence, especially the boys' literacy skills have to improve in order for Finland to provide an equal education for all.

Interestingly the Swedish-speaking students in Finland perform less well than the Finnish speaking majority students in all three areas measured in PISA. These results are somewhat unexpected since there appear to be no substantial social class or cultural differences between Swedish and Finnish speaking students. There are big differences between Finnish and Swedish speaking students in all areas (Harju-Luukkainen, 2010). This leads to the question: what do these differences depend on? So far there are only speculative answers. For example, over 60% of the students in the Swedish speaking schools in the metropolitan Helsinki region come from bilingual homes (Kovero and Londen, 2009) and many have fairly weak Swedish skills which might have an impact on achievement. The achievement gap in, for example, math is shown in a recent study to exist already by third grade and increases significantly by sixth grade. In some areas in math Swedish-speaking students are three years behind in sixth grade. One explanation given for this is that special education is not offered to students to the same degree as in Finnish-speaking schools (Niemi and Metsämuuronen, 2010).

Childhood poverty is increasing in Finland and the gap between the poor and the wealthy is increasing; as such fourteen percent of the children are poor (Academy of Finland, 2011). This has serious implications for teachers and teaching, but in our on-going study we found that pre-service teachers do not consider social class important for their future work. Many actually think it is best not to know anything about a student's socio-economic background in order to avoid being biased. The belief shared in Finnish society is that social class does not affect a child's learning and educational opportunities nor should it affect teaching in any way (Holm & Talib, 2012).

To believe that social class is of no importance because education is free in Finland is an ignorant view. It is not possible to offer a fair education by offering the same opportunities and teaching to students with very different base opportunities and support, or as bell hooks (2000) states: class matters. For example, Rohstein (2004) argues that middle class children have a much larger vocabulary than children raised by poor parents living on public assistance. These difficulties are recognized within early childhood education in Finland but mostly not by the comprehensive school teachers. The recommendation by the Advisory Board for Early Childhood Education and Care (2008) is for early childhood education to diminish social class differences between children.

■ ***Education of traditional minorities in Finland***

In Finland there are about 10,000 Romas but the Roma children have not done very well in school. As mentioned the national curriculum is very supportive of Roma children but the reality is different. The Romas will take Finnish or Swedish as their mother tongue in school but since 1995 it has been possible for schools to offer Romani as mother tongue (Basic Education Act, 628/1998) both in the pre-school and the comprehensive school if there are four Roma students who want it. Finland has been criticized for not offering the Romani language more extensively to Roma students but part of the problem has been shortage of qualified teachers and teaching

materials. As the Finnish National Board of Education (2010) states : *“Cultural differences, the teachers’ limited knowledge of Roma culture and inadequate co-operation between the home and school mean that Roma children discontinue comprehensive education more often than children from the majority population. Traditionally, the Roma families have assumed strong responsibility on early childhood care by themselves, which may have resulted in insufficient school preparedness (e.g. “semi-lingualism” and inadequate fine motor skills have been observed). Hence, for many a reason, the children’s schooling is troubled from the very outset. Schools have not always been able to pay enough attention to these problems.”*

Unfortunately this has led to Roma children being disproportionately often placed in remedial education especially during the two first years and also to that the children drop out. Roma children also experience frequent bullying and name calling in school. Overall the Roma culture is almost invisible in school which means that the majority students are ignorant about Romas and their culture. Instead majority students’ views are based on stereotypes and prejudice (Junkala & Tawah, 2009).

However, according to Rodell Olgaç (2006) Finland has in comparison to other Nordic countries a longer tradition of cooperation between the Roma and governmental agencies like the school. While the emphasis was on assimilation the first half of the twentieth century the focus is now more on supporting the Roma children and their cultural identities.

