



## Being inclusive when talking about diversity: How teachers manage boundaries of Norwegianness in the classroom

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### Abstract

This paper explores how discourses of national identity are managed in one of Norway's core institutions – the educational system. As Norway changed into a multi-ethnic society, classrooms became a central arena for individuals with different religious and ethnic backgrounds to meet. How boundaries of 'Norwegianness' are managed in the classroom is therefore of importance. Based on a thematic analysis of observations of classroom lessons and interviews with teachers in schools in Oslo, I argue that teachers navigate between several different yet overlapping discourses of 'being Norwegian'. Using the theoretical framework of bright and blurred boundaries and different understandings of 'Norwegianness', I show how teachers manage different discourses rooted in citizenship, cultural traditions, values, ethnic boundaries, or Whiteness. These discourses can be activated simultaneously in society and the classroom. However, the Norwegian school system's core value of equality and inclusiveness gives precedence to the discourse based on citizenship. To manage other discourses, teachers use different strategies when addressing boundaries along different dimensions of national belonging.

**Keywords:** diversity competence; national belonging; boundaries; Norwegianness; teacher's work

### Introduction

As Norwegian society has become increasingly diverse as a result of immigration, boundaries of nationhood and belonging are activated and redrawn in new ways. This paper aims to explore how teachers manage boundaries of 'Norwegianness' in the classroom. Questions of who is Norwegian and what it means to be Norwegian are topics of persistent public debate. In 2006, there was intense discussion regarding what the word 'Norwegian' should mean. The Norwegian Language Council defined being Norwegian as being *ethnically* Norwegian, thus defining out migrants and their children and grandchildren (Vassenden, 2010).<sup>2</sup> 'The debate culminated in the highlighting of *citizenship* as the only possible criterion of Norwegianness' (Vassenden, 2010, p. 735). In everyday practice, however, citizenship is not the only criterion for national belonging. Individuals' subjective understandings of national belonging is a complex matter,

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<sup>2</sup> See Vassenden (2010) for a more detailed description of the debate.

and qualitative studies of people with minority backgrounds show that in addition to citizenship, notions of culture, ethnicity, and Whiteness also affect self- and others' perceptions of what it means to be Norwegian (Lynnebakke & Fangen, 2011; Strømsø, 2018; Vassenden, 2011).

Norway's immigrant population has increased from 1.5% of the total population in 1970 to 14,7% in 2020. In addition, another 3,5% of the population are children of immigrants (Statistics Norway, 2020). Norway's urban areas underwent the largest transformation from immigration. In Oslo, 40% of pupils are either immigrants or children of immigrants. Schools - and thereby classrooms - are a central arena wherein individuals with different religious and ethnic backgrounds meet. The majority of children in Norway go to public schools, and those schools to a large degree mirror the local community in terms of social class and immigrant origin.

The Norwegian school system espouses two main goals: to provide the emerging generation with necessary competence for future life and work and to provide an arena that gives insight into cultural diversity and 'promotes democracy, gender equality and scientific thinking' (Opplæringslova, 1998, § 1-1, my translation). The national curriculum includes norms and values that Norwegian society accentuates as most important and understands as part of 'national identity' (Røthing, 2015, pp. 72–73).

Critical observers have argued that the educational system's goal of equality can be misinterpreted as a notion of requiring everybody to be the same. Gullestad (2002a, pp. 82–84) claimed that Norwegian nationhood is based on a conception of 'imagined sameness', often understood as observed similarities in looks or behaviour. Gullestad claimed that to be equal in Norwegian society, one must be the same as the majority. Antonsich (2010) also pointed to this, writing, 'The problem is that any dominant ethnic group tends to fill the notion of belonging with a rhetoric of sameness, which clearly prevents any recognition of difference' (p. 650). However, from the teachers' perspective, one may argue that being inclusive when talking about diversity – especially when dealing with norms and values in the national curriculum – represents a dilemma not easily resolved.

