Critical perspectives on perceptions and practices of diversity in education

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Abstract

The term diversity has been a topic of discussion in educational research and has received increased attention in recent years. Often, the focus has been on the use of the term at policy level. In this article, teacher educators' and school teachers' perceptions of diversity in education and self-perceived practices of work with diversity are explored. Five teacher educators and 87 school teachers participated in the study. Interviews and questionnaires were used to collect data. The findings indicate that teacher educators and school teachers discuss and reflect on diversity at different levels of operationalization, that they rarely associate socioeconomic and structural issues with the topic of diversity, and that they hardly mention national minorities and the Norwegian indigenous people as part of their understanding and work with diversity. This study suggests stable and long-term arenas for discussion and reflection for both teacher educators and school teachers. Further, the need for a more critical perspective on diversity in education, and an emphasis on learning from historical experiences with education and minorities is needed.

Introduction

The need to address issues of diversity in education has become more important than ever in light of the increased globalization of education and global mobility. Although cultural diversity within nation states is not a new phenomenon, the scope and variety of this

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diversity have escalated in recent decades (Miller, Kostogriz & Gearon, 2009). This tendency also concerns Norway. For instance, there are suburban areas where 140 or more languages are spoken. This situation is also influencing educational policy and practice. Recent research on how diversity is perceived and practiced by educators in kindergartens and schools in Norway, and how it is outlined in the official white papers, shows significant gaps between perceptions and practices, and between perceptions and policy documents (Burner & Biseth, 2016). However, in their research on diversity, Burner and Biseth (2016) did not distinguish between educational levels, such as early childhood education, schools, and teacher education. We have some research on diversity in education from a Norwegian context, but a focus on critical perspectives and underlying structures are still underdevelopment. Critical multiculturalism has been central to the work of Phil (2010), with a focus on language learning and overrepresentation of ethnic minorities in special needs education. Another contribution using critical perspectives was the volume edited by Westrheim and Tolo in 2014, which presented a range of articles exploring the role of education in a multicultural society. These contributions offer important overviews of policies, media discourses, historic and current classroom practices and student perspectives. However, there is still little knowledge about teacher educators' and school teachers' perceptions on their own practices of diversity comparing these two levels of education. Our claim is that, in an ideal reality, there should not be any significant differences between perceptions and self-perceived practices between these two levels of education, since (1) diversity is the normality in the population at large, in schools and in teacher education; and (2) diversity is emphasized in all documents, such as curricula and white papers, pertaining to schools and teacher education.

The purpose of this article is twofold: first, we ask how teacher educators and school teachers understand diversity and how they work with diversity in their educational contexts. The discussion will include comparisons of how diversity is perceived and practiced between these two levels of education, using Goodlad's various levels of curriculum operationalization (Goodlad, 1979). Our aim is to contribute to knowledge of diversity in education. Moreover, any gaps that are found between the two levels of education should be addressed both in teacher education and in in-service training in order to enhance a stable and mutual collaboration between the two, as called for by the educational authorities (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). The meanings associated with diversity are important as they affect educational practices. This article explores patterns in the understandings articulated by teacher educators and school teachers to gain insight into how the term diversity is understood by these two important stakeholders.

Our research stance is based on our experiences as former school teachers and current teacher educators, as well as our involvement in a four-year national professional development program called *Competence for diversity* where the aim is to enhance work with diversity in schools and kindergartens. Furthermore, we draw on recent development in the Norwegian educational context where perspectives from critical multiculturalism are

gaining ground in research (Harlap & Riese, 2014; Westrheim, 2014; Westrheim & Hagatun, 2015).

Conflicting perspectives on diversity

In exploring definitions and perceptions of diversity, our study draws on perspectives from theories of critical multiculturalism in education. Central to this school of thought is the balancing act of acknowledging and valuing differences, while being aware of possible structural injustices inherent in a multicultural society. May (2009, pp. 41-44) points to four key components of developing a critical multicultural paradigm in education. These include the need to theorize ethnicity and highlight the complexities of identities, and balancing the significance of ethnicity and culture for individuals against the tendency to essentialize group affiliations. Second, a critical multicultural paradigm must recognize unequal power relations and fundamental inequalities inherent in education. Recognizing the hegemonic power of dominant cultural knowledge and formulating alternative viewpoints is a third component. Finally, May (2009) highlights the need to hold a reflexive position that understands culture as complex, dynamic and fluid, but still allows for critical engagement.

