Article

Beyond exceptionalism: Decolonising the Nordic educational mindset

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Abstract

The idea of Nordic countries as benevolent, egalitarian nations largely innocent of colonialism, is increasingly challenged by researchers. Yet, there is still reluctance within Nordic education systems to properly examine issues of coloniality, race, and white privilege. In this conceptual paper we first draw on research from Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden to deconstruct the notion of Nordic exceptionalism. We highlight a shared history of colonial complicity and ongoing coloniality towards Indigenous and minoritised groups. We also show that the Nordic emphasis on societal equality is based on a narrative of cohesion, an *imagined sameness*, that increasingly fails to reflect their diverse populations. This egalitarian ideology results in colour-blindness in society and an unwillingness to acknowledge or confront issues of race, white supremacy, or inequality for fear of disturbing the equilibrium.

Using decolonial theory, we then suggest that within education, Nordic exceptionalism has led to a singular historical narrative and attempts to assimilate minoritised groups, in the process valorising Western epistemology. Educators either dismiss, or are ignorant of, what Quijano (2000) terms the *colonial matrix of power*: the system of Western domination that continues to normalise epistemic violence and devalue other knowledges and perspectives. Educators prefer to protect white sensitivities rather than allow critical discussion and uncomfortable questions of coloniality. We demonstrate that Nordic education needs to decolonise itself, but that this cannot be achieved until it overcomes a *discomfort with difference* that prevents alternative knowledges and practices from being valued or adopted. We conclude with some thoughts on how to begin this process.

Keywords: decoloniality, equality, mindset, Nordic education, Nordic exceptionalism

Introduction

Within education globally there is growing interest in decolonisation as an opportunity to critically examine existing structures and knowledges. Decoloniality as a concept is now part of mainstream educational language and is the subject of much academic research and discussion (Stein et al., 2020). In the Nordics, there is growing research on the historical and societal dimensions of coloniality (see Groglopo & Suárez-Krabbe, 2023; Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2016; Vuorela, 2016). Yet to date few studies are centred on education (Eriksen, 2021) or how to go about decolonising it. Indeed, in Nordic educational systems there is still little acknowledgement of how coloniality shapes current practices or how it may marginalise minoritised perspectives and knowledges (Groglopo & Suarez-Krabbe, 2023; Massao & Bergersen, 2024; Menon et al., 2021). In this conceptual article we draw on research from four countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden) to identify a specifically Nordic concept of exceptionalism, characterised by an ongoing denial of

coloniality and the conflation of equality with cultural and racial sameness. As scholars interested in teacher education, we examine how these notions are reproduced across Nordic educational systems and their consequences. Applying decoloniality theory, we argue that Nordic education's complacency must be challenged and discuss how it could be reimagined in a critical perspective.

Exceptionalism in the Nordics

Much of Nordic education's curious reluctance to embrace decoloniality can be attributed to *exceptionalism.* Claims of exceptionalism are based on national practices and notions of identity that construct an imaginary of a society and its citizens as somewhat "better" than others (Suša, 2016). The Nordic countries share many aspects of exceptionalism, seeing themselves as beacons of democracy, equality, and progressive values untainted by colonialism (Eriksen, 2018; Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2016). Abroad, they have sought to brand themselves as humanitarian superpowers: morally progressive and politically neutral societies that are supportive of the Global South and well-positioned to mediate between ex-colonised states and former colonial powers. At home, they are democracies built on the principle of equality and support for underrepresented groups (Eriksen, 2018; Seppola, 2023).

In this paper we identify and examine two shared aspects of what we term *Nordic exceptionalism,* which we see as relevant to all their educational systems. Firstly, Nordic countries position themselves as peripheral to the European history of colonialism and contemporary globalisation (Eriksen, Jore, et al., 2024; Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2016; Stein et al., 2020). This view either denies or minimises the role of Nordic states in both historical colonialism abroad and ongoing coloniality at home (Keskinen, 2019). In effect, the argument is: we were (and are) not complicit in colonial practices, therefore why should we need to decolonise? Yet a growing body of scholarship indicates that Nordic countries share a history of direct or tacit colonial complicity abroad (Eriksen, 2021; Keskinen, 2019; Stein et al., 2020). Moreover, there is ongoing coloniality within their territories against minoritised and Indigenous Peoples (such as Greenlander and Sámi), and a silencing of their histories and epistemologies (Keskitalo & Olsen, 2021; Lehtola, 2015).