In Norwegian public schools, the teacher holds a role as a representative of society. The teacher converts the values and attitudes that the Norwegian state, through official documents, has defined as important in shaping well-functioning democratic citizens. It is important to stress that the teacher is not a passive translator of formal documents. Goodlad (1979) classifies curricula into five levels that describe the path from curriculum ideas to the realization in the learning situation showing how individuals activate the curriculum. The curriculum exists "simultaneously as formal texts, as teachers' understanding of the curriculum, as practical interaction in the classroom, as pupils' understanding, and at a political and societal level" (Iversen, 2012, p. 76). As part of the schools' goal of creating democratic citizens, the Norwegian curriculum includes topics such as immigration, sexuality, equality, and religion – topics that often tend to activate boundary-drawing between different ethnic and religious groups in wider public debate. How teachers teach these topics are of great importance since interactions in the classroom shape space where identities are negotiated (Cummins, 2000, p. 164) and may affect how boundaries of Norwegianness are (re)produced.

This paper focuses on ways in which teachers use their professional judgement when they navigate among different discourses of Norwegianness in the classroom. The analysis draws on observations of social science and religion and ethics lessons in two upper-secondary schools in Oslo and on interviews with 16 social science and religion and ethics teachers. The research

questions are as follows: (1) What kind of discourses regarding what it means to be Norwegian are activated in the classroom? (2) How do teachers manage boundaries of Norwegianness when these discourses are activated?

## Theoretical perspectives and previous research

The literature on national identity and nationalism has a long tradition studying nations from a macro-structural perspective. More recent studies have recognized individual's agency in (re)producing an "imagined community" where individuals share a sense of national identity (Anderson, 2006), looking at how nationhood is practiced in everyday life (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008; Strømsø, 2018) and what symbolic resources individuals use when (re)producing boundaries of national belonging (Zimmer, 2003). In the Norwegian context some studies show that individuals draw on different symbolic resources, at different times, when defining what it means to be Norwegian (Lynnebakke & Fangen, 2011; Vassenden, 2011) or explore the negotiation dynamics among young people in "who" is seen as a national and "what" the nation as an imagined community looks like (Erdal, 2019). The goal of this article is to investigate how national identity plays out through conversations in the classroom and how teachers meet this diversity.

There is a growing body of research on diversity and diversity competence in the educational system. Research has focused on how a middle-class culture dominates the Norwegian school system, dictating who works in Norwegian public schools, which rituals are celebrated, and what the curricula emphasises (Kjeldstadli, 2014, p. 8; Seland, 2013). Relating to how minorities are included, Seland (2013) argued that Norwegian school politics displays a preference for the majority's values and cultural heritage. Some of the research on diversity in schools applies a critical perspective seeking to expose the power structures that work to exclude minorities. For example, Osler and Lybæk (2014) argued, 'Despite growing public recognition of Norway as a multicultural nation, education policy promotes an "us" and "them" discourse, counter to education for cosmopolitan citizenship' (p. 560). Examples are studies of how teacher educators emphasize ways in which diversity is represented in the classroom, reproducing the concept of *the other* (Fylkesnes et al., 2018) or that teachers' education gives them insufficient tools to handle diversity in the classroom and has a limited focus on terms such as *racism* and *ethnicity* (Osler & Lindquist, 2018). Røthing (2007), however, pointed out that such explanations tend to overlook that teachers may have good intentions even though the consequences of their teaching might reproduce othering.

One limitation when applying a critical perspective is that any reference to boundaries and differences often is interpreted as oppressive and exclusionary. One may argue that from the teachers' perspective, it is often impossible to not deal with boundaries and differences because ethnic and religious boundaries exist in the wider society and are expressed by pupils in the classroom. For teachers, a major challenge is *how* to manage sensitive issues in which such boundaries are activated and in ways that are inclusive for all students. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to focus on which strategies teachers use in their attempts to manage boundaries of Norwegianness discursively in everyday classroom situations.

