Nordic State Education in between Racialization and the Possibilities of Anti-Racist Strategy

Introduction

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Nordic state education *in between* racialization and the possibilities of anti-racist strategy: introduction

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Faced with accumulated migratory histories as well as the racialization of minoritized migrant and indigenous populations, educational institutions are facing the challenge to find ways to respond. In particular, the recalibration of forms of racialization has become inextricable from educational policymaking and everyday school life in Nordic educational institutions. Education researchers in Nordic countries have pointed to racialized exclusion being a formative experience of minoritized, racialized and indigenous students, in spite of their experiences still being neglected in educational systems, personal encounters and academic knowledge production. The task for the education researchers then is to keep examining and scrutinizing these educational moments through which racialized inequalities appear and come to matter.

With this urgency and necessity at stake, the special issue State Education in between Racialization and the Possibilities of Anti-Racist Strategy addresses the processes of racial formation in Nordic education. Specifically, this special issue asks in what ways the processes of racialization play out in compulsory public (primary and lower secondary) state-education practices in the Nordic states, and in what ways these processes are being contested, challenged and responded to, both historically and contemporarily. The articles in this special issue predominantly use the concept of racialization, in order to document and analyse the ongoing processes through which phenotypical/cultural, visible or audible differences are figured into frameworks of explanation, action and affect (Andreassen & Vitus, 2015; Essed, 1991; Lentin, 2020; Zembylas, 2015). Using racialization in this special issue, we highlight that categories such as race are not fixed. We aim to emphasize the processual formation in which race is made, unmade, marked or unmarked as well as through which it comes to matter and to whom in relation to different identity categories, be it gender, class, language, religion or sexuality as they form in educational practices.

Over the past decades, there has been a growing scholarly interest in exploring the processes of racialization, formations of whiteness and anti-racism in the Nordic countries (Danbolt & Myong, 2018; Hervik, 2018; Keskinen & Andreassen, 2017; Loftsdóttir et al., 2016; Lundström & Teitelbaum, 2017). Contrary to the dominating discourse of Nordic countries being culturally, religiously and racially homogeneous national communities, Nordic states have a long history of racial, ethnic, cultural and religious diversity, not least embedded in the contested and complicit legacies of colonialism (Loftsdóttir et al., 2016). Scholars have pointed to ‘always-there’ indigenous communities (Fur, 2016; Keskinen et al., 2009) and immigrations to the regions that date back way further than the contemporary waves of immigration (Schmidt, 2015) and postcolonial formations of racialized exclusions (Buchardt & Ydesen, 2018). Although forms of racialized exclusions have a long history in Nordic states, scholars have also pointed to emerging new forms of racializations, particularly related to migrations from the Middle East and Asia (e.g. guest migration movements in the 1960s and 1970s), refugee migrations and migrations from Eastern European post-socialist states after the 1990s, as well as after the expansion of the EU in the 2000s. In these migratory contexts, the more subtle forms of racism and racialization have been emerging. These forms have been explored under the notions of ‘cultural racism’ or ‘new racism’, in which categories such as ‘cultural difference’, ‘ethnic minorities’ and ‘Muslims’ came to point to ways of life deemed incompatible with Nordic state values.

Due to the waves of labour migration approximately since the late 1960s, the inclusion of migrants became the centre of political strategies for integration and public discourse. It is since then, also, that migration and perceived ideas of cultural difference became figured as an ‘educational problem’ (Buchardt, 2017, p. 68) as policies for education directed towards migrant children were formulated across the Nordic countries (Borevi, 2014; Stokke, 2019). In this context, the research in education in the Nordic states has approached educational institutions as part of the formation of the national welfare states, through which racialized subjectivities, identities and visions of belonging to the nation are being produced (Anis, 2005; Buchardt & Ydesen, 2018;
Hänninen et al., 2019; Harlap & Riese, 2014; Heino & Kvijarvi, 2013; Kokkinen et al., 2015; Kuronen et al., 2021; Li & Buchardt, 2021 fc.; Moldenhawer & Øland, 2013). Particularly, the emphasis has been on racialized student subjectivities (Chinga-Ramirez, 2017; Fylkesnes, 2018; Hummelstødt et al., 2021; Khawaja, 2017; Lagermann, 2013; Li, 2021 fc.; Staunæs, 2004) and the appearance of racialized categories such as 'foreign language student', 'bilingual students' (Gilliam, 2018), 'multilingual students' or the increasingly used and overlapping term 'Muslim students' (Buchardt, 2016). In parallel, researchers have examined how the processes of racialization and structural inequalities can be dismantled through education. Critical pedagogies have been approached through the lens of ‘multicultural education’, ‘intercultural education’ or ‘migration pedagogies’ (Bjørnæs et al., 1993; Buchardt & Fabrin, 2012); as well as anti-racist education (Alemanji, 2017; Berhaug & Helleve, 2016). Recently, there has been more emphasis on particularly anti-racist education, which calls for decolonial (Eriksen & Svendsen, 2020), intersectional (Rooth & Svendsen, 2011) and affective approaches (Vertelytė & Staunæs, 2016, this special issue) in order to recognize race as a crucial marker in Nordic state-education systems at large. These studies show how racialization is produced but also resisted through one of the central welfare-state institutions, namely education.