Nordic exceptionalism is also justified by an ideology of egalitarianism, which sees Nordic societies as paragons of equality, supported by ideals of democracy and human rights (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2016). However, we argue that this view relies on an *imagined sameness* (Gullestad, 2002): an out-of-date idea of Nordic nations as homogenously white 'natural' entities (Hübinette & Lundström, 2014), rather than increasingly diverse, multicultural states built on the territories of several peoples. This false narrative results in *colour-evasiveness*: the denial that racism is a real social phenomenon or that race is a relevant concept (Eriksen & Stein, 2022). Instead, differences are downplayed and individuals who are too different are ignored or excluded from the narrative (Svendsen, 2014). Seikkula (2022) explains that this Nordic

"epistemology of ignorance" is characteristic of Wekker's (2016) notion of *white innocence*, which builds on the "assumption of a small, childlike nation who is always guilt-free" (p. 793). Overall, we suggest that there is a *discomfort with difference* and a strong desire to continue to emphasise society as homogenous.

A fresh look at these issues is necessary, as the image of Nordic states as benevolent and neutral "good guys" is becoming increasingly difficult to uphold. Right-wing Nordic governments have scaled back or stopped support to the Global South, whilst increasing restrictions on immigration tarnish the earlier image of being hospitable to those who need protection. Meanwhile Finland and Sweden's entry into NATO further weakens any claims to neutrality. In the rest of this paper, we outline our theoretical framework before developing the arguments above. We suggest that Nordic exceptionalism is deeply embedded in its education systems and conclude with some ideas of how our educational models might be challenged and reimagined.

Our positionality

Within decolonial discourses it is important to acknowledge how our positionalities as authors affect our research. As Stein et al. (2020) emphasise, "place matters a great deal in the production of knowledge … both in terms of the imprint of our physical geographies, and our social positions as knowledge producers" (p. 46). Our collaboration arose through discussions within the *Global Teaching for Sustainable Society (GLOSS) research network*, where we realised the need to examine our own contexts and blind spots. As scholars at Nordic universities focused on teacher education, all but one of us are white European. We recognise that we are both products of, and actors within, the hegemonic educational systems that we seek to critique. We, too, are complicit. Although we hope to offer Nordic perspectives based on our own situated experiences, these are inevitably partial and not representative of our institutions or communities. Moreover, although we write collectively, we represent different viewpoints. Thus, our arguments are invitations to engage in decolonial discussions and 'lean in' to complexity, rather than attempts to establish a position.

Theoretical approaches

Engaging with decoloniality in education is undoubtedly a complex and uncertain undertaking, with multiple dimensions and approaches (Stein et al., 2020). To apply theories of decoloniality we first need to describe the colonial concepts it seeks to engage. Coloniality's roots are the historical process by which majority white European and Western nations exerted territorial, political, social, and cultural power over non-western territories from the 15th century onwards (Quijano, 2000). Despite most of these territories (re)gaining independence since World War II, the West continues to dominate and exploit, globally and

locally, through a system which Quijano (2000) terms the colonial matrix of power. The colonial matrix of power describes the colonial epistemologies and power relations which continue to inform present-day society and institutions (Eriksen & Svendsen, 2020) and encompasses four linked spheres of influence: economic, political, gender/sexuality, and knowledge (Quijano, 2000).

Within education, decolonial scholars such as Mignolo (2009) argue that coloniality controls and reproduces Enlightenment knowledge. The colonial matrix of power manifests through ideologies of modernity, development, democracy, and human rights (Eriksen, 2021). These knowledge traditions, along with Western humanist values, claim universal relevance and agreement, and in doing so deny the legitimacy of non-Western knowledges (Stein et al., 2020). As Eriksen and Svendsen (2020) explain, coloniality in education promotes European modernity, justifies de facto white supremacy, and positions the knowledges and ways of life of others as inferior or irrelevant. But how do we dismantle such an entrenched system?

To decentre Europe, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) puts it, we must disrupt the hegemony of colonial knowledge production**.** The decolonial process requires us to first recognise, and then systematically dismantle, existing colonial systems of power (Groglopo & Suárez-Krabbe, 2023; Quijano, 2000). To do this, Mignolo (2009) proposes that we undertake an *epistemic delinking*. This involves opening education up to diverse epistemologies, histories, and voices (Menon et al., 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Importantly, decolonial approaches do not mean to replace Western epistemology. Instead, they seek to recast universal knowledge as pluriversal, not just the pervasive Eurocentric education model reproduced almost everywhere through commercial internationalisation (Mbembe, 2016).

