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Article

Reproduction of assimilationist thinking in Norwegian social studies education: Breaking the cycle through reflective practice

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– We have learned that we, as teachers and teacher educators, need to be aware of the risk of reproducing uncritical approaches in educational interventions on migration.
– Without crucially reflecting on their own practice, even social studies teachers dedicated to anti-racist thinking risk reproducing assimilationist values.
– The article argues that this risk can be mitigated when teachers critically evaluate their own practice as a precondition for facilitating transformative learning in their students.

Purpose: The article aims to critically reflect on a classroom situation where we, as upper secondary social studies teachers, were complicit in reproducing and soliciting assimilationist values in a student assignment.

Design/methodology/approach: We use a critical reflective model to 1) reflect on our discomfort at this complicity, 2) analyse the assimilationist values reproduced, and 3) redesign the assignment to promote inclusive citizenship.

Findings: The article exposes the risk and potential of being vulnerable about our practice as teachers and of opening the classroom as a safe space for critical thinking.

Research limitations/implications: More research is needed on how social studies teachers understand integration and how they (re)design their own assignments.

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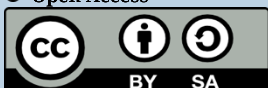

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1 INTRODUCTION

> Write a letter to a person who has recently migrated to Norway. The idea is to give them some insight into Norwegian culture and social norms. Tell them what informal social game rules are relevant **to fit into Norway**. Use your own experience of norms as a starting point. (Secondary School Social Studies Assignment, our emphasis)

In this article, we reflect on a classroom situation where we, as a social studies teacher and a migration researcher, set the above assignment, which reproduced monocultural thinking – despite our commitment to anti-racist values. In the following, we describe our own reflective journey towards reimagining the assignment, where we review both our practice and the assignment from a critical thinking perspective.

The assignment was part of a social studies module set in a publicly funded Upper Secondary school in a rural Norwegian town, Smallville. Smallville has a recently arrived new population of non-white migrant refugees, including young unaccompanied minors, who are segregated into an Adult Education facility. The classroom situation that we are discussing here, where the assignment was set, was in another school, Smallville Upper Secondary. The students in this class were exclusively white ethnic Norwegian students, meaning that the class did not include any refugee students or students with a migration background. These students generally have very little contact with the students in the neighbouring Adult Education building.

The impetus for the article was the “awareness of discomfort” (Atkins & Murphy 1993) we experienced in the process of receiving feedback from colleagues on the assignment text above and on the students’ responses. This feeling was based on the retrospective realisation that our assignment was based on assimilationist-type thinking. First, we became aware that the formulation was problematic: “Tell them what informal social game rules are relevant to fit into Norway”, implying that migrants should adapt to Norwegian social norms. Secondly, we realised that approaching the topic of migration via the concept of social norms had not been conducive to promoting critical perspectives.

Not surprisingly, then, the assignment drew assimilationist responses from the students. In their responses, students formulated letters addressed to the migrant residents where, following the task, they “told” them what they had to do to fit in. Their advice was focused on norms relating to behaving in public, how to dress, and what living in Norway is like. The most striking aspect of the letters was how often and consistently the students advised new migrant residents to adopt Norwegian values, behaviours or attitudes. Students, for example, told the letter’s addressees to “model themselves” on Norwegians in the ways in which they should behave in public, to act quietly and discretely when in town, to dress like Norwegians, and to appreciate Norway as a rich, beautiful country, which offers “many facilities and opportunities”. Reviewing these responses, we realised that rather than setting an assignment that would get students to think critically about migration, we reproduced the very type of assimilationist thinking we had set out to challenge.

The reflective journey we set out on helped us to reevaluate our own assumptions about migration and integration. In this process of revaluation, we found Atkins and Murphy's (1993) reflective practice model very helpful. Critical thinking was thus central both to our reflective journey and to the development of the proposed revised assignment. Adopting their model led us to imagine alternative, more critical ways of approaching the topic of migration. We did this by creating a revised assignment based on the concept of inclusive citizenship and by reframing the task along the principles of critical thinking approaches. This approach was inspired by the latest Norwegian social studies curriculum, which recommends teaching migration from a critical perspective through the notion of inclusive citizenship. Inclusive citizenship is elaborated on in the curriculum as enabling students to "assess social relations from different perspectives (…) scrutinise how power is organised (…) develop cultural understanding and understand why other people make different choices from ourselves" (Utdanningsdirektoratet [Directorate for Education], 2020). In the Norwegian context, the framework for teaching inclusive citizenship was developed by Solhaug (2021), who draws on the theoretical framework of Neila Kabeer (2005) and Ruth Lister (2008). In line with them, Solhaug allies the term with the concepts of justice, recognition, self-determination, solidarity and equal rights and opportunities to participate in social life (2021, p. 132). He suggests using inclusive citizenship as a productive frame for teaching about citizenship, helping students to understand differences, stimulating empathy, and giving students a sense of belonging, especially in school (p. 132).