**Contributions in the special issue**

This special issue draws on the existing state of the art on race, racism and anti-racism in Nordic education, adding on new perspectives and contributions. In continuation with the state of the art discussed above, the articles in this special issue show how race and racialization are central and formative experiences in students’ lived school lives. Yet, our special issue offers new angles in the ways that it cuts across different analytical boundaries, levels of analysis and disciplinary frameworks. **First,** it specifically addresses racialization and anti-racist educational strategies in the ways they appear in Nordic state-educational institutions as simultaneously evolving processes. We suggest that we cannot understand the processes of racialization without understanding the strategies and practices through which these processes are being contested and challenged, as it is through schooling the processes of racialization occur, and it is also through schooling and education that racialized inequality structures are potentially challenged. This happens when for instance, racialized students resist their racialization by developing their own everyday anti-racist strategies, or when teachers are caught in dilemmas of addressing racism in the classroom. Many articles in this special issue deal with this dualism: while documenting the complex processes of racialization, they at the same time show how these racialized experiences also inform anti-racist action and resistance.

**Second,** this special issue shows how lived racialized experience is inextricably related to educational policies in relation to migrants and their integration into the Nordic welfare states. The articles in the special issue address processes of racialization through the ways educational policy comes to matter in lived life and through migratory histories. In other words, referring to and expanding on Bernstein’s concept of recontextualization, it is through education that nation-state discourses and policies for minority ‘integration/assimilation’ are recontextualized and pedagogized (Bernstein, 1990; Buchardt, 2018) and are lived through everyday schooling experience. Articles in this special issue show how state policies such as mother tongue language provision, reception classes for migrant children, urban regeneration policies, integration policies, among others, are lived through the everyday lives of students and teachers in educational contexts.

**Third,** the articles in this special issue draw on different disciplinary knowledge and methodologies in exploring processes of racialization and anti-racism across Nordic educational settings and contexts. We consider this a strength. The diversity of disciplinary and methodological perspectives allows us to grasp racialization processes from different angles. Moreover, the plurality in the theoretical frames built to understand the particularities of Nordic educational settings and contexts allows us to comprehend how racialization is reconfigured through different locations and spaces in the Nordic states. For example, the articles in this special issue draw on methodologies such as oral history interviews, ethnographic interviews and observations, media discourse analysis, state-of-the-art literature analysis, as well as auto-ethnographic enactments of ‘ethnodrama’. The articles in this special issue enable discussions of the topic racialization and anti-racist strategies in schooling that go across different disciplines, as the articles read collectively provide analytical contributions that are ‘in between’ the classical disciplines.

It is through this interplay between racialization and antiracism; lived life and education policy as well as disciplinary methodological boundaries that the articles make an analytical and empirical contribution to the state of the art on processes of everyday racialization as they evolve together with Nordic education policy. The articles in the special issue touch upon pressing theoretical, empirical and conceptual issues occurring in relation to complicities of knowledge production in education research, affective investments in knowledge production about race,
racism and anti-racism in education, intersectional dynamics of processes of racialization, colour-blind discourses and racialized linguistic ideologies pertaining to students’ daily experiences, as well as nation-state policies for migrant education. All of the articles draw from empirical material situated in a Nordic nation-state welfare context, specifically Finland, Denmark and Sweden. Although Nordic countries have their own distinct relations and histories in terms of welfare-state formations and educational models, we see parallels and patterns cutting across (Buchardt et al., 2013).