Mignolo (2011) also emphasises that the decolonial project is not linear, with a distinct goal or point of arrival. Nor is it static, or merely an individual endeavour. Its objective is to challenge Western rationality's claim to be the only possible basis for cognition, analysis, and living one's life by opening up, making visible, and advancing fundamentally different perspectives and positionalities (Massao & Bergersen, 2024). Decoloniality also involves adopting more relational attitudes towards issues such as privilege and oppression (Maldonado-Torres, 2016), which invite educators to think *with*, rather than just *about,* peoples, subjects, struggles, or knowledges (Massao & Bergersen, 2024). This approach links well with Freire's (2000) critical pedagogy, which stresses the necessity of becoming critically aware of power inequities, or *critical consciousness*, before acting. Freire (2000) insists on the participation of the oppressed to change their reality, and views students and educators as co-learners.

Thus, as Mbembe (2016) concludes, the decolonising turn requires both a critique of the current Western hegemonic model, and imagining new, different models. Groglopo and Suarez-Krabbe (2023) describe this

first process of systematic recognition and dismantling as decolonising *from*; the second, positive process as decolonising *for*. Accordingly, we turn first to the case for decolonising *from* Nordic coloniality.

Nordic colonial exceptionalism: Decolonising *from*

It is increasingly clear that the identities of the Nordic nations are built on "selective interpretations of historical events" (Jensen, 2016, p. 105). A growing body of scholarship is exposing "amnesia and sanctioned ignorance in relation to their colonial histories, legacies and structures" (Eriksen, Jore, et al., 2024, p. 1; see also Keskinen, 2019; Rastas, 2016; Stein et al., 2020). Moreover, as Vuorela (2016) explains, beyond active colonisation the Nordic nations are also complicit in coloniality—far from being innocent outsiders, they have supported Western patterns of thinking as a universal truth.

Historic colonial involvement

Danish colonial history dates back to the 17th century, when trading companies and colonies were strategically established in India, the West Indies, the African Gold Coast and Greenland (Eliassen, 2024). Protestant missionaries subsequently set up schools to introduce Christianity to pagans. Through this trade and missionary engagement, a narrative of Denmark as the benevolent helper arose, bringing civilisation to Indigenous peoples (Jensen, 2016). In Greenland, this 'civilising mission' meant that Christianity was an intertwined and inseparable part of the education system. For example, until 1964 prospective primary schoolteachers attended an integrated teacher and chaplain training to prepare them for educational and religious service in Greenland's communities (Danish Ministry for Greenland [DMG], 1964).

In a union with Denmark until 1814, Norway too was involved in both colonialism and slavery, as evidenced by the discovery of a slave trade ship off its coast (Eliassen, 2024). Thomas and Von Hof (2024) report that Norwegian ships accounted for 35% of all Danish-Norwegian slave tonnage and together they transported at least 110,000 African slaves between 1670 and 1804 to the Danish West Indies. Sweden also participated in the slave trade, albeit on a limited scale. It also had colonies in Ghana and Saint Barthélemy in the Caribbean. Its complicity in colonial thinking is also clear from its participation in the 1884 Berlin Conference of European powers for the scramble for Africa (Nilsson, 2013).

By contrast, Finland is not usually considered to have been an external colonising power, as it never had colonies overseas (Lehtola, 2015) and was historically colonised itself by Sweden and Russia (Keskinen, 2019). Instead, Finns were historically deemed racially inferior 'outsiders' of Mongolian descent, not quite belonging to (white) Europe (Keskinen, 2019). This marginalisation caused great anxiety among the Finnish intellectual elite (Eriksen, Jore, et al., 2024). Consequently, during and after independence, Finns actively

pursued pseudoscientific research that created hierarchical divisions between themselves and 'non-civilised' others such as Sámi and Russians, as part of their ambition to become a part of modern Western Europe (Keskinen, 2019; Rastas, 2016). By embracing colonial ideas of dominant and subordinate races, Vuorela (2016) argues that the Finns were *complicit* in coloniality through "tacit acceptance of hegemonic discourses" (p. 20).

Coloniality at home

There is also increasing recognition of the Nordic countries' legacy of active colonial behaviour 'at home', especially against the indigenous Sámi peoples. Norway has a history of racist studies from the late 19th century, which categorised the Sámi as biologically inferior, primitive, and 'weak' in comparison to those of Nordic origin (Kyllingstad, 2012). In Sweden, anthropology studies in which Sámi were stripped naked and photographed were conducted by the State Institute for Racial Biology until the 1930s (Keskinen, 2019). Meanwhile in Finland, researchers dug up skulls and conducted unethical scalp measurements on Sámi people (Keskinen, 2019). Although there was no formalised assimilation policy (Keskitalo & Olsen, 2021), until the 1970s Sámi children in Finland were often forcibly removed from parents to attend boarding schools and punished for speaking Sámi (Lehtola, 2015). Epistemically, Sámi knowledges and ontologies continue to be excluded from curricula and devalued in other ways. Local Finns continue to challenge Sámi interpretations of Lapland history (Lehtola, 2015) whilst, despite criticism, neither Finland nor Sweden have signed the UN Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (Mörkenstam, 2019).