Critical multicultural perspectives have gained ground in recent discussions regarding the use of the term *diversity* in an educational context in Norway (Westrheim & Tolo, 2014). The term diversity has been heavily debated in the last decade in Norway. According to Hylland Eriksen (2006), the Norwegian public sphere distinguishes between diversity and differences, where the former is considered to be something positive and the latter something negative colliding with the majority's shared values. Hylland Eriksen claims that the public tends to see only shortcomings and evil intentions when confronted with cultural differences. According to this view, diversity is fine; it is morally harmless and potentially economically profitable, but the others, bearers of difference, have become inferior as they were in the past (Hylland Eriksen, 2006). Not only do we see Hylland Eriksen's argument in the public sphere and official documents related to the public, but also in the educational system (Burner & Biseth, 2016). According to Lindquist (2015), there has been a shift from using the term *multicultural* (Norwegian *flerkulturell*) to *diversity* (Norwegian *mangfold*) in the educational sector. Diversity is viewed as something positive and harmless in the official and judicial documents in Norway, concurring with Hylland Eriksen (2006).

However, there is also a tendency towards a shift in the perceived content of the term diversity, from including everyone, towards merely including the others. This is visible in Lindquist's (2015) analysis of official documents since 1990, where diversity is mainly related to issues of immigration. For early childhood education, Norwegian language acquisition is prevalent in policy documents. In the case of schools, policy documents emphasize challenges related to dropout, basic skills, and Norwegian language acquisition.

Berg (2009) questions the extent to which diversity is reflected in school staff in Norwegian education compared to society at large. In adult education, for example, the staff is more multi-ethnic than in primary and secondary schools. She claims that students constitute a multicultural group in Norway, and asks to what extent this is the case when it comes to teachers. Furthermore, Berg (2009) raises some important questions, for example: what kind of teachers are the ones who are multi-ethnic? "B-teachers", assistants, part-time teachers? How much influence do they actually have? Identities and power relations are important for how people's minority background is treated in societies in general and at schools in particular. As formulated by Cummins (2009): "Effective education for minority or subordinated group students challenges coercive power relations in the broader society by affirming students' identities at school" (p. 64).

The focus on diversity has been brought to the fore in Norwegian education scholarship by the introduction of the national professional development program *Competence for diversity* launched in 2013 (Burner & Biseth, 2016). The program was a result of the White Paper *A Comprehensive Integration Policy: Diversity and Community* (Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, 2012), which claimed that educators need to address diversity in order to decrease the achievement gap between students with a minority background and majority students. One can raise the issue of whether the term diversity in this context is applicable to cover the actual content of the initiative, which is directly targeted at capacity building in order to deal with multilingual and multicultural classrooms (Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training, 2013).

Scholarly objections against the use of the term diversity in educational policies range from pointing out conflicting understandings and practices of the concept from different stakeholders' points of view (Burner & Biseth, 2016), to calling for national policy to be rooted in a more critical perspective (Westrheim & Hagatun, 2015). The latter objection questions whether the uncritical use of diversity as a normative and positive term might simply contribute towards overshadowing structural injustices and differences at group level. Westrheim and Hagatun (2015) suspect that we are seeing a trend of accommodating diversity through symbolic representations of culture, holidays and food, rather than allowing an increased diversity to have a *real* structural impact on current educational practices. This echoes the famous three S's suggested by Troyna and Williams (1986), namely *saris*, *samosas* and *steel bands*, a criticism of the exotification of cultures which in their opinion lead to underachievement of minority pupils. Modood and May (2001) named this "the welcoming of people from other cultures by encouraging their cultural practices, usually in superficial ways" (p. 306). Using the example of Norwegian Roma[2] to illustrate the point, Westrheim and Hagatun (2015) show how this group is considered

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[2] Norwegian Roma are categorized as a national minority in Norway, and are the descendants of Roma arriving from Romania in the second half of the 19th century. The group is distinct from Norwegian Romani or travellers, who constitute a separate national minority whose affiliation to Norway dates back to the 16th century.