The collection of the articles in unison documents that experiences of racialization in Nordic educational settings are an undeniable reality for racialized students, and yet the articles point to the continuous denial of racism and erosion of race from educational contexts, pedagogical strategies and to some extent research traditions. The mechanisms of such denial are explored in depth in the article Exploring the Concept of Race in Swedish Educational Research after WWII – A Research Overview written by Kerstin Von Brömssen. The article analyzes and discusses the Swedish state of the art in education research on race and racialization in school contexts. The author shows that although the scholarship including race perspectives is growing, concepts of race and racism(s) have been either erased from academic vocabulary or used with hesitation. Exploring research in education and the use of the concepts race, racism and racialization, the article provides the historical overview of the concept of race in Swedish academia, arguing that the history and unresolved political issues around eugenics and race come into play and contribute to the denial of racism and the hesitation to use the concept. Similarly, in the article From Tolerance Work to Pedagogies of Unease: Affective Investments in Danish Antiracist Education, Manté Vertelytė and Dorthe Staunæs trace different affects and feelings associated with and ascribed to critical and anti-racist pedagogies in Danish knowledge production from the 1970s to the present day. Drawing on the literature that argues that race is an affectively experienced encounter and anti-racist education is affective work, the authors show how the discourse of anti-racism as ‘tolerance work’ prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s evolved into an anti-racist pedagogy centered on ‘creating good and positive atmospheres’ and how, from the 2000s onward, feelings of unease, embarrassment and anxiety about addressing race have become integrated in anti-racist education research and practice. What von Brömssen’s and Vertelytė and Staunæs’s articles point to is the complicated investments and affective dimensions involved in the very process of knowledge production on race and racialization.

The affective investments in knowledge production are also related to questions such as who is producing knowledge about race and racialization and from what subject position. Drawing from auto-ethnographically inspired ethnodrama methodology, Ioana Tistea in the article ‘Ain’t I also a Migrant? An Ethnodrama of Weaving Knowledges otherwise in Finnish Migration Research explores researcher positionality of being a migrant from Romania in Finland. Analysing situations occurring in different educational contexts (integration classes, university conferences) through ‘ethnodrama’ methodology, Tistea shows the complicit and multifaceted aspects in knowledge production on race and racialization. Particularly, the author displays how passing as non/not-quite/white enables inquiries into what counts as valid knowledge and ways of knowing, raising the questions of who is considered a legitimate knowing subject in migrant educational and research settings and practices in Finland. Tistea’s work also opens up for the analyses and discussions of forms of racialization of ‘Eastern European’ migrants in Nordic countries and the proximities to and distances from whiteness.

The ways that whiteness and white privilege manifest in everyday school settings are documented in Osa Lundberg’s article The Property Functions of Whiteness – A Case Study of Race Reputation and Status in Urban Education. Drawing from ethnographic data from a study of ninth grade students and teachers at an urban compulsory school in Sweden, the author analyzes how urban students of colour’s experiences of inclusion and access to Swedish society are withheld or restricted by the premise of white normativity. Conceptualizing whiteness as ‘property’, meaning that the right to use and enjoy is a right that white people can possess, assert and experience, Lundberg shows how whiteness functions as a form of property in terms of reputation and status related to the ideas of Swedishness that also inform one’s right to participate in public spaces. The students of colour remain dispossessed, be it by colour, location, language or materiality. These students are positioned and dislocated from the race reputation and status of whiteness nested in the social category Swedish. Teachers and staff seem to hold the belief that coming into contact with white mainstream Swedish students or mainstream Swedish society will by osmosis lead to a more desirable form of Swedishness.

That white normativity restrains the experiences and future perspective of racialized students is also documented by Sanna Mustonen’s article ‘I’ll always have Black Hair’ – Challenging Raciolinguistic Ideologies in Finnish Schools. Based on longitudinal interviews, spanning five years, with two young men who came to Finland as unaccompanied minor
asylum seekers, the author convincingly shows and argues how values attributed to language proficiency are racialized. By tracing their life trajectories in an educational context, Mustonen shows how the discourse of language skills being the key to participation, inclusion and integration is a false assumption, as racialized migrants’ language proficiency does not protect them from being racialized. Albeit fluent in Finnish, participants in Mustonen’s article encounter everyday racialization and perceive themselves as non-legitimate Finnish speakers. Such experiences and perceptions, furthermore, shape their future educational trajectories. Applying a raciolinguistic approach with longitudinal methodology, Mustonen’s article is a contribution to the field of racialization and education which challenges the common notion that language proficiency is the ultimate cue to integration and inclusion.