Denmark, meanwhile, has strategically pursued assimilationist policies within its territories. Under UN pressure to dismantle colonial structures, Denmark gave Greenland the status of a county in 1953, which integrated it into the Danish administrative and educational system (Jerris, 2024). As a consequence, teacher training in Greenland was modernised, secularised, and made to emulate the Danish programme where possible (DMG, 1964). As Jensen (2016) explains, this overlaying of existing social structures with Danish administrative reforms was particularly destructive to Greenlandic identity. It resulted in Danish teachers teaching subjects in Danish, using Danish textbooks, showing a lack of awareness of the importance of Inuit languages and culture for the formation of Inuit identity. For many Inuit this remains a sensitive situation, as evidenced recently when a Greenlandic MP who spoke in the Danish parliament was forced to vacate the podium after refusing to translate her speech into Danish (Bryant, 2024).

Signs of progress?

At a policy level, recent changes seem positive. Intensive efforts to strengthen Indigenous education led to the inauguration of Ilisimatusarfik, Greenland's university, in 1984 and growing numbers of educational

programmes are taught in Inuit (Lennert & Demant-Poort, 2021). Meanwhile, Finland, Norway, and Sweden have established Sámi parliaments to participate in decision-making processes and in self-administration (Mörkenstam, 2019). Historical colonial injustices are also being publicly recognised and scrutinised by Sámi Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (Gindt, 2023), and through apologies such as the Church of Sweden's ceremony in 2021 (Szpak & Bunikowski, 2021).

Yet, as Mörkenstam's (2019) examination of Sweden's indigenous rights regime illustrates, the values expressed in indigenous policies and structures are often contradicted by action, a situation he terms 'organised hypocrisy'. For example, despite legislation strengthening reindeer-herder rights, the exploitation of natural resources within Sápmi has significantly increased since the mid-1990s, a fact which has been critiqued by the UN's Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Ideology of egalitarianism

Many countries lay claim to equality. Yet Nordic societies, relying on an ideology of egalitarianism, see themselves as inherently more equal than most (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2016; Seppola, 2023). Norwegians, for example, twice voted against joining the EU, with the opposition successfully characterising EU membership as a threat to Norwegian egalitarianism (Seppola, 2023). But what distinguishes the Nordics is how equality is associated with sameness. For example, Gullestad (2002) explains that the commonly used Norwegian word *likhet*, which means sameness or likeness, also translates as equality; consequently "social actors must consider themselves as more or less the same in order to feel of equal value" (p. 46). Actual sameness is emphasised whilst differences are minimised (Svendsen, 2014). This approach to sameness results in an ethnification of national identity, with exclusionary and inegalitarian consequences. Thapar-Björkert and Farahani (2019) explain that, within the Swedish national imaginary, the boundaries between race and ethnicity are ignored and Swedishness is equated with whiteness, which excludes those who do not conform to this depiction. Similarly, the Finnish national identity became rooted in the idea of cultural and linguistic homogeneity during independence, driven largely by the Fennoman movement (Keskitalo & Olsen, 2021). As Eriksen and Jore et al. (2024) explain, this meant that the assimilation of minoritised and Indigenous peoples was perceived as necessary to build a 'civilised' Finnish nation.

Egalitarianism in this Nordic form is closely related not only to homogeneity, but to conformity and social cohesion. In the Norwegian conformist-oriented tradition, being too different threatens this notion of sameness (Fylkesnes, 2019) and may therefore be treated as a disturbance to the peaceful social order (Gullestad, 2002). Indeed, the increasing diversity of all Nordic societies in recent decades threatens the cosy consensus of imagined sameness and egalitarianism. As Hall (1996, in Jensen, 2016) observes, the "presence of the rest in the West" interferes with a country's claims to be unified and cohesive, instead

revealing how it really functions and how it treats different residents differently (p. 106). The way minoritised peoples such as the Sámi have been treated reveals the sinister side of equality as sameness, just as their presence challenges notions of a culturally homogenous society (Dankertsen & Lo, 2023).