When investigating how boundaries were activated in the classroom, I have been inspired by Albas's (2005) concept of *boundaries* and Vassenden's (2010, 2011) *discursive oppositions of*

*Norwegianness*. Alba's and others' concept of 'boundaries' is indebted to Fredrik Barth's (1969) constructivist concept of ethnicity as relationally organized and created by defining the boundaries between groups – rather than what Barth calls the 'cultural stuff' contained within them (Alba, 2005; Gullestad, 2002b; Vassenden, 2010). Alba (2005) distinguished between 'bright' and 'blurred' boundaries to explain how the nature of the boundary affects the degree to which individuals achieve access to the opportunities available to the majority group in a society (p. 22). Alba argued that concepts such as bright and blurred boundaries are useful for comparing immigrant groups' assimilation or lack thereof. *Bright* boundaries are boundaries that are clear and without ambiguity about membership; with *blurred* boundaries, however, an individual's location with respect to the boundary may be more unspecified. When studying how boundaries of *Norwegianness* are activated and managed in the classroom, the boundaries' brightness or blurriness is of central importance. National identities, however, – and thus notions of what it means to be Norwegian – are multidimensional, meaning that different types of boundaries may be activated in different situations.

Vassenden (2010, 2011) developed an analytical framework to analyse everyday understandings of national identity, recognizing what he called multiple discursive oppositions.<sup>3</sup> He argues that being Norwegian is neither fluid and optional nor fully open to negotiation (2011, p. 177). Instead, it consists of several relatively stable discursive structures among which people navigate. These are organized along four dimensions – citizenship, cultural aspects, ethnic boundaries and categories, and Whiteness/non-Whiteness – which can be overlapping or contradictory. He argues that one must work analytically to understand what individuals include in their conceptualisation of being Norwegian or non-Norwegian because the terms can be used interchangeably, depending on which dimension is being activated. For example, a person may feel Norwegian because of formal citizenship, but 'non-Norwegian' because of non-Whiteness or cultural distance. The discursive oppositions between being Norwegian and non-Norwegian within these four dimensions may be open to negotiation and depend on context; they also vary in how fluid they are. Vassenden (2010) claimed that the most elastic discourse in today's Norway is the cultural aspects, whereas the most clear-cut boundaries are formal citizenship and Whiteness/non-Whiteness. In the following analyses I include a distinct value discourse to show how part of what is understood as being Norwegian is the acceptance of certain values. Values are analytically separated from the cultural discourse because some values that teachers present in schools, such as gender equality and sexual liberalism, can be understood as so-called 'Norwegian values' (Gullestad, 2002a; Røthing & Svendsen, 2011) that are not open to negotiation. Vassenden's framework is based on empirical findings from research on individuals and their subjective boundary or identity work. The aim of this article, however, is to look at how teachers manage these boundaries – stemming from their own, the pupils', society's or the educational system's views of *Norwegianness* – when activated in the classroom.

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<sup>3</sup> In this article, discourse is understood as its most basic definition: 'As a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)' (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 1).

## Methods

The data collection for this paper consisted of a combination of classroom observations and in-depth interviews conducted at two upper-secondary schools in Oslo: one on the west side, the other on the east side. In the following sections, I call those schools 'Western High' and 'Eastern High,' respectively. The two case schools were strategically selected to investigate how context affects how teachers work. The schools differed in grade-point averages required for entrance, as well as in the pupils' minority and socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, I conducted two interviews with two teachers at another school on the east side of Oslo, which I call 'Eastern High 2'.

In each of the case schools, I observed one social science class and one religion and ethics class over 3 months, for a total of 32 lessons in both schools. The social science pupils were in their first year of upper-secondary school (15–16 years old), whereas religion and ethics pupils were in their final year (17–18 years old). Both subjects are mandatory in the Education Programme for Specialization in General Studies.<sup>4</sup> I chose these subjects because their curricula include themes that highlight prejudice, religion, and immigration in the classroom – themes that presumably activate boundaries of Norwegianness. In one of the two Eastern High classes, only one pupil had two Norwegian-born parents. All other pupils had at least one (most had two) parents who were born outside Norway. At Western High, the situation differed. With few exceptions, most Western High pupils were from families living on the west side of Oslo and had two parents who were born in Norway.