as a group whose values are *particular*, whereas the educational system is seen as representative of collective and universal values. Thus, the Roma people in Norway continue to face a choice of assimilation or exclusion in school, despite years of various initiatives to improve the situation (Westrheim & Hagatun, 2015, p. 176-177). Similarly, Borchgrevink and Brochmann (2008) have objected to the simplistic use of the term diversity, without problematizing differences that are de facto problematic:

> The possibility that disharmony might just as well be about social class issues or cultural conflicts, is not up for discussion. Instead, the White Paper [Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, White Paper 49, 2003/4] can be read as a therapeutic, top-down story to the old-Norwegian majority about the inherent value of diversity (p. 25, our translation)

Rhedding-Jones (2005) expresses similar views in claiming that diversity becomes problematic when it operates in practice as assimilation rather than transformation of a monoculture (p. 132). Such problematic aspects of the use of the term diversity is why we need to make an effort to understand how educators perceive the term, as these understandings have implications for their professional practices (Rhedding-Jones, 2005, p. 131).

With this as the backdrop, this article aims to further develop these initial investigations through a broader comparative inquiry by including perspectives from teacher educators and school teachers. The present study aims to look at patterns emerging from education professionals at two different levels in the educational system and explore possible relations and implications.

Data collection and data analysis

The sample of this study consists of teacher educators and school teachers from the Eastern part of Norway. Formal approval for the study was obtained from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD).

The teacher educators (N=5) were selected from different subject fields in order to gather data across disciplines. They work within the following fields of education: mathematics, educational studies, social studies, early literacy, and Norwegian language. The teacher educators volunteered their participation after a call for participants was issued. The teacher educators are all experienced teachers and are affiliated with a university which collaborates with schools in the national development program *Competence for diversity*. The school teachers (N=87) are from primary and secondary schools, all of whom participate in the national development program *Competence for diversity*. The study covers four municipalities and seven schools.

Interviews and questionnaires were used to collect data. Semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) were used with the teacher educators, lasting between 40 and 60 minutes. An interview guide was used (see Appendix 1). The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Informed consent was also obtained from all of the participants. Electronic questionnaires were used with the school teachers (N=87; total N including leaders

and kindergarten educators = 222) (see Appendix 2). The questionnaires were sent to all the participating institutions in the start-up phase of the program, and the results were also used to map out which areas of professional development the schools wanted to focus on. The interviews and questionnaires were all open-ended and gave opportunities for in-depth replies, with the exception of closed-ended items in the questionnaires tapping the participants' background information.

Two researchers analyzed the interview data and two other researchers analyzed the questionnaire data. We all met to discuss our analysis at regular meeting points. Both data analyses adopted an inductive approach to see which categories were prevalent and important for the participants. All the researchers used a combination of NVivo 11 and analysis conducted on paper to code and categorize the data. The data were read in their entirety, re-read, coded, compared and categorized according to the constant-comparative method of analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1998).

Two main categories were derived from the interview questions and questionnaire items: *perceptions of diversity* and *self-perceived practices with diversity*. For the first sample, the teacher educators, we grouped the codes related to their perceptions of diversity into one subcategory: *broad definitions of diversity*. When describing the practices related to diversity, the two following subcategories emerged: *teaching content* and *teaching strategies*. For the second sample, the school teachers, three subcategories emerged under the main category *perceptions of diversity*: *differences*, *religion* and *language*. Under the main category *self-perceived practices with diversity*, the following subcategories emerged: *the others*, *non-existent practices* and *miscellaneous*.

Findings

All the teacher educators expressed a broad perception of what might be included in the term diversity. Responses range from open-ended ones such as: "It depends on the context. Diversity means that there are many varieties of something", to lists of aspects that could be included in a definition: "An openness to different attitudes, opinions, religions and cultural expressions in a society." In sum, they mention that diversity must be understood as something broader than multiculturalism and multilingualism. Nevertheless, when looking more closely at the concrete examples given as illustrative of diversity, the categories mentioned by teacher educators are often connected to multiculturalism: cultural and religious connotations, attitudes and values, ethnicity, language nationality, and socioeconomic differences. In addition, when discussing *where* diversity is found, all five informants mention diversity as something present *out there* in schools. Three of the informants also focus on diversity among their own students, as illustrated by the following quote:

> Because we also have students with multicultural backgrounds, how can we think about that as a resource for the student group? Because we have sort of a double role. We are educating teachers, but our students are also learners.[3]

When discussing content, the teacher educators describe various ways of highlighting differences in their classes. This ranges from using stories and languages from different cultures in their teaching to integrating global perspectives in subjects such as mathematics. Others focus more on the contentious aspects of teaching about topics such as immigration in a diverse classroom, as illustrated by the following quote:

> You become conscious that students have become more culturally diverse, and that makes you conscious of what you talk about that could be challenging [...] such as multicultural society, immigration policies, and migration. And many of the students you discuss with have life experiences and very different perspectives, meaning that you have to reflect on how you portray things.

When discussing strategies, teacher educators argue within the framework of *how* to teach. Here they reflect on how a diverse student body affects their thinking regarding group work, activities and planning. The consensus is that you cannot have one single approach that fits every student and that knowing the diverse backgrounds of the students is a prerequisite for differentiated teaching. Thus, the informants relate their practices to knowing the backgrounds of their students and to think actively about how to use these different backgrounds. Examples highlight students' input and contributions, as shown in the following quote:

> You want to achieve a dialogue or a discussion, to build knowledge. Then it is interesting to hear from different perspectives. So then there is diversity, if not it would be very boring if there isn't diversity. Then you'll only have one answer.

While teacher educators relate diversity mainly to collective student backgrounds and experiences, school teachers express a more concrete view, underlining that something is different than something else. The quote "different cultures, ethnicities, people, religions, backgrounds" illustrates this point. Religion has a prominent place in the school teachers' understanding of diversity. One-fifth of the school teachers mention religion as part of their understanding of diversity. Finally, language is relatively important for their understanding, with 16% occurrence. In general, the school teachers' understanding of diversity pertains to the different people they observe in their daily life, characterized by having a different culture, religion or language.

The school teachers mostly relate their practices with diversity to children with a minority background or with a deviant way of being in relation to the majority population. The following quotes are examples of how school teachers describe their work with diversity: "give them [children with minority background] a cultural baggage to be able to meet the Norwegian society" and "[working with] all types of people, from different nationalities and different functional disabilities". Furthermore, few school teachers actually

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[3] All the quotes from the informants have been translated from Norwegian to English by the authors.

explain how they work with diversity. Rather, they mention places they have worked where they consider their pupils to belong to "the others", typically schools with a high percentage of pupils with a minority background. Also, a few of the school teachers merely reply "I'm not aware of this" or "I've not worked with this". Finally, when they mention language as a way of working with diversity, they do not explain how. Other miscellaneous ways of working with diversity that are mentioned by the school teachers are: "campaigns to reduce xenophobia", "work with mother tongue teachers" (other mother tongues than Norwegian), "increase understanding of each other, tolerance, respect, empathy, openness", "put diversity into the school's plans", "lecture on diversity", "learn about cultures, music and drama", "compare religions in the subject Religion and Social Studies", "draw on pupils' interests, involve and include everyone" and "classroom management".

Although there are several broad definitions of the term diversity given by the informants that include formulations like "drawn from a variety of backgrounds", "a variety of households" or "different cultures, ethnicities, people, religions, backgrounds", their focus is mainly on attitudes and values, cultural, religious and linguistic aspects. One exception is the following teacher educator:

> [I]t should be important that teachers are culturally diverse, and that it doesn't become the way it easily seems to become, namely white Norwegian lecturers standing in front of an audience teaching, and immigrants cleaning the floors. It's easy to succumb to such patterns. And it creates some expectations, you know, that you should go into these roles? But I think it means a lot to pupils to have teachers from different cultural backgrounds.

In this quote, the structural and socioeconomic implications of the term diversity is discussed more explicitly.