Sameness is seen as a necessary step towards equality amongst citizens, whilst to be different from the majority is seen as a threat. Gullestad (2002) warns that the 'disturbance' of increased immigration has provoked a racist discourse, based on principles of white, Norwegian, and Christian universality and superiority. These racialised principles are used to determine (imagined) sameness and whether someone 'belongs'. Forssling (2020), meanwhile, refers to an ideology of Nordicism, which views the Nordic race as superior. Nordicism persists in mass media, political right-wing discussion and the increasing interest in Vikings and Old Norse culture (Kyllingstad, 2012). In extreme cases it has resulted in terrorism from those who see multiculturalism as a threat to the Nordic race (Bangstad, 2014). As Dankertsen and Lo (2023) conclude, apparently egalitarian traditions may result in inegalitarian effects for people who either cannot, or will not, conform to the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour of the majority population.

A race-free society?

A consequence of the Nordic emphasis on sameness is the dismissal of race as a relevant concept. All five Nordic countries (including Iceland) are consistently judged amongst the happiest countries in the world (Helliwell et al., 2024) and amongst the top countries for human rights and democracy (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2016). These judgements help to fuel an exceptionalist narrative which denies that racism exists as a social phenomenon (Eriksen & Stein, 2022) and which downplays the idea of white privilege (Gullestad, 2002). For example, as Jensen et al. (2017) highlight, in Denmark racism refers to Nazism or to apartheid, whilst racist incidents are generally denied or represented as exceptional and individual. Yet despite claims that equity and equality are deeply engrained in Nordic education and society, in reality not everyone is treated equally, and issues of white supremacy linger. White supremacy works intersectionally through other inequalities such as class, gender, sexuality, and geography. In societies emphasising sameness and ideas of exceptionalism, reproduction of a hidden white supremacy can interlink with the colonial matrix of power. For example, research by Rastas (2016) reveals a persistent belief among some that Finnish society has no history of racism. Using interviews and document analysis, she examines the use of the term *neekeri* (nigger); although acknowledged as racist and pejorative elsewhere, in Finland it is deemed neutral and harmless, and therefore legitimate. Rastas (2016) adds that there is "a kind of ignorance of the presence and the well-being of the African and black populations in Finland" (p. 95). This wilful blindness extends to culture. It is only recently that the appropriateness of Finland's Christmas *tiernanpojat* (starboys) tradition, where a white boy blackens their face to depict one of the three Wise Men, has become subject to critique.

Defenders argue that challenging it is an attack on a tradition that is not racist in origin (Wall, 2018). By contrast, recent research by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (2023) shows that over half of people of African descent experienced discrimination in Finland within the last year, one of the worst levels surveyed.

In Norway, similar findings challenge the prevailing idea of a colour-blind society or education. A recent study by the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth, and Family Affairs (BUFDIR, 2024) found that 71% of immigrant school children from Africa (except North Africa) experienced discrimination last year. In schools, Eriksen and Stein (2022) conclude that minoritised groups experience various forms of racism, from microaggressions and being undervalued, to hate speech and violence. Meanwhile, these acts are often misunderstood, downplayed, and unreported by school staff and leaders (Nyegaard, 2024).

The importance and relevance of race and underlying notions of white supremacy can also be seen in national policies. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI, 2022) highlights Danish legislation on social housing, which refers to the percentage of so-called "non-western" residents as a criterion to determine whether an area qualifies as a "parallel society" and therefore potentially subject to eviction policies; it notes that this has been classified as discriminatory by the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (p. 24). This law implicitly affirms the supremacy of Western (white) citizens, who are 'better' as they do not require an eviction policy. The ECRI (2022) also points to Danish passivity in addressing instances of hate speech, which is justified with reference to the importance of upholding the right to freedom of expression. For Jensen et al. (2017), these Danish policies are "mechanisms of exclusion" (p. 66) which deny racism whilst stereotyping immigrant culture as problematic. For example, a 2005 equal opportunities action plan linked a lack of employment opportunities to the clothing of "ethnic minority women" (Jensen et al., 2017, p. 65).

Finally, we find it interesting to observe that, in Norway at least, much of the literature on Nordic egalitarianism has been written in Norwegian (Dankertsen & Lo, 2023). The image of Nordic countries as leaders in egalitarianism is thus largely left unquestioned within Anglophone academic discourse. In reality, the evidence suggests that Nordic societies are far from being cohesive paragons of equality for whom race is an irrelevance. Instead, they exhibit troubling issues of inequality, racism and white supremacy that continue to be downplayed or ignored. But to what extent is education implicated in this?

Education—problem or solution?