While observing I sat in the back or the front of the classroom depending on where I could find room for a chair. I did notes on my computer during the lessons, writing down what happened in the classroom, what the teachers taught, and comments from the pupils. I conducted the teacher interviews after completing part of the observations. Thus, I could use examples from the classrooms during the interviews. The interviews were semi-structured and done at the school where the teachers worked and lasted about an hour. I conducted 16 interviews – 11 with social science teachers and five with religion and ethics teachers – and then had the interviews transcribed. All teachers were White with a majority background, but one teacher was from a different Nordic country. As with the schools, I anonymized the teachers in the analysis and in this article to protect confidentiality.

The subject of 'Norwegianness' or 'being Norwegian' emerged in my observations of how social science and religion and ethics teachers work with the topic of prejudice in their lessons. The theme caught my attention during an observation of a social science class at Eastern High. The class consisted of approximately 24 pupils, none of whom had two Norwegian-born parents. The teacher was always well prepared and worked hard to engage her pupils. She controlled her class, and the pupils seemed to respect her. Although her teaching style aimed at including all her pupils, her way of including or excluding pupils when she spoke about Norwegian society varied. It became apparent that there are several ways of talking about national belonging.

When analysing the material, I conducted a thematic analysis inspired by the guidelines Braun and Clarke (2006) developed. While familiarizing myself with the data, I read through the fieldnotes and interview transcriptions. During the first round of coding, I organized

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<sup>4</sup> Other programme options are vocational.



excerpts regarding national belonging into categories. This phase was driven mainly by the data. Throughout the next phase, I used a more theoretical approach, looking for subthemes under the main theme of national belonging that exemplified what Vassenden (2010, 2011) called discursive oppositions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## **Different understandings of being Norwegian**

In this research, I identified several discourses of Norwegianness used in the classroom. The teachers found navigating those different understandings to be challenging because some discourses created bright boundaries of Norwegianness that exclude, rather than include, some pupils.

How teachers manage understandings of Norwegianness when trying to uphold the inclusionary ambition of the Norwegian school system depends on their professional judgement and school context. Before discussing how teachers use different strategies to deal with the various discourses that arise, I first illustrate the discourse variation teachers must manage in the classroom. I include part of an observation fieldnote from a day trip with the Eastern High social science class. The class went to an educational centre that invites upper-secondary schools to a workshop about prejudice and the importance of dialogue. The fieldnote is from a session in which the courseholder presented statements, and the pupils ranked agreement by standing under signs marked, 'agree', 'disagree', 'maybe' or 'do not know'. The statement was 'Norway for Norwegians'.<sup>5</sup>

The whole class except for three pupils stand under the sign 'agree'; the group of three stand under 'do not know'. One of the pupils asks, 'Who are Norwegians?' It is quite noisy, and the statement creates discussion. The courseholder says it is important that they give room for each other's opinions. Boy1 says that there are many cultures living together in Norway, and there is not so much racism here. He had lived in another European country and thinks it is better here. ... Girl1 says she is half Somali and half Norwegian (she wears a hijab) and that she feels both Somali and Norwegian. Girl2 says that foreigners have given Norway a positive development. Someone calls out, 'Like what?' Boy2 says taxi drivers and kebabs. Many pupils start laughing. Girl2 says food culture. Boy3 says that Norway is for everyone and that everyone should be able to come and settle down here. The courseholder asks [Boy3] if he feels that Norway is for him. [Boy3] says yes, because he feels he can go to school and get a job. The courseholder asks all the pupils, 'Who is Norwegian?' The first thing called out is, 'A White person'. The courseholder asks what the pupil means, and the pupil corrects it to 'ethnic Norwegians'. Another pupil says, 'Someone with a Norwegian passport'. Another pupil says, 'Those who are raised here'. Girl2 says she was raised here but does not have a Norwegian passport. Another pupil says that one must be integrated, that one must adapt to people in the rest of the country. Get a job and learn the language.