Discussion

One emerging difference between the teacher educators' and school teachers' perceptions of diversity is the level of operationalization when discussing diversity (Goodlad, 1979). Teacher educators are at a more reflective but abstract level, sometimes referencing their own experiences with their own students, but more often discussing an *imagined* classroom *out there* and how diversity would work in such contexts. At the same time, teacher educators have more exploratory answers to how they work with diversity, describing the discussions and problematizing of diversity that they see as prevalent in teacher education. The school teachers, on the other hand, take a more concrete approach with keywords such as *language*, *culture*, or that they have worked at schools with a high percentage of pupils with a minority background. School teachers respond at a more practical level, mentioning specific topics and ways of working but without going into discussions or problematizing to the same extent. The teacher educators' views are more in line with Goodlad's idea of formal and perceived curriculum, versus the school teachers being more at the operationalized and experienced curriculum levels (Goodlad, 1979). The data

suggest that the professional context can influence the respondent's perceptions. Even though perceptions might be quite similar, they are expressed in different ways.

The teacher educators reflect on diversity as an inherent part of society and schools, and this frames their discussions both of perceptions and practices. The school teachers, on the other hand, reflect on diversity more as differences between groups of people (Hylland Eriksen, 2006). Sometimes they mention minorities as having the need to be included or integrated into the larger society. Both groups of informants mention religion and culture, but the teacher educators in contrast to the school teachers rarely mention language as meaning anything else than dialects. The school teachers typically associate language with Norwegian as a second language. In other words, the issue of language barriers in education is not a concern to the teacher educators in this study, whereas this is one of the more prevalent issues raised by the school teachers. Whereas school teachers seem to be discussing diversity as an issue that needs to be rectified through, for instance, better language learning, the teacher educators see the issue more as a topic that needs to be reflected on or raised awareness about with student teachers.

When it comes to self-perceived practices of diversity, the data fall into two overarching categories of content and strategies. When referring to content, teacher educators argue mainly within the dimension of *content integration*, where the use of examples from various cultures are incorporated (Banks, 2009, pp. 15-16). This ranges from Mathematics, to languages and stories, to case studies in Social Studies. Among the school teachers, there is a tendency towards focusing on describing the contexts they are working in or have worked in, rather than the content they bring into their classrooms.

When discussing strategies, the teacher educators see the diversity of student groups as an implicit part of their planning, with a focus on the need to draw actively on the prior experiences and backgrounds of students. The school teachers provide various answers on how they have worked or work with diversity in their classrooms, similar to the study by Burner and Biseth (2016). When they mention language as a way of working with diversity, it remains unspecific which language(s) and how work with languages can enhance work with diversity. Some of the examples provided are more concrete than others, such as making use of mother tongue teachers to support second language learning, whereas other examples are more abstract, like classroom management.

As such, there is a difference of perspectives in the discussion of practices of diversity. This discrepancy is interesting in light of the findings of Aamaas and Duesund (2016), who found that student teachers often do not discover the links between broader themes in their education such as the impact of socioeconomic backgrounds on learning, or methods of differentiation as a tool applicable outside of the field of learning disabilities. In the interviews, several of the teacher educators suggest that they could be more explicit in highlighting such connections for the student teachers (Aamaas & Duesund, 2016).

Focusing simply on culture and religion when discussing diversity might neglect issues related to class, poverty and injustice (May, 2009). Borchgrevink and Brochmann (2008) claim that "the word diversity covers up the fact that not all differences are harmless" (p.

28). They suggest the possibility that disharmony and conflicts stemming from diversity could just as well be about class issues rather than culture conflicts (Borchgrevink & Brochmann, 2008, p. 25). Similarly, Westrheim and Hagatun (2015) have argued that the positive connotations of diversity as a normative and positive term might simply contribute towards overshadowing structural injustices. Within the paradigm of critical multiculturalism, the recognition of unequal power relations is a fundamental concern (May, 2009). However, few of the informants in our study explicitly discuss structural issues related to socioeconomic factors, with the exception of one of the teacher educators. The findings in the present study suggest that this perspective is yet to be acknowledged sufficiently in educators' encounters with diversity.

Despite using words such as ethnicity, culture and religion when discussing diversity, our data suggest that few of the informants mention the five historic national minorities of Norway (Roma, Romani, Jews, Kvens and Forest Finns) or the Sami people. The national curricula and white papers mention national minorities, and an even more prominent place is given to the indigenous Sami people. Thus, it is a surprising finding that the informants in the present study do not include them in their reflections on diversity in education. Midtbøen, Orupabo and Røthing (2014) found that teachers perceive the national minorities and the Sami people as remote from their own contexts and of little relevance to their pupils. This might imply that although the informants in the present study seem to have a broad definition of what is included in the term diversity, when describing their practices they mainly associate the term with recent immigrant groups.