Finland is one of the few European countries with an indigenous population. As mentioned the national curriculum is supportive of the Sami students learning their language and culture as well as learning in their language. The situation in the Sami home areas has improved during the last decade and basic education is now provided in the three Sami languages in all the home areas. The situation is more problematic for the Sami students living elsewhere. The Sami languages can be taught as mother tongue or as a foreign language in any school with enough Sami students but the municipality does not have an obligation to do so. However, it is estimated that most of the Sami children living outside the four municipalities constituting the Sami home region do not receive instruction in the Sami languages (Lauhamaa, Rasmus & Tupakka, 2006). This constitutes a problem since 70% of Sami children are living outside the home areas. An additional difficulty has been the shortage of Sami speaking subject matter teachers. There is also a shortage of textbooks in Sami. According to the national curriculum Sami children should be taught Sami history but Sami history is not listed as a subject in the curriculum nor are there history textbooks in Sami (*Rätten till delaktighet och inflytande för samiska barn och ungdomar*, n.d.). The Finnish textbooks used in school do not contain more than rudimentary information about the Samis. Consequently it is difficult to implement the national curriculum and to give the Sami students the kind of education they are entitled to.

■ **Discrimination and social exclusion**

The integration of immigrant students into the Finnish school faces severe challenges from the majority students as Souto (2011) found in her recent study. For majority Finnish students (7-9th grade) to be included in the school community they cannot openly socialize with students with an immigrant background. What is considered *normal Finnishness* is determined by being born by Finnish parents, being white and representing Finnishness also by their everyday actions meaning sticking to other Finns and not challenging what’s considered Finnish. Hence, the division between them and us are actively maintained and reinforced by students, and this division is if considered necessary enforced by using violence.

Souto argues that ‘everyday racism’ is present in the Finnish school and that the school refuses to deal with it. For example, the difficulties the immigrant students experience in school are blamed on cultural differences and on that the immigrant students have to adjust to the ways of the majority population. In other words, the racism students experience is classified instead as cultural differences. The existing eurocentrism and prevalent prejudice against, for example, Russians and Somalis are ignored. Even though in the national curriculum integration is the policy, in practice the assimilation approach often dominates.

Students with immigrant background are a risk group with regard to bullying and discrimination. While about a third of all students have experienced some kind of discrimination, 65% of students with immigrant background have experienced name-calling in school. Overall social exclusion, name-calling and other forms of discrimination is a problem in school. Even physical violence such as pushing and hitting is experienced by as many as 25-30% of students from minority groups. School is the place where young people most frequently experience discrimination. The reason for discrimination can be anything - looks, behavior, school performance or family background. Anything that is considered different can evoke the bullying. Importantly students who encounter discrimination in school do open up to parents and friends much more often than to teachers about the problem. In addition, students even report occasional discrimination by teachers. Students perceive teachers as unable to change the situation even if they try. This lies at the heart of the problem with discrimination. It is not enough that individual teachers address the problems. It is the school culture and structure that need to be changed in order to accomplish a long-lasting effect (Kankkunen, Harinen, Nivala & Tapio, 2010).

The group most vulnerable in school is the students with disabilities or long-term illnesses. Of this group about two-thirds have found themselves treated in hostile ways or excluded from the group (Kankkunen & al., 2009). This problem needs urgently to be addressed because a new law about basic education has been adjusted so that it requires students needing special education services to be much more integrated into the regular classroom than before. The law will shift the responsibility for special education more to the regular classroom teachers. One of the goals is for special needs students to be as integrated as possible into the regular classroom activities. The special education teacher will serve more as a consultant and support to the classroom teachers. However, currently there is not much space for gifted students to be challenged and to grow in the Finnish school system. This is a weakness of the Finnish system, but a more differentiated in class system without actual ability grouping or tracking is a possibility that would violate the principles of equality and equity.

Likewise sexual and gender minorities are frequently bullied by other students but also by teachers and staff in school. The teachers are often complicit by not intervening in name-calling or by refusing to talk about related issues. The ignoring and thereby silencing of gender and sexual minorities in teaching and school overall is experienced as very difficult by students. The students' identities are nullified in this way (Huotari, Törmä & Tuokkola, 2010). Social exclusion and labeling are common forms of discrimination against students who are not heterosexual (Aaltonen, Joronen & Villa, 2009). For 79% of sexual minority students prejudicial encounters is the typical way of being treated in school (Kankkunen & al., 2010).