We view our revised approach to teaching migration via the notion of inclusive citizenship as being in line with other approaches to citizenship and anti-racism education which take into account the ways in which, as Missira (2019) writes in the wider European context, "the dissolution of homogenous societies" has produced changes in the "determination of citizenship, as the need develops for co-existence of people who are neither blood-related nor have they long co-existed in the same area" (p. 57). Such approaches complement the traditional focus on formal aspects of citizenship, based on political systems and rights and responsibilities, with a more experiential, dialogic and empathetic perspective that fosters openness to new citizens and actively draws in their narratives. We view a focus on this second dimension of citizenship as a pre-condition to students' development as active participants in an inclusive society.

2 Citizenship education in a multicultural Europe

In the following, we look at educational responses to the challenges of teaching citizenship and related anti-racism education, which address the new "determination of citizenship" in an increasingly multicultural Europe, before situating our approach in relation to them.

Studies on social studies in Norway point to the persistent need for Norwegian education to address racism and to open classrooms to new understandings of citizenship. Svendsen's (2014) ethnographic study of Norwegian social studies teaching in Oslo suggests that Norwegian education may be reproducing racism through the denial of "race". She showed how teaching on racism is "conveniently" related to locations outside Norway,

closing down the conversation on current everyday experiences of racism. In a similar vein, Dansholm's (2022) study of citizenship education in 10th grade showed that students drew on Norwegianness as a concept of belonging as a substitute for the concept of citizenship. Dansholm points to "the conflation of white nationalism and citizenship within the public debate that some students draw on in discussions of citizenship" and suggests, like Svendsen, that educators should problematise this "more explicitly" (p. 93). Erdal (2021) also points to the need for Norwegian social studies teaching to directly address questions of "race" by including the perspectives of students with a migration background, who do not often have the opportunity to share their personal experiences in class. At the same time, following Kumashiro (2002) and Harlaup and Rise (2014), she points to problematic aspects of "using" migrant and refugee students as "experts" or "representatives" of their country of origin (p. 274). This resonates with another challenge related to opening the classroom to multiple perspectives, which happens when teachers encounter students who are not willing to share experiences or are receptive to new perspectives. In these situations, teachers need to be willing to leave room for *intentional non-action* (Biesta, 2020, p. 93; Svendsen & Skotnes, 2022)

A similar recommendation, relating to a Swedish study of teachers' didactic choices in teaching migration to 10- to 12-year-old students, also advises teachers to use "cases, pictures, stories, and affective dimensions could be useful when explaining migration" (Blanck, 2021, p. 70). Referring to Klafki's (2001) exemplary principle, Blanck suggests that teachers should "choose the kinds of knowledge and capabilities that are significant and relevant to the pupils in their educational practice" (Blanck, 2021, p. 72). She advocates that "a more effective and sensitive teaching about migration could be an in-depth orientation about pupils' previous knowledge and then broadening and widening this by specialised knowledge" (Blanck, 2021, p. 71).

Also, in the Swedish context, Arnebäck and Jämte (2022) investigate how Swedish teachers teach anti-racism in their schools and draw up a typology of teachers' approaches to this topic. They found that "some teachers emphasised the need to counter individual students' expressions of racism", while "others worked to challenge social norms of exclusion, institutional discrimination, monocultural learning environments or internalised restrictions" (p. 206). They argue that a range of strategies are needed to address the different forms of racism. Three of these were relevant to our approach: *a democratic* approach, which "involve[s] students in democratic dialogues", *a knowledge-focused* approach which "provide[s] opportunities for knowledge development and critical evaluation of sources of knowledge to prevent racism" and a *relational* approach which "enable[s] positive self-worth in students through recognition, care, respect and solidarity" (p. 207).

Harðardóttir and Jónsson (2021) also stress the importance of inclusive educational responses to refugee youth within national educational settings. Their approach is to re-centre citizenship education around refugee youth or "forced visitors", drawing on "the metaphor of teachers becoming visitors in their student's lives" (p. 41). They suggest that educational interventions should be centred around materials and settings where refugee

youth themselves “generate and share diverse world views and perspectives through their visual and narrative accounts” and that “the stories of these forced visitors are of critical importance to the process of educational inclusion and citizenship within educational settings in Europe” (p. 42).

Also, writing in the context of strengthening European citizenship education Missira (2019) points to the potential of foregrounding the notion of “active citizenship” as a way of approaching “new” demonstrations of citizenship which “presuppose the acceptance of the “other” and its recognition as an equal member of the society where he/she lives” (Tarrow, 1995, pp. 223-225, cited in Missira, 2019, p. 57). Missira (2019) stresses the importance of “moving beyond citizenship as voting” towards an understanding of the citizen as “someone who participates in public life (civil society and political life), who takes a role in the community, seeks information and is inspired by the aim of common good and the respect of human rights” (p. 56). Especially relevant to our study were the questions Missira suggests the education system needs to ask, such as: “Do we offer education that promotes healthy humanitarian ideals and critically thinking citizens?”; “What can be done to enhance not only the level of information and skills but also the level of engagement and participation in all aspects of democratic culture?” (p. 64).

Our study aims to address the Norwegian silence around race by combining the democratic, relational and knowledge-focused strategies identified by Arnebäck and Jämte (2022). Inspired by Harðardóttir and Jónsson (2021), we include stories written by “forced visitors” in our revised assignment. In the following, we describe the steps in our reflective journey towards reimagining the assignment, using these strategies within an inclusive citizenship framework. Before this, we give an account of the context of the study, the namely social environment of Smallville, the town where the school, Smallville Upper Secondary School, at the centre of this study is located, before describing the school itself, the learning context, and the background to the problematic assignment we set.