In this fieldnote, several understandings of what it means to be Norwegian are mentioned. One pupil referred to her dual-ethnic background as both Norwegian and Somali; another pupil called out, 'A White person'. These pupils drew on the discourses of ethnicity and Whiteness. The citizenship discourse also is mentioned when one pupil said that a Norwegian person is someone with a Norwegian passport. The cultural discourse was used in discussing food culture as something foreigners brought to Norway. Also using the cultural discourse, one boy stressed an adaptation to Norway as a country and being integrated as prerequisites for being Norwegian. As shown in the fieldnote, pupils drew upon several discourses, illustrating the complexity of talking about national belonging. This complexity aligns with other studies about boundaries of

<sup>5</sup> The author translated all interview and fieldnote excerpts from Norwegian to English.

Norwegianness among youth (Erdal, 2019; Erdal & Strømsø, 2018; Lynnebakke & Fangen, 2011). It also shows that discourses centred around national belonging are relatively stable structures through which people navigate (Vassenden, 2011) and that discourses at the structural level are part of the pupils' repertoire (von der Lippe, 2011).

### **Citizenship discourse**

When the topic of national belonging was thematized, I found the most straightforward strategy for teachers was to refer to the citizenship discourse. Vassenden (2010, p. 748) described the citizenship discourse as a dichotomy – you are Norwegian if you have Norwegian citizenship and non-Norwegian if you do not. In this context, the citizenship discourse is more than a legal definition of citizenship. The teachers have an inclusive ideal when they talk about their pupils: they are Norwegian if they have a Norwegian passport, if they are born in Norway or if they identify as Norwegian. As a symbolic resource, the citizenship-based discourse can create the brightest boundary of national belonging. When the subject of being Norwegian is discussed in classrooms, the citizenship discourse is used to create a bright boundary defining whether an individual is Norwegian. Magnus, a teacher at Western High, highlighted the citizenship discourse as the only legitimate discourse. He talked about what it meant to be Norwegian: 'You just have to insist. ... We have a fairly broad concept of nationality in school. One does not associate nationality with ethnicity'.

Even if teachers and students often emphasize the inclusive citizenship discourse, some pupils also present discourses that contrast to this ideal. During observations of lessons and in interviews with teachers in which Norwegianness was discussed, many pupils used different discourses. It was mainly the teachers that worked in Eastern High and Eastern High 2, where the majority of the pupils were immigrants or children of immigrants that brought up national belonging with their pupils. During the daytrip to the educational centre with the social science class from Eastern High, some pupils referred to their parents' origins when asked if they felt Norwegian, indicating they belong to a different ethnic category than the majority. Some pupils also described how 'Norwegians' did not consider them Norwegian because of their skin colour. Their teacher, Heidi, also said that they ask each other "Where are you from? And answer with their parent's homeland". Ida, another social science teacher from Eastern High, explained that some of her pupils told her that they did not feel Norwegian because they did not ski, something they related to being Norwegian. In the next sections, I show which strategies teachers employed to manage other discourses of Norwegianness in different contexts while trying to adhere to the goal of being inclusive.