Education offers the wonderful possibility of a decolonial, socially equitable, and sustainable future. Moreover, the importance of promoting principles of equality and human dignity is clearly stated in Nordic national curricula and policy documents (for example Opetushallitus, 2016; Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2019).

Despite this, Nordic exceptionalism is deeply rooted in its educational institutions (Eriksen & Stein, 2022), along with (neo)colonial ideas that normalise racism, epistemic violence, and the Western capitalist system (Eriksen, 2018; Svendsen, 2014). In Denmark, for example, Klai (2021) finds that history textbooks continue to rely on a problematic colonial discourse of adventurers venturing out in the world to bring exotic goods (and people) from the new world home.

Nordic education, perhaps due to a (white?) superiority mindset, also finds it difficult to acknowledge or accept sources of knowledge from outside the mainstream (Thapar-Björkert & Farahani, 2019). Within Sweden, education is based on Eurocentric epistemic and knowledge production and knowledges from minoritised and colonised groups such as the Sámi (Balto & Johansson, 2015) and residents with foreign backgrounds are not given the place they deserve (Thapar-Björkert & Farahani, 2019). Thapar-Björkert and Farahani add that it is only the white scholars of the country that are considered capable of producing valid knowledge, and there is less willingness to investigate the colonial heritage of these epistemic practices in producing knowledge. Another powerful example of this is highlighted by Kohvakka (2024), whose research reveals the absence of Sámi and minoritised groups from Finnish history textbooks and curricula. Her analysis uncovers how the assimilation of the Sámi is referred to in textbooks as Finnicization rather than colonialism, positioning it as a move towards unity and sameness rather than an act of epistemic violence. She argues that ignorance of these histories is not passive, but a deliberate, active act designed to reinforce the dominant discourse of Finland as a homogenous country. As Eriksen and Svendsen (2020, p. 4) remind us, "curricula indicate what counts as worth knowing and who counts as knowers". Here, the lack of coverage of the history of the Sámi and other minoritised groups, and the language used to describe their assimilation, is a good example of Quijano's (2000) colonial matrix of power in action.

Educational institutions are often still unaware of unwritten rules (or blind spots) that have a gatekeeping function, and which can lead to the reproduction of differences. For example, action research conducted by Tkachenko et al. (2016) with student teachers in Norway shows how cultural differences in interpreting facial gestures can affect performance. In oral presentations, (Norwegian) examiners used a direct gaze to express interest and support; however, some students felt that this meant that what they were saying was wrong, which affected how they responded. Thus, a lack of intercultural communication knowledge, or an unwillingness to include this knowledge in practice, can reproduce differences in academic assessments (Tkachenko et al., 2016).

We must nevertheless remember that colonial patterns are not simply maintained because of a lack of knowledge; they are reproduced in affective ways as well. Providing more knowledge about coloniality is not enough to transform education in practice. Eriksen and Stein (2022) warn that the privileges that the

colonial matrix of power confers on white Nordic citizens, the "feeling, looking and being seen as good", can often override a sense of moral duty or intellectual commitment to equity (p. 17). Whites can simply choose not to acknowledge the significance of race in *their* society. As Shotwell (2016, in Eriksen & Stein, 2022, p. 226) observes, the problem that whiteness raises is not simply a question of knowledge, but a "habit-of-being problem". Education has the potential to address this unconscious habit. However, it needs to recognise that opportunities for discussions about race and coloniality can be shut down for fear of disturbing the white emotional equilibrium (Zembylas, 2018). In Nyegaard's (2024) qualitative study of 14 Norwegian principals, the issue of racism in schools was (ironically) avoided by some for fear of subjecting students to "harmful awareness" or "unnecessary harm" (pp. 12 –13). Another did not use the term racism "because we wish to focus on the fact that we have mutual values"– an example of imagined sameness being used to prioritise conformity and social cohesion over uncomfortable realities (Nyegaard, 2024, p. 12). Meanwhile, those who cause discomfort by pushing back against Nordic exceptionalism and white innocence are punished (Ahmed, 2024; Zembylas, 2018).

Reluctance to (self) critique

Complicity does not just include active acts, but also staying silent or ignoring coloniality. Hayes et al. (2021, p. 898) claim that "the reproduction of coloniality in higher education […] is perpetuated by a lack of reflexivity among higher education managers, academics and teachers of their own epistemological situatedness" (see also Groglopo & Suarez-Krabbe, 2023). Why is this? The challenge, as Eriksen and Stein (2022) argue, is that exceptionalist discourses may lead to institutions ignoring a key purpose of education in democratic societies, which is to challenge, upset and transform unjust social relations.