2.1 Context

Smallville Upper Secondary is situated in a small Norwegian rural town with a recently arrived new population of non-White migrant refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. These include a group of non-accompanied refugee minors. Despite the arrival of these new adolescent residents, Smallville Upper Secondary remains a predominantly white school. This is because the newly arrived migrant adolescent students are segregated from mainstream classes and assigned to the Smallville Adult Education school rather than integrated into Smallville Upper Secondary. Smallville Upper Secondary is also predominantly white because there is no history of non-white migration to this town until recently. There are, however, a few non-white students in Smallville Upper Secondary who have transferred from Adult Education after graduating from basic education here. However, in the class at the centre of this study, class 3B, there were only white students and no students with a migration background or no recently migrated students. The class

consisted of 22 white ethnic Norwegians aged between 17 and 18 years old. As a result of the policy of educational segregation, the students in this class had minimal personal contact with the non-white students of similar age in the nearby Smallville Adult Education school.

The wider social context of the study is the deeply rooted assimilationist thinking that pervades Norwegian society (Svendsen, 2014). While Norway's formal settlement policies refer to integration rather than assimilation (Norwegian Directorate of Integration and Diversity, IMDI), there seems to be a gap between political attitudes on one hand and societal attitudes on the other, which appear to favour assimilation (Berry et al., 2006, cited in Brook and Ottemöller 2020). This is supported by the 2023 nationwide survey of Norwegian attitudes towards immigrants, where around 31 % stated that "immigrants should try to become as similar to ethnic Norwegians as possible" (Statistics Norway, 2023). Similarly, in the educational context, a recent survey (NSD, skolevalgsundersøkelsen [School Election Survey]) showed that a third of Norwegian students believe immigration to be a threat towards what is "unique/distinctive" Norwegian (Solhaug, 2021, p. 127). The "positive" narratives around cultural sameness in the Norwegian public sphere are closely associated with the idea that Norway needs to be homogeneous to be a socially cohesive society capable of "preserv[ing] its essential characteristics in the fact of actual or imagined threats" (Keskinen et al., 2019, p. 2). These narratives imply a suspicion of difference and the idea that immigrants need to eradicate their differences to be integrated. In the Norwegian public sphere, concerns about immigration are often formulated in terms of fears that immigrants do not share or accept 'Norwegian' values (Sætermo et al., 2021, p. 18). As a result, the concept of immigrant integration has become equated with acquiring 'Norwegian' values, even though no one really seems to be able to say what these values are (Sætermo et al., 2021, p. 18). Anthropologist Marianne Gullestad describes the emphasis on cultural sameness as creating "an invisible fence for the acceptance of 'immigrants' as unmarked citizens who 'belong' in Norway" (2002, p. 59; Ringrose et al., 2023, p. 4).

Studies of educational contexts in the Nordic context suggest that "assimilationist and acculturation perspectives continue to be persistent and pervasive" (Lundberg, 2020, p. 2). In social studies education, Mari Jore (2022) and others (Svendsen et al., 2022; Ringrose et al., 2023) show how such perspectives contribute towards constructing exceptionalist, national and euro-centric images and narratives in Norway. Eriksen (2022) points to the challenge of addressing this type of thinking, noting that the "traditional focus on individual knowledge and attitudes in anti-racist education is insufficient" (p. 72). Leaning on Gorski (2008), Eriksen argues that when white teachers practice neutrality, this amounts to reproducing "colonising education" and that the alternative means "accepting the risk of losing likeability, altering our subjectivities, and being willing to be disliked by the powerful who will continue to resist" (2022, pp. 72-73).

Turning back to the local context of this study, we can describe Smallville Upper Secondary as an empirical site which "offer[s] insights into tensions between 'the fact of hybridity' (…) and a continued cultural and educational investment in a Norwegian national

imaginary which is invested in Whiteness and monoculturalism" (Svendsen, 2014, p. 10). In the town of Smallville, the tensions have been *more than symbolic*. In the months preceding our study, there had been several incidences of violence between non-white migrant adolescents and ethnic Norwegians, which drew considerable media attention (Skotnes & Ringrose, 2021).

When we set the assignment, class 3B was studying a module on social norms. At the same time, we were taking part in a Norwegian Research Council research project (LIM) promoting critical perspectives on migration. As part of this research project, we were due to conduct a text solicitation exercise on migration alongside a teacher of refugee students at Smallville Adult Education. As a result, we decided to adapt the school assignment on social norms so it could double as a text solicitation exercise for the migration research project. The text solicitation exercise was originally formulated like this:

> Write a letter to a newly arrived migrant resident and tell them what to expect when they arrive in Norway.

When the text formulation was adjusted to also address social norms, it was reframed as follows:

> Write a letter to a person who has recently migrated to Norway. The idea is to give them some insight into Norwegian culture and social norms. Tell them what informal social game rules are relevant to fit into in Norway. Use your own experience of norms as a starting point.