### **Expanding the concept of 'Norwegian culture'**

Expanding the concept of 'Norwegian culture' is another strategy teachers used when pupils applied the cultural discourse to create boundaries of belonging in the classroom. Vassenden (2011) pointed out that 'cultural stuff' is most elastic. He argued that cultural discourse can include knowledge of the majority language, religion, or views on alcohol, to mention some. Where to draw the boundary of what is and is not Norwegian culture is open for negotiation, and the cultural discourse can blur boundaries of Norwegianness (Alba, 2005). The teachers in

this study used a strategy to help their pupils expand their understanding of what Norwegian culture could mean. Vegard at Eastern High 2 illustrated this strategy:

We often start the year by talking about what is typically Norwegian, and the pupils say cheese slicer, brown cheese, and skis and stuff like that. [Then I ask], 'But what is typically Norwegian today? Do you think all Norwegians eat brown cheese, and that is what characterizes our culture?' Then it often turns out that, no, that is not what we are concerned with today. And the culture we have today and the cultural expression we have today are influenced by being a multicultural country. And then they feel like part of it and write papers about it. ... The few who care enough to write a proper paper give an expression of identifying with the new definition of the typical Norwegian that we have created together.

Vegard explained that nearly 80% of his pupils had immigrant backgrounds, underlining that the discussion about what it meant to be Norwegian occurred with new pupils every year. Teachers at Eastern High also told stories about Norwegian culture being a subject that came up during classes. From my observations and interviews with the teachers from multi-ethnic classrooms, pupils typically expressed feeling more Norwegian by the end of discussions about being or feeling Norwegian than at the beginning of those discussions. This appeared due to teachers working with the Norwegianness concept in two ways. First, they moved the debate from one centred around ethnicity or Whiteness to a discussion about citizenship in line with the citizenship discourse. Other times, teachers actively opened the 'cultural box' of Norwegianness to expand the concept of Norwegian culture and be more inclusive in discussions around what it means to be Norwegian. In the preceding example, the teacher actively moved the cultural boundaries from centred on the stereotypical image of Norwegian culture (brown cheese, skiing, and family cabins) to a more inclusive understanding of Norwegian culture based on its current diverse population. Vegard explicitly stated that, together, the teachers and his pupils have created a new definition of what it means to be Norwegian. The teachers' experiences with opening the concept of Norwegianness align with findings from a participatory research project in which pupils were encouraged to co-construct national belonging. The study's results indicated that when teachers facilitate discussions on national belonging, they give space to different experiences the teachers can use to discuss themes such as race, ethnicity, and diversity (Erdal & Strømsø, 2018).

Expanding the concept of culture and thereby blurring the boundary of Norwegianness is a strategy that works in a way that can be inclusive. A challenge for teachers occurs when cultural elements such as food, clothing or music slide into values that are not open for different understandings. The difference between the cultural discourse and the value discourse is blurred and overlapping, and thus analytically separated to catch the two contradictory strategies teachers use. Because the value, for example of gender equality, cannot be expanded, the teachers' strategy was to expose their pupils to what the teachers regarded as 'typical Norwegian' values.

### **Exposing pupils to 'Norwegian values'**

Several teachers at Eastern High felt it was their responsibility to expose their pupils to topics such as sexual orientation, sexual liberalism, and gender equality – central values in school documents. Studies have shown that values like sexual liberalism and gender equality are values individuals must endorse to define themselves as Norwegian; hence, support for these values can be understood as part of being Norwegian (Gullestad, 2002a; Røthing & Svendsen, 2011).



This resonates with a study of religious education in Norway, in which Iversen (2012, p. 182) argued that values are mobilized to construct boundaries of national belonging. At Eastern High, the teachers included the pupils in the 'Norwegian *we*'. At the same time, they stressed that their pupils differed from the majority because they lacked many Norwegian value references that majority teachers and some majority pupils took for granted.

Nina, a teacher at Eastern High, exposed her pupils to what she understood as Norwegian youth culture and gender equality, as shown in the following interview excerpt:

Nina: I think about it a lot – with regard to Islam and gender equality. I try to appear as an equal woman. And be like, 'I am your teacher; I expect you to respect me, then I will respect you'. And show the girls in the class that it is possible to get an education and do well. I wear pants and make my own decisions. And with the girls that behave very carefully, I encourage them to take up a little more space. I keep telling them to taste life a little. ... Sometimes, I show movie clips that they think are over the line, and I say, 'You have to deal with this'.