Menon et al. (2021) found that the system of Finnish education is accepted uncritically, and that there is an absence of decolonial discussion in educational research. Its claim to be based on strong equitable principles, like Finnish society more generally, arguably serves to discourage decolonial critique. Simpson et al. (2019) found similar narratives in interviews with Finnish professors visiting South Africa. Participants brushed off concerns of neocolonialism with claims that Finland was colonised rather than a coloniser. With local researchers, Simpson et al. demonstrated paternalistic attitudes that positioned the professors as the experts helping the locals to write. The hegemony and 'correctness' of the Finnish educational model were never questioned. Indeed, as Menon et al. (2021) conclude, it may even be that Finnish education export initiatives "represent a form of neocolonialism, legitimised by the neoliberal marketisation of excellence" (p. 944).

In Norway, research from Eriksen and Stein (2022) found that student teachers typically damped down opportunities for critical discussions about the politics of difference, and worked to ease students' feelings

of discomfort when they did occur. Avoiding these discussions was positioned as a form of care. This implies a belief that critiquing Nordic exceptionalism, structural inequalities, or the hegemony of Western epistemology might somehow harm students. Yet this type of caring, which protects white sensitivities and controls critical discussion of differences, can oppress minoritised students. It can also result in lost opportunities among both students and teachers for reflective learning and the reframing of perspectives (Eriksen & Stein, 2022). As Bhabha (1994, in Jensen, 2016, p. 105) notes, the narrative of sameness within a system simultaneously invites a narrative of difference. A good example of this is Ahmed's (2024) ongoing doctoral research, which focuses on how minoritised perspectives and contributions are marginalised. She explains how as a minoritised student, she was afraid to engage in discussions about routine kindergarten issues during their teacher education because she did not have the "right" opinions and experiences. When she did express her opinions, she was often met with laughter or even anger. To overcome white resistance, as Eriksen and Stein (2022) conclude, teacher education must give trainee teachers the skills and means to identify and disrupt structures and behaviours that support the colonial matrix of power and reproduce white supremacy. This includes challenging policy where necessary. For example, Fylkesnes' (2019) critical discourse analysis of Norwegian teacher education policy and curriculum documents shows "a polished façade that glosses over the subtle and 'invisible' patterns in which the racialised discourses are formed and produced" (p. 416). She explains that this possible because the ideal of imagined sameness removes any obligation to recognise colonial legacies (Fylkesnes, 2019).

In summary, within Nordic education there appears to be a continued reluctance to admit to issues of race or to explicitly acknowledge coloniality. Instead of addressing decolonial critique, there is a discomfort with difference driven by a continuing narrative of sameness, dressed up as equality.

Decolonising *for* a new Nordic educational mindset

Moyo and Mutsvairo (2018, p. 27) explain that present-day coloniality is "subtle, invisible, ideological, substantive, and hegemonic", portraying European epistemology as the only perspective that has value. Within the Nordic nations, this invisibility is strengthened by a continuing reluctance to admit to colonial legacies and the perpetuation of a (false) narrative of sameness. Education is still characterised by a largely singular historical account which downplays or ignores Indigenous and minoritised perspectives, knowledges, and epistemologies. Moreover, Nordic exceptionalism feeds belief in the excellence of its education; we feel that we have little to learn from other systems, which reaffirms our epistemic superiority. It can also result in educators not wanting to see the challenges some students may have when they meet such a system. Yet good education should always be self-critical and open to new ideas. If Nordic education systems are unable to open themselves up to other epistemologies, they will eventually

stagnate. So how could we decolonise our educational mindset?

Adopting Maldonado-Torres' (2016) decolonial attitudes means thinking *with* different ways of learning and embracing student diversity, rather than insisting on sameness. Those who are marginalised or from outside the system are often able to ask different questions, which can lead education in new and exciting directions. For example, in Bergersen and Muleya's qualitative study (2019), students on exchange from Zambia challenged mindsets about learning, teaching, and knowledge during their year in Norway; but as important is the impact they had on Norwegian students' and lecturers' reframed perspectives. Freire's critical pedagogy can also help to expose how the dominant curriculum isolates some groups' historical disadvantage and present experiences. By becoming *critically conscious* of their disadvantage, curricula can be opened up to include their experiences and knowledges. Velásquez Atehortúa's (2020) case study, which also borrows directly from Mignolo's epistemic disobedience, demonstrates how critical pedagogy can be practised in the Nordics by assuming the role of a subversive scholar. To empower students on an introductory intersectionality course, he encouraged reflective writing to transform the classroom into a "contact zone", from which students could imagine new structures of political power (p. 164). He also tried to "awaken" their consciousness in two ways. First, by changing the curriculum to focus on literature from subaltern scholars; second, by opening up discussion about how his own discipline was part of a landscape of power (p. 162).