The students were told that the assignment was not to be graded or shared with the other students. Most of the students wrote around three paragraphs (300 words). The students signed a consent form relating to the use of the assignment for research purposes. One important addendum to the assignment discussion is that a teacher in Smallville Adult Education set the original assignment above. This meant that at the same time as our students completed the assignment adjusted to also address social norms, the refugee students completed the original one. This also meant that we had access to another set of texts with perspectives from Syrian, Eritrean, Ethiopian and Afghanistani students, which we included in the new revised assignment. The gender of the student was not marked and is therefore not taken into account in our analysis. Once the students had completed the assignment, we coded and analysed it for the migration research project and presented the findings. The feedback we received from colleagues led to an awareness of discomfort. We realised that despite our aim to open social studies to more critical perspectives on migration, we had formulated an assignment question using the terms "fit in", which had an assimilationist bias, and which "invited" the assimilationist responses it solicited. This, in turn, prompted us to reflect on our own practice, following the theory and methods described below.

3 THEORY

In the process of designing a new assignment, we were inspired by Klafki's critical constructive didactics, as well as Kabeer's (2005) and Lister's (2007) theoretical framework of inclusive citizenship.

3.1 Klafki's critical constructive didactics

When reformulating our assignment in the interest of a more critical approach to encourage students to break the cycle of "sameness thinking", which Gullestad points to, we were inspired by Klafki's (2014) advice on how to open new worlds for students. We drew on his recommendation to do this by using teaching materials which relate to contexts relevant to the students' everyday lives and by encouraging students to engage actively with materials by applying what they have learned to real-world problems. This engagement with the world is at the heart of Klafki's (2001) central idea of a "double-sided opening", where the student "opens up to the world" while the world "opens for the student" (Ryen et al., 2021, p. 22). Following this principle, teachers should make choices in line with the curriculum that is justified in terms of how specific content can become meaningful to students, known as the exemplary principle (Henriksen, 2005, pp. 128-30, cited by Ryen, 2019, p. 72). Part of this double opening is the idea that the teacher should make space for students to share their subjective experiences and connect this to important subject matters (Klafki, 2014; Ryen, 2019, p. 69). The process of including the student's sharing subjective experiences and (pre)knowledge and using this as a foundation for critical reflective teaching may, on the other hand, be both challenging and risky, as Biesta points out. For teachers, this risk involves having to let go of some control regarding the lesson content and progression. However, as Biesta (2013, 2020) makes clear, teachers should accept this risk as part of the course since the risk is a premise for all transformative learning and "has everything to do with the possibility for the student to appear, and to appear as subject" (2020, p. 103).

While Klafki later in his work focuses on self-determination, co-determination, solidarity and democracy as main goals for Bildung, rather than Bildung as a process, the double-sided opening through the exemplary principle is still the foundation for achieving these goals (Straum 2018, p. 50). Bildung has since been conceptualised by (Sjöström et al., 2017, p. 168) as a reflexive event forming the self in a complex meaning-making process throughout life (Schneider, 2012), a lifelong challenge and opportunity (Biesta, 2002) or as "the process of developing critical consciousness and of character-formation" (Vásquez-Levy, 2002, pp. 118-119, cited in Sjöström et al., 2017, p. 168).

3.2 Inclusive citizenship

Citizenship education discussion on diversity, including the varying frameworks put forth as teaching models – such as cosmopolitan citizenship (Osler & Starkey, 2018) and global

citizenship (Oxley & Morris, 2013) – are, in essence, about inclusion and creating a space of belonging in our heterogeneous world.

For Lister, citizenship is a "momentum concept". Following John Hoffman (2004, p. 138), she explains that momentum concepts "'unfold' so that we must continuously rework them in a way that realises more and more of their egalitarian and anti-hierarchical potential" in the "struggle for social justice" (2007, p. 49). Seen from this perspective, Lister views this struggle as a tension between citizenship's inclusionary and exclusionary dimensions, quoting Isin (2005), who "problematises "the idea of inclusion [which] relentlessly produces exclusion" (p. 138, cited in Lister, 2007, p. 49).

While Kabeer's principles of inclusive citizenship were developed "from below", identifying values associated with the idea or ideal of citizenship in dialogue with marginal groups, especially in the global south, these have been synthesised by Lister (2007) into four main themes, which are transferable to other global contexts:

• justice, articulated in terms of "when it is fair for people to be treated the same and when it is fair that they should be treated differently." (Kabeer, 2005, p. 3)

• recognition "of the intrinsic worth of all human beings, but also recognition of and respect for their differences." (p. 4)

• self-determination or "people's ability to exercise some degree of control over their lives" (p. 5). This value also emerges particularly strongly in disability theorists' accounts of citizenship, which detail the very specific barriers to self-determination and participation faced by disabled people (Morris, 2005) and

• solidarity, that is, "the capacity to identify with others and to act in unity with them in their claims for justice and recognition" (Kabeer, 2005, p. 7). This value could be said to reflect a horizontal view of citizenship (developed most strongly in Nordic accounts in the North), which accords as much significance to the relations between citizens as to the vertical relationship between the state and the individual. (Lister, 2007, pp. 50-51)

Later, in the analysis section, we describe how we use Solhaug's (2021) take on Kabeer (2005) and Lister's (2007, 2008) theories, applied to the teaching of citizenship in Norwegian social studies, as a framework for our new critically orientated assignment.