Interviewer: Have you done that?

Nina: Yes. They get totally shocked if someone kisses in a film.

Interviewer: Can you give an example?

Nina: Yes, in 'A Doll's House',<sup>6</sup> for example. There are kissing scenes between Nora and Helmer. Seeing that is a crisis for some. They do not want to see it.

Interviewer: What do you say?

Nina: I say, 'This is good for you. You have to deal with this; this is how the world works'.

Heidi at Eastern High told a similar story of how she was accused of showing the pupils pornography because there was a sex scene in a film they watched. During one lesson I observed in Heidi's class, I noted many pupils' negative reactions when a boy and a girl kissed in a video clip. I asked Heidi why she kept showing clips such as that one, given the students' reactions. She answered, 'I believe they cannot be spared from everything. They have to be exposed to some things. And I think this is quite common for young people to watch, so they can tolerate it, too'.

In the preceding examples, the teachers openly talked about values such as gender equality and sexual liberalism as things that are not internalized in their pupils because of their own or their parents' immigrant backgrounds. The teachers' reasons for exposing the pupils to these values was to include them in what the teachers regarded as important aspects of being Norwegian and to give them knowledge and tools to fit in with the majority. The discourse of values created a bright boundary of nationhood. The teachers saw their role as one to change how students with immigrant backgrounds from more conservative societies thought about gender roles and sexuality, as part of the teachers' role of facilitating social participation and democratic citizenship.

<sup>6</sup> 'A Doll's House' is Norwegian playwright [tergh](#) Henrik Ibsen's most famous play, written in 1879.

### **Avoiding the discourse of ethnicity and Whiteness**

In the two primarily homogeneous ethnic majority classrooms at Western High, teachers tried to avoid discourses about ethnicity and Whiteness around pupils with immigrant backgrounds in fear of (re)producing a bright boundary of national belonging. In contrast to the classrooms at Eastern High, where different ethnic backgrounds were a natural part of both the teachers' and the pupils' discourses, the teachers at Western High explained that they sometimes found it challenging to teach about subjects such as racism or prejudice, which might highlight visible differences among the pupils.

In an interview, Gunn, a teacher at Western High, explained that she strived to not single out pupils. She explained how the difference between White/non-White could be used to create bright boundaries of belonging, but that she worked hard to make it invisible. Gunn was from a different Nordic country and used her identity as a foreigner in her teaching:

Well, for example, when we talk about prejudice – and, you know, there are three pupils in the class who have – two of them have Pakistani backgrounds, the third one probably has a Thai background. Of course, I have to say things they feel comfortable with. They must not be singled out in any way. So, when we talk about prejudice, I try. ... It can almost get a little pathetic. I turn to the prejudices Norwegians might have against people from the other Nordic countries. And then I put myself in a weak position. ... But I understand that my experience with prejudice is more like friendly teasing. I must not compare myself with the deep-rooted racism that some of the pupils encounter. But because I have put myself in that position, there actually was a pupil who told me that her mom had been spit on because she was wearing a hijab. And I think maybe it came from me daring to show myself as weak and vulnerable.

When talking about prejudice against people from her home country, Gunn avoided putting the spotlight on the pupils who were non-White and thereby making them representatives of 'the other'.

Other teachers at Western High also talked about how they handled having a few pupils with minority backgrounds in the classroom. Magnus stressed, '[One must] take into account the human dimension' when, for example, teaching about racism and prejudice – especially in classrooms he called 'comically White'. It was challenging to teach about subjects that were abstract phenomena for most pupils but embodied experiences for the few minority pupils. Trine, another teacher at Western High, explained how one of her minority students took it upon herself to represent her ethnic group in a classroom of students who represented the majority. Trine had discussed with her colleagues how to support this girl, who was 15 years old and sometimes started crying when 'defending' her views.

