Essentializing vs. non-essentializing students’ cultural identities: curricular discourses in Finland and Sweden

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how students’ cultural identities are discursively constructed in the Finnish and Swedish national curricula for the compulsory school. The aim is to illuminate the manifold discourses on cultural identity which prevail within Nordic educational policy. The study employs a critical multicultural education and postcolonial perspective with a particular focus on essentialist and non-essentialist views of identity in the curricular discourses. Through discourse analysis, key terms such as ‘cultural identity’ and ‘multicultural identity’ as well as different aspects of cultural identities such as language, gender and religion are investigated. The results show diverging discourses, with distinct differences in their explicitness and implicitness in the two countries. A clear effort to see all students as having multi-layered and multicultural identities is evident in the Finnish curricular discourse whereas a more essentializing discourse emerges in the Swedish curriculum. We conclude with a discussion on the importance of addressing policy discourses on students’ cultural identities in order to ensure non-essentialist and socially just teaching and educational practice.

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Introduction

As policy documents, the national curricula in Finland and Sweden have a significant role in how students’ identities are perceived and talked about in the educational discourse in the two contexts. In both countries, as elsewhere in Europe, the general discourse on student populations has moved from accentuating homogeneity towards identifying increasing diversity among students (Eriksen 2005; Holm and Londen 2010). But how is this reflected in educational policies such as the national curricula? As they are important to the discursive developments on students’ cultural identities, this study addresses the question: How are students’ cultural identities constructed in current national curricula in Finland and Sweden?

The national curriculum can be seen as demonstrating politically sanctioned ways of thinking and reasoning about community and self (Popkewitz 1997). This discourse is ‘a situated communicative event’, which cannot be objectively given nor universally understood, according to the perspective of cultural discourse studies (CDS) (Shi-xu 2015, 2).
Thus, to understand policy discourse on cultural identity, we need to see how identity discourses are built up in the specific cultural contexts, as the meanings of discourses are complex and changing, as well as intrinsically bound to history and culture. The collective and common understandings, or social imaginaries, within the Finnish and Swedish communities play a significant role in making policies such as the national curriculum meaningful and authoritative (Rizvi 2006). In line with Sivesind and Wahlström (2016), despite curricular discourses becoming increasingly global, there are distinct national differences linked to their histories and local contexts. Within education, these discourses construct and affirm notions of the identities of students and groups and create distinctions between them (Isopahkala-Bouret, Lappalainen and Lahelma 2014).

The present study compares the two national discourses and their educational implications. By looking at identity discourses within a Westcentric context (Shi-xu 2016) we afford an understanding of how two Western nations respond to increasing cultural diversity, non-Western influences and globalization. These societal changes have created discourses of interconnectedness but also alienation and new divisions. By looking at the categories and distinctions of the two national contexts – and consistent with CDS – we seek to contribute to a context-sensitive analysis with an overarching aim to combat ethnocentrism and marginalization and to enhance equality and co-existence (cf. Shi-xu 2016). These are also intrinsic goals of the comprehensive school education in the two countries, and should therefore be reflected in their policies.

The Nordic education model of curriculum-making emphasizes equality, providing the same education for all and minimizing social differences, which has set clear directions for curriculum development in Finland and Sweden (Imsen, Blossing and Moos 2016). This emphasis is still present, even if more individualistic views and neo-liberal reasoning have gained pace since the 1990s (Arnesen and Lundahl 2006; Isopahkala-Bouret et al. 2014). Until the last decades of the twentieth century, the two countries had been ‘basking in the mixed blessing of egalitarianism, homogenous populations and shared values’ (Eriksen 2005, 4). Today, questions of cultural diversity have become central. A movement from initial hegemonic attitudes of assimilation to discourses on multiculturalism and two-way integration can be seen in educational discourses across the Nordic countries. However, these discourses are multifaceted and have been influenced by the multicultural backlash and the crisis of multiculturalism the past decades, including a rising white insecurity and defensive reaction against cultural differences (Eriksen 2005; Hage 2008; Holm and Londen 2010). A vital concern is whether educational policies today are confined to managing pre-defined inter-ethnic relations within the nation state or reflecting a wider perspective on diversity and identity (Rizvi 2009).