The imaginaries of the future and how these are shaped by students’ racialized experiences are further explored by Ahrong Yang in the article Racialized Forecasting. Understanding Race through Children’s (to-be) lived Experiences in a Danish Educational Context. Yang proposes the term ‘racial forecasting’ to show how racialized experiences are not only reflected in terms of past experiences, but also projected onto future imaginaries. Based on two cases from an ethnographic field study conducted in a Danish elementary school, this article investigates how students of colour predict future encounters with racism and share their concerns with how to deal with these potential encounters. Racial forecasting, as the author shows, is embedded into emotional predispositions when students are concerned with their fears of not belonging, yet struggling to make sense of their feelings towards prevalent race-blind discourses and colour-blind norms.

How young adults deal with and resist racism and racialization is analysed in Johanna Enns-Kananen’s article ‘My skin is Hard’ – Adult Learners’ Resistance to Racialization and Racism. Enns-Kananen suggests expanding Yosso’s (2005) framework of community cultural wealth to understand interactions that address racialization and everyday racism in basic education programmes in a Finnish community college. Through analysis of a two-year ethnographic study where several students shared stories and thoughts on racialization and racism with the white researcher on site, the author shows that resistance to oppression is possible, and that a variety of knowledges that support such resistance exists and can be developed with BIPOC communities. Fostering this ability to resist, she argues, is the charge of public education. Furthermore, she finds that the instances of resistance extended beyond the moment in which they occurred. Besides providing agency and safety in the situation, all participants exhibited knowledges that challenge larger ideologies and systems of oppression. As such, this article contributes to critical and anti-oppressive perspectives on Finnish education.

Jin Hui Li’s article The lived Class and Racialization – Histories of Foreign-worker Children’s School Experiences in Denmark adds to the state of the art on intersections of race, bringing forth the often missing discussion on the relation between class and race. Drawing on oral history interviews with former migrant students, the article explores how the class process for migrant students operated through racialized practices in Danish schooling in the 1980s. Contributing to the literature on migrant education and class experiences, the study finds that the migrant students’ lived class experiences are woven into the processes of racialization in such a way that even the migrant students from academic homes had racialized struggles sustaining their middle-classed positionality in the Danish school. This documents that the arrangement of the power structures of class is hence strongly interwoven with the power structure of race in the historical context of Danish schooling.

Educational matters are not only matters of pedagogies, didactics and students’ well-being. They are also intimate matters that are inextricably related to forms of intimacies, family relations, friendship relations and kinship. This particular entanglement is analysed in Asta Smedegaard Nielsen’s article Saving Racialized Children through Good Schooling: Media Discourses on Racialized Children’s Schooling as a Site for Upholding Danish Whiteness. Drawing on the analysis of media representation and discourses and on racialized children’s schooling, Smedegaard analyzes how issues of kinship and family play into nation-building processes through representations of ‘the child’. The article shows how the notion of the inclusive nation is constituted through the ideals of cultural and racial mixing of ‘bilingual pupils’.

If educational institutions are to provide ways to deal with racialized exclusions and pave the way for justice and equality, then we need to build an extensive scholarly knowledge on how processes of racialized exclusions form and appear in Nordic educational settings. On the one hand, the special issue is a contribution in ways it comprehensively shows how racialization takes place in Nordic educational settings, covering areas such as language education, research and media discourses, migrant histories entangled in intersections between class and race, antiracist strategies and future imaginaries. The special issue mostly deals with so called new forms of racialization, particularly related to guest migration and refugee movements since 1960s. However, other forms of racialization, for instance,
related to postcolonial exclusion of indigenous communities are not centred here explicitly. In order to build a comprehensive understanding of the ways racialization and antiracist takes place in Nordic education, more comparative and historical research into the continuous entanglements and shifts between forms of racialization of different groups in education are needed.

References


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