4 METHOD

In evaluating our practice, we followed a reflective practice method, helping teachers "to help explain, justify, or challenge what [they] have encountered in [their] own or other people's practice" (Open University, 2016). According to Dewey (1910, p. 6), reflective practice refers to "the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it". Reflective practice in

teaching involves considering that teaching is a complex activity in which decisions are made in complex contexts (Open University, 2016). The process of reflection helps address that complexity by bringing together context, practice, and theory. Reflection in teaching can be understood as 1) a dynamic process that results in "learning through changing understandings of the situation", 2) an active process which is more than about thinking, 3) a cyclical process "where reflection leads to developing new ideas which are then used to make revisions", and 4) a critical process which encourages "looking at issues from a variety of perspectives, which helps you understand the issue and scrutinise your own values, assumptions and perspectives" (Open University, 2016). In the following, we adopt the five stages of Atkins and Murphy's (1993) reflective cycle as follows:

1) Awareness of discomfort
2) Description of the learning situation
3) Identification and challenge of assumptions, exploration of alternative ways of teaching migration
4) Evaluation of the relevance of the knowledge used
5) Identification of the learning that occurred

While we describe our new assignment in stage 4, we have *not* tried it out in a classroom situation and so have not described students' responses to the revised assignment.

5 ANALYSIS

5.1 Awareness of discomfort

The impetus for this article was the feeling of discomfort we felt when receiving feedback on our assignment formulation and on our initial analysis of the student texts. Our colleagues pointed out that the assignment formulation had strong assimilationist undertones and a "closed" format, which, as a result, invited assimilationist responses. We realised that far from encouraging students to be open to other cultures (Utdanningsdirektoratet [Directorate of Education], 2020), we were complicit in monocultural thinking. This was particularly jarring given that our aim was to challenge the very type of thinking we had ended up reproducing. At the same time, one of our colleagues noted that both the formulation of the assignment and the student texts represented a telling indication of the extent to which assimilationist thinking is normalised in the Norwegian educational system, as in wider Norwegian society. They commented that it was not surprising that students reproduced assimilationist ideas, given that these are taken for granted in Norwegian society as a premise for integration. These comments spurred us to dig deep into the process of assimilation that we had "helped reproduce" and then reflected on how we could use this experience, and especially our insights into our own blind spots, to reflect on how we could undo these processes in future classroom situations.

5.2 Description of the situation: learning and assignment

In this section, we describe the lesson that took place before the assignment was presented and present information about the form of the student responses before identifying the assumptions present in the assignment text and in the students' writings. When we refer to the "teacher", we mean the co-author of this article. As mentioned, the assignment was linked to a module on norms but then adapted to fit in with a text solicitation exercise on migration. The lesson started with a focus on norms related to socialisation in general and then applied to students' everyday lives. It ended with a focus on norms in the context of migration. The students were first asked to reflect on norms which they take for granted. They brought up examples, such as not spitting indoors and giving up your seat on the bus for elderly passengers. Then, the class discussed the difference between formal and informal norms. Crime was given as an example of being punished for breaking a formal norm, and peer pressure to dress like their friends as an example of informal norms. Following this, the students were asked to think about norms in terms of the context of different social roles they take on (for example, student, football team member, friend, daughter, sister). Which norms and expectations were associated with each role? Finally, the teacher turned to the topic of migration, asking the students to think about what norms would be relevant to migrant residents and what advice they would give to newly arrived migrant residents based on their own experiences. At the end of the class, the teacher presented the assignment text, which was aimed at getting students to think about their own experience of social norms and then to think about how newly arrived migrant residents might relate to these norms.

5. 3 Identifying and challenging assumptions in the assignment and student texts

The key assimilationist assumption we identified in the assignment is contained in the phrase: "Tell them what informal social game rules are relevant to fit into in Norway". The key word here is "*tilpasset*", which means "adapt, fit, adjust". In the process of adapting the original question – "Write a letter to a newly arrived migrant resident and tell them what to expect when they arrive in Norway" – we formulated a question which imperceptibly (to us) had an assimilationist bias. This slippage can then itself be symbolic of the multiple "imperceptible" small gestures and understanding of migration which reproduce monoculturalist thinking. After identifying the assumptions in the assignment text, we analysed the ones made in the student texts using a thematic approach. The main themes that emerged when students "told" new residents what they had to do to fit in were the following: how to behave in public, how to dress, the living, and life in Norway. The most striking aspect of the letters was how often and consistently the students advised new migrant residents to adopt Norwegian values, behaviours, or attitudes across all the themes.