**Cultural identity and the ‘multicultural’**

Cultural identity in educational discourse is closely interlinked with the notion of *multicultural identity*, as it is often through the introduction of the ‘multicultural’ that cultural identity becomes visible (Bennett 1998). Yet, the definition of the ‘multicultural’ is often left curiously open and unspecified – a floating signifier within discourse (Guilherme and Dietz 2015). In the Scandinavian context, Sweden is generally described as the most multicultural and multilingual country as around 20% of the population is comprised of immigrants, either born abroad or with parents born aboard, and over 120 languages are
spoken in the schools. Finland’s immigration trends are more recent (the 1990s) than in Sweden, and only around 7% of the population are first generation immigrants (Björklund, Björklund, and Sjöholm 2013). Still, since the late twentieth century the comprehensive school in both countries has been characterized as ‘multicultural’. This is mainly due to the presence of students with another cultural identity than that of students from the majority population (Bunar 2011; Holm and Londen 2010). In education, discourse on ‘the multicultural student’ commonly indicates that a certain student has multiple cultural identities while majority students have only one, and having one cultural identity is understood as the norm. Talk about multicultural students is often vague and includes stereotyping particular student groups. In Europe there has been a strong focus on immigrant students as representing the ‘multicultural’, whereas in the US multicultural discourses have also traditionally been linked to ethnic minority students (Hahl and Löfström 2016; Holm and Zilliacus 2009).

A conceptual issue within discourses on ‘multicultural identity’ is that they may not only be descriptive, but also include normative aspects linked to multiculturalism. Multiculturalism includes a wide range of normative discourses ranging from endorsing pluralism, difference, and collective belonging to having liberal values such as freedom of choice, autonomy, and tolerance (Colombo 2015). ‘Multicultural identity’ may also be linked to ‘global citizenship’ and ‘cosmopolitan identity’ (Banks 2008). A general discursive trend is that multicultural identity is associated with integration and social adaptation, either positively or negatively. In a positive sense being multicultural is about being flexible, adaptive, and effective in intercultural relations. Within socio-psychological research, multicultural identity is linked to traits such as cultural empathy, open-mindedness, emotional stability, flexibility, and social initiative (Arasaratnam 2013). In contrast, multicultural identity in a negative sense represents the unsuccessfully integrated student and the ‘problem student’ of ‘bad’ multicultural schools (Bunar 2011). These unfavourable connotations relate to the discourse on the backlash of multiculturalism as an unsuccessful project of integration.

Within multicultural education there is currently a shift in focus from issues of integration and interaction between different cultures to social justice issues (Nieto and Bode 2012; Zidarić 2012). As Shi-xu (2001) argues, this includes a development from a discourse on individual knowledge and having cross-cultural competence according to a Western hegemonic perspective to a wider conception of how cultural identity emerges and changes. This radical shift in discourse encourages a move from a perspective on differences between groups and individuals, between ‘us and them’, and the dialogue that takes place between individuals to a perspective on the cultural context of power and privilege, seeking to transform existing power and inequality relations (Nieto and Bode 2012; Shi-xu 2001). As multicultural identity evolves from a differentiating to an ethical concept it becomes problematic to name certain students as ‘multicultural students’ according to their cultural backgrounds.

**Essentialist vs. non-essentialist views of cultural identity**

In our critical multicultural education and postcolonial perspective, the conceptual problems connected to the ‘multicultural student’ are linked to fundamental views of cultural identity. In an essentialist view, identity consists of an inner core, which emerges at birth or
childhood and unfolds during the course of life, but basically remains the same. Thus, cultural identity is linked to belonging to a fixed culture, with unchanging nationalities, ethnicities and worldviews (Hall 1996). Culture is seen as ‘nature’, an essence within an individual or group, and cultural traits may be arbitrarily clustered together (Verschueren 2008). This essentialist view on identity plays a major role within educational discourse when the aim is to recognize, protect and cultivate students’ identities and when cultural identity is seen as differences between groups and individuals. The narrow term ‘multicultural identity’ is then reduced to a label for the ‘other’ student, representing those who are different, non-integrated, and non-majority. Another consequence of an essentialist view of identity is that the ‘multicultural student’ may be exoticized. This is illustrated by the food-and-festival approach to multicultural education, where individual students act as exotic representatives of ‘their culture’ and education focuses on stereotypical cultural traditions (Kromidas 2011). Multicultural identity becomes a given – not chosen – identity. Problematic discourses of othering linked to essentialist views have been reported both in the Finnish and Swedish educational contexts, and coupled with the notions of deviance and inferiority (Bunar 2011; Dervin 2015).