Implications and concluding remarks

In this study, we have investigated how the two groups of teachers (teacher educators and school teachers) understand and work with diversity. In the following, we suggest three implications from this study, before we reflect on the study's limitations and suggest potential future research.

The study identified gaps in the ways teacher educators and school teachers express and describe their understandings and work with diversity. This was discussed in light of Goodlad's levels of curriculum development, where it seemed as if the two groups of informants were discussing different realities, but they were seemingly reflecting at different operational levels. One implication of the present study is that teacher educators and school teachers need arenas to discuss and reflect on their understandings of and work with diversity. One such arena is the nationally initiated development program *Competence for diversity*, which we propose should be more integrated and long-term program, as it is now only a four-year program. The data suggest that teacher educators and school teachers possibly have similar goals and mindsets regarding diversity, but different ways of expressing them. Thus, there is a need for mutually intelligible concepts at different levels of education. This is particularly important with regards to student teachers' in-service practice in order to ensure a coherent use of terms and concepts used for reflection

on their own practice. Arenas for discussion and reflection can lead to a common foundation and thus improvement of teacher education and teaching practice at the various levels of curriculum development (Goodlad, 1979).

A second implication is the need to include more critical perspectives on diversity as a concept in education. Cultural, religious and linguistic differences are at the forefront of the informants' attention, in line with Burner and Biseth's findings (2016), but structural aspects such as socioeconomic differences and the dominance of majority perspectives receive less attention, also in the nationally initiated development program *Competence for diversity*. Problematic differences such as poverty, marginalization and the dominance of majority perspectives should not be avoided when discussing diversity in education (Borchgrevink & Brochmann, 2008; Cummins, 2009; Hylland Eriksen, 2006; May, 2009; Westrheim & Hagatun, 2015; Østli, 2015).

A third implication concerns the big picture of diversity, and the question of who are included and excluded in perceptions of diversity. The informants rarely mention historic national minorities or indigenous groups in Norway as relevant. The same tendency has been identified more generally among Norwegian teachers (Midtbøen, Orupabo & Røthing, 2014). The absence of these groups from discussions of diversity is unfortunate, as lessons learned from their encounter with the majority classroom should offer important insights on working with contemporary diversity and immigrants, for example, the importance of confirming and supporting pupils' identities (Cummins, 2009). Acknowledging that we already have a lot of important knowledge about both devastating and fruitful practices when it comes to minorities in the past, one could ask whether we are developing historical amnesia.

This study has used interviews and questionnaires to collect data both on understandings and practices of diversity in education. A limitation of the study is that it is based on *self-perceived* practices, not observed practices. In an extension of this study, we suggest observing how teacher educators and school teachers actually practice working with diversity. Another limitation is that the study can hardly be generalized to Norwegian teacher education or schools in general. However, the study does provide a picture of an under-researched topic within a geographically concentrated area. In future research, a larger sample representing various geographic areas, preferably including other countries, could shed more light on diversity in education.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview guide for teacher educators

1. Introductory questions
   What does the word diversity mean to you (in society)?
   What does the word diversity mean in schools?

2. School and classroom level
   To what extent does diversity play a role in your daily work?

3. Teacher education
   To what extent does your teacher education program focus on diversity?
   In the Norwegian framework for teacher education, "knowledge about diverse societies" is stated as a required general competence. The nature of this knowledge is exemplified as having "awareness of cultural differences, and skills to handle these as a positive resource."
   - What might diversity as a positive resource mean in a teaching context?
   - What skills might be required of the teacher to make diversity a positive resource?

4. What might "acknowledging diversity" look like in your context?

Appendix 2: Questionnaire items for school teachers

1. Background questions (closed-ended items: job title, municipality, gender, age, educational background and work experience)
2. How do you understand the concept 'diversity'? (open-ended item)
3. How did you work with diversity previously? (open-ended item)
4. How do you work with diversity currently? (open-ended item)