When taking up the first theme of behavioural norms in the public sphere, the students wrote most about travelling by bus. They describe how Norwegians behave discretely on buses and try to avoid talking to each other:

> Norwegians, for example, tend to never talk with each other on the bus and try to exchange as few words with each other as possible. (Letter 16)

When students discussed norms on buses in prescriptive terms, they advised migrant residents to behave like the locals, using expressions like “model yourself on others” or “learn to behave”, as in the quote below:

> Don’t make a big deal out of yourself in situations like on buses or in restaurants (...). Don’t shout or cause a commotion with other people in quiet gatherings. Model yourself after others right from the start so that you learn how to behave in different gatherings. (Letter 4)

The “advice” above suggests that the student thinks that migrant residents behave differently from ethnic Norwegians. They imply that they are much noisier - “shouting” and “causing commotion”, and that they like to draw attention to themselves “Don’t make a big deal out of yourself” – unlike “discrete” Norwegians. The students’ comments also suggest that they think that migrant residents are “too visible” on buses. This resonates with Ahmed’s theory that non-white bodies in white spaces are hyper-visible. They also resonate with Ahmed’s idea that spaces, such as in this case, the local bus, which has long been associated with white bodies, have, in effect, become “white spaces”.

Another topic which comes up in many of the letters is dress codes, particularly advice on *how not to dress*. When telling the migrant residents about dress codes, such as how to behave on buses, the emphasis is on fitting in and dressing like Norwegians. This is the case in the letter below, where the student writes about adopting Norwegian dress codes as a condition for social acceptance:

> When you come to Norway, there is something that you should be prepared for. And that is the trend that you need to follow to be socially accepted. (...) You should wear sneakers whatever the time of year; that is not very important but worth noting. And ankle socks! It is extremely important to show your ankles. A safe choice is to wear a hoodie and jeans or jogging trousers. But watch out! Use brand clothes, Levis, Adidas, Nike etc. Not Cubus or Kapal [cheaper range clothing stores]. Then you will be slaughtered! Greetings, Anonymous. (Letter 20)

The advice for the new migrant to buy clothes from expensive stores suggests the social pressure Norwegian adolescents are under to buy brand clothes, as well as the high standard of living in Norway. At the same time, it suggests that the students may not be sensitive to migrant refugees’ potentially limited financial resources.

Finally, many students use their letters to describe Norway as a receiving country. The three subthemes which come up most in relation to Norway are the landscape, the political system, and attitudes towards migrants. The first two are described very positively.

> Norway is one of the world’s richest lands, but not only because of oil money. We have a tax system where you have to give a little of your income to the state, which uses the money for free hospitals, schools, universities, etc. (Letter 21)

> Norway is a beautiful country which offers many facilities and opportunities. We have deep fjords and high mountains. We have a long winter and a short, cold summer, so if you are going to live here, it is important that you dress warmly. (Letter 18)

At the same time, as seen in the letter below, many students combine writing about the positive aspects of living in a welfare state with warnings about the negative aspects of living in Norway if you are not an ethnic Norwegian. These warnings all relate to the question of difference and Ahmed's (2007, p. 159) comments about brown bodies standing out and standing apart in predominantly white neighbourhoods, which are naturalised as "white spaces" or, in Gullestad's terms, the problem of being marked out as different:

> At the same time, I will advise you against going to/settling in the countryside or in closely populated areas. There is namely less tolerance for people who look or act differently, and there is a strong chance that you will be disliked. [...] something that is "typically Norwegian" is to have negative attitudes toward foreigners. One must also be careful not to stick out in the crowd but should preferably dress like the rest of the crowd one is in, and you should also behave in a similar way to them. These are some basic facts about the social rules in Norway. Think carefully before you come. (Letter 18)

The letter explicitly states that difference is a problem: "There is namely less tolerance for people who look or act different", explains they will likely encounter racism "there is a chance you will be disliked", and implies that such attitudes are common even "typical". The solution to the problem of difference is presented here, as in many of the letters, as mimicking Norwegian behaviour "behave in a similar way to them", and/or as in Ahmed's text, to become invisible "One must also be careful not to stick out in the crowd but should preferably dress like the rest of the crowd one is in". This also gives insight into the pressure the ethnic Norwegian students themselves experience regarding the fear of not being "accepted", as it is safest to "dress like the rest". The student's final warning, "Think carefully before you come", implies a hostile tone, echoing the rhetoric of far-right ideology. On the other hand, several of the other students who mention negative attitudes towards migrants adopt a sympathetic or apologetic tone. However, even these may evoke stereotypical views of migrant behaviour, suggesting, for example, as in the letter below, that they are likely to respond violently to opposition:

> I have to apologise to you that a small section of the population has something against immigrants and will always do so; no matter how much you try, you have to rise above that. You will be looked down on by these people but never respond to them with violence; that will not help. (Letter 14)

Reviewing the above letters, we conclude that they are mostly characterised by the assumption that migrants are different, that they might find it difficult to be included in Norwegian society, and that they should try to be as similar to Norwegians as possible. The

letters also contain a central paradox – Norway is presented as an ideal receiving nation but at the same time described as hostile to migrants.

5.4 Challenging assumptions with Solhaug's take on Inclusive citizenship

Following the next step in our reflective practice, we moved to challenge our and our students' assimilationist thinking by critically revising our assignment using the concept of inclusive citizenship as developed by Solhaug. In Norwegian, the term "citizenship" is covered by two terms which distinguish its judicial and civic dimensions. The term *statsborgerskap* ("state citizenship") refers to the legal process of acquiring citizenship, whereas "*medborgerskap*" (literally "with" or "fellow" citizenship – sometimes translated as "co-citizenship") refers to the civic process of becoming a part of a community. The idea of "*medbogerskap*" is that all those who live within a nation, whether permanent or temporary residents are citizens. "*Medborgerskap*" is something that is practised, and becoming a citizen or "*medborger*" happens through participation in practices that create and sustain democracy, both as a system and as a culture (Lenz, 2020). The term is associated with "identity, trust, belonging, participation, and relationships with other citizens" (Brochmann, 2002, p. 57, cited in Solhaug 2021, p. 49).