In contrast, in a non-essentialist view, the subject has no fixed or permanent identity (Hall 1996). Accordingly, an individual’s ‘cultural identity’ includes a number of aspects, such as ethnicity, religion, language, nationality, gender, sexuality and social class, which intersect, that is, the different aspects inter-relate and crisscross within people’s lives and in social relations (Anthias 2011). In this perspective, the term ‘identity’ is often expressed in plural as ‘identities’ or ‘identifications’ to better respond to its process nature and manifold character. Children today form their identities in the context of multiple traditions through a mix of local and global traditions, via both first hand and virtual media reality, which transcends the borders of nations and separate ‘cultures’ (Jensen 2003; Verschueren 2008). Hence, identity is a process of change and not a possession of the individual, but ‘interactively created over and over (though with a degree of consistency), so that the same individual can literally have different identities in different contexts’ (Verschueren 2008, 26). Identity is continuously formed as part of a dynamic culture. Cultures are thus neither seen as solid nor fixed, but rather as ‘liquid’ (Bauman 2004), representing a way of life of a society or a group. In line with Shi-xu (2001), ‘culture’ can be seen as discursively constituted through meaningful practices in a geo-historical and political context. Within this context power relations have a central role in creating and upholding cultural differences.

A distinct move from essentialist to non-essentialist views of identity can be seen in identity discourses during the past decades, for instance, in Finnish educational discourses through the emphasis on constructivism (Zilliacus 2014). However, both essentialist and non-essentialist discourses are present in everyday educational discourse. As O’Sullivan (2013) argues, this is inevitable as more or less consistent descriptions of identity traits and tendencies are an important and unavoidable fact and facet of human cognition, and a way to handle difference. In order to encourage educational discourses that do not strengthen processes of othering and exoticizing, there is a need to examine descriptions that have possible essentializing tendencies. Rather than seeing descriptions of specific identities as essential traits, they should be seen as situated constructions within discursive practices in concrete contexts (Shi-xu 2001).
Materials and methods

In order to address the question of the construction of students’ cultural identities in Finland and Sweden, this study explores the current national comprehensive school curricula (ages 7–16) in each country. The Finnish material included the National Core Curriculum of 2014 published by the Finnish National Board of Education and implemented from 2016. This detailed document serves as a framework for making local curricula at the municipal and school level and is intertextually linked to both national and international legislation and recommendations. An aim of this new curriculum is to respond to societal changes such as globalization and the growth of cultural and linguistic diversity. The Swedish analysis focused on the Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and the recreation centre from 2011, including revisions from 2015. The curriculum, published by the Swedish National Agency for Education, provides general guidance for compulsory education, but does not include references to other official policy documents. The 2015 revision includes an updated mother tongue tuition (MTT) syllabus and additional foreign language syllabi and specific syllabi for national minority languages. The Finnish and the Swedish national curricula each includes the following: a general introduction describing the fundamental values, the overall goals and guidelines for the education, and the syllabi outlining the teaching objectives and core content for each school subject.

The two national documents were analysed through discourse analysis, at first separately and then comparatively. In a first read-through of the documents, the analysis focused on tracking concepts (55 concepts in all), such as ‘diversity’, ‘identity’, and ‘ethnicity’, that from a critical multicultural theoretical perspective may be included in discourses on cultural identity. After the frequency of these key concepts had been identified through word-search, we moved to a deeper analysis of text excerpts where the concepts occurred. The analysis made use of Gee’s (2014) discourse analytic tools and focused on how identities were built in the text. Particular attention was given to the situated meanings and figured worlds, that is, theories or assumptions that the text invites or assumes the reader to believe as typical or normal. Emerging discourses were unearthed within each curricular context, and then refined by comparison with those found in the other curriculum, thus identifying similarities and differences between the national discourses. Linguistic and organizational equivalence between the two curricula was an analytic concern in the comparison, as the documents represent nation-specific reforms and historical contexts. It is notable that the Finnish text is over twice as long as the Swedish. For both curricula, the official Swedish language version was analysed, with official English translations presented in this article.

Contrasting use of terminology in the two national contexts

In order to understand findings on the situated meanings and discursive positions of ‘cultural identity’, we first present an overview of the prevalence of concepts related to cultural identity (Table 1).