To transform the educational system, it is not just in textbooks or curricula that new and critical voices must be heard, but also as stories told in the classroom, or research based on personal experience. As a refugee in Norway, Abamosa (2024) used autoethnographical research to show how education designed to integrate immigrants actually marginalises them, and he highlighted the need for more disruptive pedagogies. It is clear that educators, too, need to be shaken out of their complacency, and two further Norwegian studies demonstrate the benefits of self-reflective practice for them. In Eriksen, Aamaas, and Bjerknes (2024), three teacher-educators engaged in collaborative autoethnography via a reading circle, aiming to add Indigenous perspectives to a teacher education programme. Their experiences widened their acceptance of what constitutes knowledge and prompted them to expand the types of literature they included in reading lists. Additionally, their insights encouraged them to engage with others by expanding partnerships with Sámi educators, and provided support for Mignolo's (2011) point that learning about coloniality must use contextually relevant examples.

Using a similar methodology, Olsson et al. (2024) reflected on their efforts to decolonise a teacher education course. Their findings underline the limits of how far White academics can advance decoloniality on their own, and therefore the importance of decentring, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) suggests. They

conclude that white introspection "needs to be complemented with relational perspectives and the practice of listening to silenced Others through invited lecturers, not least bringing in existing Indigenous Studies from a Sámi context" (Olsson et al., 2024, p. 74). What emerges is the importance of "unlearning" the hegemonic epistemological culture. For Nordic educators, this "letting go" of the narrative and sense of authority may often be uncomfortable. However, as Boler (1999, in Eriksen, Aamaas, and Berknes, 2024, p. 142) explains, to examine our self-beliefs and systems of understanding we must dwell in that discomfort.

Pashby and Sund (2020) also emphasise the importance of reflexivity, which they suggest is "in itself an action towards transformation" (p.80). In their small-scale study with teachers in Sweden, Finland, and England, they explored the use of Andreotti's (2012) HEADSUP tool, which describes seven ways in which educational approaches to global issues can reproduce the colonial matrix of power. Through workshop discussions, they found that using a frame such as HEADSUP helped teachers to critical engage students more deeply in reflecting on ongoing coloniality (Pashby & Sund, 2020).

Educators can also embrace different viewpoints through North-South mobility, which research shows can promote global awareness, intercultural competence, and critical understanding of one's position as a professional practitioner (Bergersen & Muleya, 2019; Massao & Bergersen, 2024). Finally, another important area is teacher training that calls attention to cultural blindspots. As Tkachenko et al. (2016) stress, rather than insisting that students conform to the existing practices of the majority community, educators should embrace increased diversity as an opportunity to challenge and transform educational practice.

We hope that the suggestions outlined above provoke discussions around decolonial journeys in education. To conclude, as teacher-educators we believe that there needs to be further frank and honest discussion about the Nordic countries' historic and ongoing roles in coloniality. We need to recognise our past complicity and actively critique ongoing injustices, whilst acknowledging positive changes too. In line with Mbembe (2016), we also need to embrace different ways of thinking. This means listening to marginalised histories and knowledge systems within our education system and including and valuing knowledge produced by epistemic practices outside Europe. As Mignolo (2011) suggests, we must challenge educators to think *with*, and not *about* people, subjects, and knowledges. This can help us to "tease out alternative possibilities for thinking life and human futures" (Mbembe, 2016, p. 44).

Nordic educators should also consider a broader debate on the interconnections between exceptionalism, equality as sameness, white supremacy, and notions of Nordic identity. Investigating blindspots and acknowledging colonial history and white privileges at individual and institutional levels can help avoid the reproduction of racialising and colonial structures within Quijano's (2000) colonial matrix of power. Perhaps

most importantly for the Nordic context, education needs to reassess how it approaches and discusses the concept of equality. The narrative of sameness must give way to a more nuanced approach that also recognises our differences. As Audre Lorde (1984) said[1], we need to have the courage to "reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside [oneself] and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there" (p. 112). Nordic education needs to get comfortable with difference.

Disclosure statement

The authors collaborated on this article as part of the Nordplus-funded Global Teaching for Sustainable Society (GLOSS) research network.

Note regarding authorship

Except for the first author, authors are listed alphabetically, which reflects the latter's equal contributions to the paper.

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[1] With thanks to Professor Rajendra Chetty for pointing us towards this quote.

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