In the context of the Norwegian social studies curriculum, teachers have the mandate to facilitate citizenship education aimed at students learning to become active "*medborgere*", active citizens of an inclusive society who feel a sense of belonging and commitment to society (Solhaug 2021, p. 126). Solhaug argues that citizenship education should be explored in class using the framework of inclusive citizenship as a means of addressing increasing student diversity. He points out that the principle of inclusion applies to other identity markers, such as gender, culture, social class and sexuality, which relate to the majority population (p. 127). He underscores the need for explicitly inclusionary approaches by pointing to the survey, which shows that a third of Norwegian students believe that immigration poses a threat towards what is "unique/distinctive" Norwegian (p. 127).

Solhaug's (2021) inclusive citizenship model follows the theoretical principles designed by Neila Kabeer (2005) and Ruth Lister (2008), whereby teachers focus on communicating 1) the principle of justice, in the sense of when it is just to treat people equally, and when it is just to treat them differently; 2) the importance of acknowledging the equality of all peoples and respecting the differences between them; 3) the imperative of recognising the right to self-determination and people's right to control over their own lives; 4) the need to create solidarity/identify with others; 5) the potential of the right and opportunity to participate in society and make friendship connections (pp. 130-132).

Solhaug (2021, p. 132) uses the notion of "inclusive practice", by which he means civic interaction, recognition and good manners (*væremåter*) as the basis for everyday interactions and as promoting the idea of "equality in daily togetherness", including in the classroom:

> By means of teachers modelling behaviours and attitudes favourable to diversity, schools can foster a vision of inclusive citizenship that can have powerful implications for promoting acceptance and respect. We therefore argue that teachers' and students' empathetic institutional practices may model awareness and practices of inclusive citizenship that other students can adopt. (Solhaug & Osler, 2018, p. 102)

For Solhaug (2021, p. 132), working with inclusive citizenship can "help build citizenship norms which have the potential to increase individuals feeling included in different arenas, especially in school". He also relates issues of belonging to the ongoing discussion about what it means to be "Norwegian" (p. 57) by suggesting teachers raise questions about how power is organised around citizenship, who has it, and how decisions are made as to who is "in or out". To do this, teachers need to problematise and contextualise the notion of citizenship. This involves being aware of and making students aware of the fact that some of the students in our classrooms are not all allowed to vote – they may not have Norwegian passports, but they are all fellow citizens (2021, p. 49). In line with German researcher Sibylle Reinhardt (2015), Solhaug emphasises the importance of enabling students to gain insight into each other's stories, lives and experiences when problematising and contextualising citizenship in the classroom because "taking into account the perspectives of the other is fundamental to understanding conflicts between people of which are of public interest, whether they happen in school or in society" (Reinhardt, 2015; Solhaug, 2021, p. 63).

5.5 The new assignment

Following Solhaug, central to the critical thinking and inclusive citizenship framework of the new assignment was the idea of exposing students to a variety of perspectives, using material that they could easily relate to, as well as relate critically to. In the following, we describe how we would go about the assignment if we were to do it again. Firstly, mirroring our own experience of critically re-examining our assignment text, we thought we would ask students to read and then eventually critically re-examine the letters the ethnic Norwegian students had written (i.e., those we solicited from Smallville Upper Secondary). Since these letters were written by students of a similar age and at a similar educational stage, we assumed that they would easily relate to them and that exposing the assimilationist nature of the letters and the assignment might make a greater impression on them and facilitate transformative learning.

Secondly, to open the students to other perspectives, we thought we could ask them to read a second set of letters, which were produced by refugee students from Syria, Afghanistan, and Ethiopia who were attending the neighbouring Smallville Adult Education. These letters were also part of our research project and were produced in response to the first version of the original letter assignment telling a new migrant resident what to expect in Norway. For this task, students could write in their mother tongue. As we noted, these letters produced a much more nuanced view of life in Norway. Migrant students pointed

to positive aspects of life in Norway but also referred to life in Norway as difficult and stressful, noted that assimilation was expected, described the challenges of getting to know Norwegians and referred to racism and work discrimination on the basis of religion and colour.

Like the first set of letters, these were also written by students of around their age or older, living in the same town as them, but who, in this case, were refugee residents. As such, we thought of these texts as facilitating "meetings" with "others" – although ideally, meetings would include face-to-face encounters (the rewards of facilitating educational meetings between refugee and non-refugee youth have been documented in recent research in Norway and globally (Pastoor, 2017; Svendsen & Skotnes, 2022)). In line with Harðardóttir and Jónsson (2021), we hoped that we and our students would become "visitors" in the lives of our neighbours, whether by face-to-face or textual encounters:

> The stories of the forced visitors are of critical importance to the process of educational inclusion and citizenship within national educational settings in Europe. It is equally important that the story of public education in affluent countries becomes one where those often-silenced stories are heard and where the locals, be it teachers or students, become the visitors in the life of the other through critical and decentering pedagogies. (p. 42)

Giving attention to the stories of forced visitors was integral for the revised assignment/lesson plan described below:

Opening gambit: On the board, draw a picture of a bus with a local number (i.e., bus 32). Ask the students to visualise someone getting on the bus. How would that person act on the bus? Is it a matter of "would" or "should"? Can buses have colours? Can you say that the bus is a white space? Who fits in? Who stands out?