In the Swedish curriculum, concepts related to culture are mainly found in the introductory section and the language syllabi, with the few instances specifically referring to student identity suggesting a limited recognition of culture as part of identity. Both ‘cultural diversity’ and ‘cultural identity’ are used only a few times. The term ‘multicultural’
is not included at all. However, these concepts are integrated throughout the Finnish curriculum: the term ‘cultural identity’ is used 66 times, ‘multicultural identity’ six times and the attribute ‘multicultural’ referring to students’ identities is used seven times. In total, the term ‘cultural’ refers to students’ identities in 161 instances. The stark contrast between the two curricula can be partly explained by the fact that the Finnish text (549 pages) is both longer and more detailed than the Swedish text (259 pages). However, this cannot fully explain the prevalence of text related to identity. Below, ‘cultural identity’, ‘multicultural identity’, and related concepts in the curricula are further explored, illuminating how the discourses diverge.

‘Cultural identity’ in the Finnish curriculum

In the Finnish curriculum (Finnish National Board of Education 2014), the discourse on ‘cultural identity’ is most visible in the general parts of the curriculum as well as in the subjects of Mother tongue and literature, Second national language instruction and Foreign languages. The Finnish curriculum articulates students’ identities as constructed within cultural contexts in an ongoing process of ‘building their personal cultural identity’ (19). Students form their identities by ‘creating a relation to themselves, other people, society, nature and different cultures’ (13). This accords with a non-essentialist and constructivist view of students’ identities, which emphasizes that students actively form their identities in a constant process of interplay in a cultural context. Central to the conception of cultural identity in the curriculum is the freedom for students to actively change themselves, their culture and their community, and ‘form their own cultural identities’ (16). Overall, there is an emphasis on students’ own participation and on fostering active citizenship. The focus is on students’ abilities to develop a new culture and new ways of thinking, and also includes to a greater extent other perspectives than the Finnish. Compared to the previous curriculum there is less reference to Finnish national identity and heritage. Instead, global identity through world citizenship is increasingly present (six instances).

The discourse on cultural identity appears as dynamic, but also complex – cultural diversity among students is explicitly viewed as present not only between students but also within the individual. Students’ identities are described as ‘multifaceted’ (six instances) and ‘multilayered’ (one instance). The aim of the subject of Mother tongue and literature is that ‘students are to be guided to see and understand their own and others’ multifaceted linguistic and cultural identities’ (107). This goal is not only limited to some
student groups, but notably includes all students. For instance, in foreign languages ‘the
goal is to support all students to develop a multilingual and multicultural identity’ (244). The
curriculum takes an explicit normative stand by stating that ‘multiculturalism is a richness’. Students are also to cultivate an ethical stance towards others as a key goal for identity development and living in a cultural diversity society. ‘Cultural identities’, in plural, is used in a number of contexts (14 instances), which also exemplifies the dynamic view of identity. For example, Mother tongue and literature for minority Swedish speaking students aims to ‘to strengthen the student’s linguistic and cultural identity(ies)’ (179). Apart from recognizing and supporting cultural identities there is also an explicit aim to reflect on cultural identity, as, for instance, in Sami language where students are to ‘reflect on the relationship between culture, language and identity’ (345).

‘Cultural identity’ in the Swedish curriculum

In contrast to the Finnish curriculum, ‘cultural identity’ in the Swedish curriculum (Swedish National Agency of Education 2015) is not presented as an intrinsic part of each individual. The Swedish curriculum neither refers to ‘multicultural students’ nor clearly articulates the presence of students’ different and possibly multiple cultural identities. ‘Cultural identity’ appears as connected to ethnicity, for example, the Crafts syllabus focus on ‘crafts and handicrafts in Sweden and other countries as an expression of ethnic and cultural identity’ (220), and as something that those with a mother tongue other than Swedish have and which needs to be supported. Culture is an explicit and key part of the knowledge requirements for MTT as a subject (language instruction for students’ mother tongues other than Swedish). The MTT syllabus states that students should ‘develop their cultural identity’ and ‘be given the opportunities to develop their knowledge of cultures and societies where the mother tongue is spoken’ in order to ‘develop a comparative perspective to cultures and languages’ (71). This indicates a view of culture as something static and observable outside of Swedish society, rather than part of the students’ identity. It is seen as something existing elsewhere in other countries where the language is spoken – not in Sweden, even though these students are speaking their languages in Sweden as well. Furthermore, the MTT syllabus describes cultural forms of expression as being from ‘areas where the mother tongue is spoken, such as visual arts, music and architecture’ (74). One reference to students’ background in the general guidelines stipulates that everyone working in the school should resist ‘restrictions on the student’s choice of study or vocation that are based on gender, social or cultural background’ (17). Thus these aspects of the students’ background may be seen as both set features of their identities as well as a potential hindrance for their education. The few instances of the term ‘cultural identity’ in the text as a whole appears to give limited space for dynamic perspectives on cultural identities.