■ ***Religion and plurality***

The Finnish school as an institution is built upon the Evangelical Lutheran tradition. Lutheran values saturate the school and the curriculum despite the official encouragement of religious tolerance and the students' rights to religious instruction in their own religion. According to the national curriculum the aim is to strengthen students' religious identities by offering instruction in their own religion as long as there are three students of the same denomination (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2004). Hence, religion instruction takes place sometimes in very small groups, but most importantly each religious group forms its own instructional group. Hence, separating students into different religion classes means that students do not get to know other religions very well. Even though students are taught about other religions to some extent in grade three or four they do not get the practical experience of discussing issues with others who believe differently. Questions can be raised about whether this system is good for integration and an economically sustainable system in the long run with increased migration. In addition, there are very few certified teachers in minority religions and very little teaching material. Hence, there are some serious questions about the quality of education in these classes (Aaltonen & al., 2009).

Multicultural education is thought of as teaching students to be more open and accepting of others and differences, but the separate instructional classes in religion segregate between

different religious groups. Even though students are supposed to learn something about other religions within their own instructional groups, they rarely encounter students with a different belief system in discussions of beliefs and values. In a study of different religion instructional group most of the children participating in the minority religion groups had no or very little knowledge about what other students from other groups did during their classes or what they believed in (Zilliacus & Holm, forthcoming).

5. Discussion

Multicultural education and social justice issues in education are closely related. The national curriculum as well as the laws is supportive of both multicultural education and a socially just system. But as we have seen, multicultural education is not a simple and transparent concept – it can be interpreted in various ways and requires implementation in practice. The way multicultural education is defined in the national curriculum in Finland, does not necessary provide for a socially just educational system. Multicultural education is somewhat narrowly defined as focusing mostly on the ethnicity, languages and religious orientations of students with immigrant background. The laws take a broader view by specifically forbidding discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, language, disability or other aspects tied to the person but bullying and unfair treatment occur. And even though the laws as well as the national curriculum treat the national minorities, the indigenous population and the language minorities respectfully, the problems related to these groups, however, are at times not dealt with sincerely in practice at the school level.

Now, we argue that there is an important relationship between the narrow definition of multicultural education in the national curriculum and the challenges we have outlined in this article with regard to multicultural education. In these challenges lie the consequences of the fact that the national curriculum does not include the majority population in its policy on multicultural education. Multicultural education is seen as reserved for students of immigrant background even though integration should be a two-way process according to the new integration law (Integration Act 1386/2010)

This has consequences at the practical level. Due to that the majority students are never required to learn about others or think reflexively about themselves the Finnish ways are not questioned or examined. This leads to a situation where everything that differs from the majority population's ways of acting and thinking is considered deviant and problematic. In other words the majority students are never challenged with regard to their own prejudiced, stereotypical, racist, sexist and classist ways of thinking about others.

One could say that even if Finland does not have a history as a colonial power it nevertheless, from a cultural perspective, is part of the colonial world order. As such, the one-way thinking about multicultural education is an expression of this heritage, as well as an obstacle for multicultural education to develop in Finland. This leads to a school system where students' achievement might be high (as measured, for example, by PISA) but it is a system that creates a strong "us" (the majority population) and "them" (those who are different from the majority) division. Hence it is not a system that could be considered as offering a multicultural or socially just education.

In discussing our theoretical framework we claimed the importance of the congruence between interpersonal and institutional mediation when it comes to education. We also stressed the importance of how overarching values of education are implemented in a productive way in educational institutions. We have seen that, in relation to multicultural education, there is not enough hermeneutical sensitivity in encountering difference and otherness in our educational institutions, which leads to polarisation and not challenging our comfort-zones.

We think the basic question about multicultural education is about taking the Others better into account in an ethical way. A two-way integration implies that we are capable of recognizing Others in our ongoing practice, that we become capable of forming “shared” concepts and social institutions together with others. It also requires that we can suspend our “convictions” and instead turn socially productive by making possible that concepts can be formed and sometimes changed in an ongoing process (see Roman-Lagerspetz, 2011). Educational institutions have a very central role in creating a space for this. Our educational institutions could therefore function as a model for a cosmopolitan attitude towards education, i.e. as having a reflexive attitude towards otherness, which also implies re-reading our own cultural narrative (see Mansikka & Holm, 2011a). Both the majority and minority populations have to examine their own stereotypes and prejudicial thinking. A critical and reflexive approach to multicultural education is thus necessary in order to create a just educational system.

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