Starting topic: Can you say that countries have a colour? What colour is Norway? Is it easy for immigrants to integrate? Does it depend on what type of immigrant? Which type? Write on the board: name, nationality, sex, age, profession, and family. Ask for examples. Prompt in order to get a variety of examples or dimensions, such as:

Hans, a male Dutch Engineer, male, age 34, Manager in the Norwegian Oil Industry, has two children

Ferhana, Afghan Housewife, female, age 54, refugee, seven children

Ask the students to look up typical names when formulating the examples. When done, ask, "What makes the difference?"

Work in pairs: Start by asking the students to read the letters written by ethnic Norwegian students to migrants. Ask them to write down the main topics and the types of advice given.

Plenum: Ask the students to imagine writing a letter to a new *ethnic Norwegian* student coming into their class. To what extent would it be acceptable to tell them how to dress, how to work, where to live – if not, why?

Individual: Ask the students to reread the letters written by Norwegian students and to underline the sentences where migrant residents are expected to act in ways similar to Norwegian residents.

Plenum: Discuss what assuming that people should be the same means. Write down *prescriptive* sentences from the letters, then ask how they could be phrased differently to be more inclusive:

Example: "You need to wear these kinds of clothes"

Discuss the possibility of writing in a more open way as opposed to describing closedness, for example, about friendships. How could friendships be made outside of football?

Work in pairs: Ask the students to read the letters written by the refugee students. What are the main topics and types of advice given? What are the main differences in their attitudes to the topics compared to the ethnic Norwegian students' letters? What makes them feel included or excluded? What actions could be taken to change this?

Individual: Ask the students to write a definition of inclusive citizenship, naming the categories of people that would be included.

Plenum: Gather all the suggestions on the board to create a joint definition of inclusive citizenship.

As a further task to address the meta-cognitive aspect of critical thinking, students could be asked if any of their ideas on integration changed through the conversation in class and in groups. A second option would be to stimulate further critical reflection through a new letter-writing assignment designed to make our students visitors in the lives of refugee students. A third option could be to facilitate a letter-writing assignment where students from Upper Secondary and Adult Education schools exchange letters as a basis for educational meetings and transformational learning (Svendsen & Skotnes, 2022).

6 FINAL REFLECTIONS ON THE RELEVANCE OF KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING

In this section, following the reflective practice model, we review the knowledge we gained and identify the learning that occurred. First, we focus on the knowledge we gained after the critical analysis of the situation, and then we reflect on whether it helped us in resolving the feeling of discomfort. The knowledge gained was that assimilationist thinking is very deeply ingrained in our and our students' thinking. We knew that we needed to be wary of reproducing it and that we needed to find new approaches which would have a much greater chance of producing transformative learning. Returning to the beginning of our experience, we now see that it would be easy to imagine teachers moving on from the original letter-writing assignment (as we did) to the next topic, thinking that "it's too bad the students are not more critical concerning their views on migration and integration", without grasping that the educational intervention (the assignment, the teacher, the [school] system) itself reproduces such assimilationist values/views. In other words, we have learned that we, as teachers and teacher educators, need to be aware of the risk of reproducing uncritical approaches.

The feeling of discomfort dissipated as we delved into critical didactics, which helped us both to understand our own uncritical approach and gave us a framework for revising the assignment. Similarly, exploring the notion of inclusive citizenship allowed us and hopefully will allow our students to undergo the same kind of transformative process we went through. In our journey, we learned that critical reflection is risky and uncomfortable but that, ultimately, discomfort is necessary if change is to take place in our attitudes and values and those of our students.

We end by turning to Eriksen's (2022, p. 72) pronouncement, "A person may be deeply committed to anti-racist values but nonetheless be complicit in reproducing structural oppression". As we recognised the way in which the original assignment we set was complicit in reproducing racist values, we also came to realise how the framing of any assignment is key to how tasks are perceived by the students. Reflecting critically on our own lack of critical thinking and taking the risk of exposing our own vulnerability was the impetus for stimulating this same kind of thinking in our students and being "brave" enough to open up the classroom as a dialogic space where students are presented with choices, and bearing the risk that they would not make the choice we wanted them to make – in our case taking on rather than resisting the assimilationist views in the original letters by ethnic Norwegians.

Simply put, if we as teachers expect our students to take on a critical approach to a given topic, we must make sure that our assignments are framed in such a way as to optimise the chances of this happening. This strategy might make us uncomfortable as we will need to let go of some control by opening up for students' subjective experiences and the values they represent, but we believe that taking such risks is necessary – and not least, by working on this article we have found that the key is not necessarily getting it right the first time around, but rather giving ourselves other chances to open up new worlds by working critically with the process of learning together with our students.

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