Apart from ‘culture’ represented in the syllabi for MTT, ‘cultural diversity’ is found only twice in the Swedish curriculum, once on the first page of the first section entitled ‘Fundamental values and tasks of the school’:

The internationalisation of Swedish society and increasing cross-border mobility place high demands on the ability of people to live with and appreciate the values inherent in cultural diversity. Awareness of one’s own cultural origins and sharing in a common cultural heritage provides a secure identity which it is important to develop, together with the ability to understand and empathise with the values and conditions of others. (7)
In the extract above, cultural diversity is implied as a challenge for Swedish society, creating ‘high demands’ on people. Furthermore, cultural identity may be understood as twofold: the students have both their own origins and a common heritage, suggesting an essentialist view of cultures. The common heritage includes ‘the basic democratic values’ of Swedish society (7). While the delineation of cultural heritage as being specifically Swedish and Nordic, found in the 1994 curriculum, disappeared in 2011, the Western focus remains, as one central knowledge goal is to have ‘an insight into the Swedish, Nordic and Western cultural heritage’ (13). The other instance of ‘cultural diversity’ focuses on ‘an understanding of cultural diversity within the country’ as part of an international perspective (9), suggesting that the Other is bringing diversity into the country. In other parts of the Swedish curriculum, identity as related to culture and diversity is present, although the connection to the students’ own potentially diverse identities is only implicit. For example, in Art, students work with ‘pictures which deal with questions of identity, sexuality, ethnicity and power relations’ (22); and in Music, students study how music may ‘signify identity and group affiliation in different cultures, with a focus on ethnicity and gender’ (144). Only in the History syllabus is the student recognized as a dynamic individual, with the goal to ‘develop different perspectives of their own identities, values and beliefs, and those of others’ (188). However, multiple identities and global citizenship are largely absent in the text.

‘Cultural identity’: changes in discourse?

In the Finnish curriculum the common use of the term ‘cultural’ and ‘multicultural identity’ and other related terms is linked to a clear discursive development compared to previous curricula. Whereas the ‘multicultural student’ in the previous curriculum of 2004 generally implied the ‘immigrant student’ (Holm and Londen 2010), the term now implies all students in the school. This emerges as a way to avoid grouping and categorizing students into minority and majority students. This development of including all students in the multicultural seems to be a prerequisite for intersectional perspectives on cultural identity and seeing how different identity aspects, such as social class and ethnicity, intertwine and connect to issues of power. However, clear intersectional perspectives are not visible in the curriculum apart from that different identity aspects such as the cultural and linguistic are mentioned together in the text. The Swedish curriculum does not show similar trends. On a general level it seems that by not articulating diversity the Swedish curriculum to a certain extent has not subsumed to ‘naming’ and labelling certain groups. Nevertheless, other potential problems arise. First, the actual diversity in the Swedish school is not acknowledged; and second, a potentially problematic discourse on cultures as static exists – one often tied to minority groups through their mother tongue, as further seen in the next section.

Other markers of cultural identity

A wider focus on how students’ cultural identities are constructed in the two national curricula reveals that both recognize students’ identities as including a number of various aspects. In referral to the constitutional law and the Non-Discrimination Act (21/2004), the Finnish curriculum states that no discrimination may take place in education on the basis of ‘gender, age, ethnic or national origin, nationality, language,
religion, political opinion, sexual orientation, health status, disability or any other reason that concerns the individual’ (Finnish National Board of Education 2014, 12). Similarly, the Swedish curriculum states on the very first page that no one should be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of ‘gender, ethnic affiliation, religion or other belief system, transgender identity or its expression, sexual orientation, age or functional impairment or other degrading treatment’ (Swedish National Agency for Education 2015, 7). Below we specifically consider language, gender and religion as part of students’ cultural identities.

**Language**

An examination of different markers of cultural identity uncovers a strong focus on language and identity, and the terms ‘identity’ and ‘language’ appear frequently in both curricula, which include many language options (e.g. national languages, minority languages, foreign languages). A trend towards referring to students through their language identities is evident, although a fundamental difference between the two countries is found in the concept of multilingualism.