In these examples, the teachers talked about how they tried to avoid discourses of ethnicity and Whiteness with a strategy of not putting the spotlight on pupils who were non-White and 'look different' from most pupils in the classroom. At the same time, those teachers were aware that some pupils might feel exposed when discussing themes that actualized differences. The teachers were uncertain how to talk about it without opposing the aim of an inclusive school system.

### **Conclusion**

National identity and belonging are dynamic and currently under (re)construction in several European countries (Vassenden, 2010) due to increased immigration (Alba, 2005). Teachers act as representatives of the state in the primary arena where young people interact across ethnic,

religious, and racial boundaries; thus, teachers play a significant role in (re)defining Norwegianness. How national belonging is discussed in the classroom is important to whether pupils feel included or excluded in the 'Norwegian we'. In exploring how teachers manage Norwegianness, the use of different discourses in the classroom became evident, as reflected in the theoretical framework that guided my analysis. Teachers and pupils drew on the discourses of citizenship, cultural aspects, ethnicity, Whiteness, and values when talking about everyday understandings of national belonging. However, when teachers must manage discourses of Norwegianness, different school contexts and everyday classroom interactions lead to different strategies.

The Norwegian school system's core values of equality and inclusiveness give precedence to the citizenship discourse, which creates an inclusive and bright boundary of who can be understood as Norwegian. Teachers' main challenge is to manage the understandings of Norwegianness that move beyond the citizenship discourse. They choose different strategies – such as *expanding the concept of 'Norwegian culture'*, *exposing the pupils to 'Norwegian values'*, or *avoiding the discourse of ethnicity and Whiteness*.

The school context influenced which discourses were activated and which strategy teachers used. Two strategies – expanding the concept of 'Norwegian culture' and exposing the pupils to 'Norwegian values' – were activated in schools where minorities constituted the majority. As shown in observations from Eastern High and interviews with teachers from Eastern High and Eastern High 2, both teachers and pupils used the cultural and value discourses. When faced with the cultural discourse, teachers tried to expand students' understanding of 'Norwegian culture' by including minorities' everyday experiences. Consequently, they made the boundaries of Norwegianness more blurred and inclusive. I identified a difference in strategies when the theme changed from 'Norwegian culture' to 'Norwegian values'. What I define as 'the value discourse' supplemented Vassenden's (2010, 2011) discursive oppositions as a subcategory to the discourse of cultural meaning. When dealing with the value discourse, teachers chose the strategy of exposing pupils to so-called 'Norwegian values'. By doing so, they kept the boundary of Norwegianness bright. Teachers experienced it as an obligation to talk about values such as gender equality and sexual liberalism, so their pupils could gain knowledge and 'hopefully' adopt the non-negotiable values.

A challenge for teachers was how to manage the ethnicity and Whiteness discourse without putting an uncomfortable spotlight on students who look different from the majority. At Western High, where most pupils had the majority background, the discourses around ethnicity and Whiteness could be used in interaction with the few students who had minority backgrounds. Most teachers found it challenging to teach about racism and immigration when there were few students with minority backgrounds. They did not want students to experience having to represent a group. The teachers expressed uncertainty talking in the classroom about different experiences of being Norwegian that went against their inclusive aspirations.

When discourses that distanced teachers from the legal concept of Norwegianness were used, it was hard for teachers to talk about being Norwegian in ways that included all the pupils. One reason for this challenge might be the teachers' lack of legitimacy in talking about differences in the Norwegian school system because the 'unitary school system' represents values tied to 'imagined sameness' (Gullestad, 2002b; Røthing & Svendsen, 2011). If everybody is the same, then how does one talk about experienced differences?

This article contributes to the literature on how diversity is managed in the Norwegian educational system by highlighting how teachers manage boundaries of Norwegianness. It also complements the literature on national belonging. It shows how institutional representatives, such as teachers, also must manage different understandings of national belonging by using their professional discretion to fit it into the prescribed framework. Teachers need more knowledge to allow them to engage with the very real boundaries that divide classrooms and communities in today's diverse student population without compromising the goal of an inclusive school system.

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