The Finnish curriculum (Finnish National Board of Education 2014) introduces the key concept ‘multilingual’ (which appears 105 times) alongside the term ‘bilingual’. A new discourse on multilingual identity arises as all students are seen as multilingual from the start, and multilingualism a part of cultural diversity:

One manifestation of cultural diversity is multilingualism. Every community and every member of the community is multilingual. Parallel use of various languages in daily life is seen as natural, and all languages are appreciated. (26)

Students are encouraged to make versatile use of all the languages they know during lessons in different subjects and in other school activities. Before the 2014 curriculum, supporting students’ language identities and learning was concentrated on fixed languages, taught in separate classes. Emphasis is now on the right to one’s own language, parallel to the goal of multilingualism. This appears as a substantial development of the view on students’ identities. Multilingual identity is particularly articulated in texts on education in the other national language and foreign languages, but is a goal that encompasses all education. The multilingual student’ thereby enters into the discourse of students’ cultural identities. ‘Students with other linguistic backgrounds’ emerges as a key term which substitutes for the ‘immigrant student’. Both ‘immigrant’ and ‘immigration background’ appear in the text, but have been replaced by ‘other multilingual students’ in the section on specific issues related to language and culture. This choice to talk about linguistic identities seems to be a way to create a distance from the ambivalent concept of ‘multicultural students’.

The connection between identity and language is also strong in the Swedish curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education 2015): for each of the syllabi related to language (Swedish, Swedish as a second language, MTT, and four minority languages), ‘identity’ is mentioned five times. Likewise, all fourteen instances concerning ‘questions of identity’ are found in MTT or minority language syllabi. Students are expected to both develop their ‘cultural identity’ and become ‘multilingual’. This is not presented as an option or a goal in the curriculum subjects. Thus, only the student with another named language other than Swedish is the one developing a cultural identity. In contrast, Modern languages do not lead to changes in cultural identity or multilingualism, although
a space for development may be implicitly seen in this statement: ‘Having a knowledge of several languages can provide new perspectives on the surrounding world, enhanced opportunities to create contacts and greater understanding of different ways of living’ (57). So although the introduction to the Swedish curriculum states clearly that ‘language, learning, and the development of a personal identity are all closely related’ (9), questions of identity tend to be explicitly related to MTT and education for official minority languages, rather than all of the students, as seen in the Finnish curriculum. Languages also remain seen as separate and fixed parts of the individual student, rather than part of a fluid identity (see also Rosén 2017).

**Gender**

In both curricula, gender is also a key identity marker linked to the promotion of gender equality. Throughout the Finnish curriculum (Finnish National Board of Education 2014) an integration of a gender sensitive approach to teaching is promoted. Gender equality is highlighted as a central part of the mission of the comprehensive school, with goals to ‘equally encourage girls and boys in the study of different subjects and increase knowledge and understanding of gender diversity’ (16). An example is in Music, where working methods should ‘break any gendered patterns that may occur within music culture and in music instruction’ (492). Some transformative elements in this gender sensitive approach strive to break and reconstruct gender patterns, which clearly reflects a non-essentialist view of gender. In a similar vein, the Swedish national curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education 2015) advocates that students should be allowed ‘to explore and develop their ability and their interests independently of gender affiliation’ (8). Gender equality is specifically mentioned in eight of the 20 course syllabi. For example, in Religion students study ‘daily moral questions concerning the identities, roles of girls and boys, and gender equality, sexuality, sexual orientation, and exclusion and violation of rights’ (201). While there is no specific reference to gender perspectives in pedagogy in general, there appears to be a strong focus on the individual’s rights to a personal gender identity. The earlier Swedish curriculum (1994) focused mainly on the possible limitations of gender roles, while the current Swedish curriculum instead discourages discrimination based on gender identity, including ‘transgender identity or its expression’ (7). Hence, both national curricula espouse a non-essentialist view of gender identity.

**Religion**

As for religious identity, both curricula express rather fixed views on religious and worldview identity. The Finnish curriculum supports religious diversity in the very organization of religious education by offering separate religious and secular ethics classes depending on students’ religious affiliation. The focus of the education is on students’ ‘own’ religion or worldview. However, the discourse on students having their ‘own religion’ is linked to a static view of students’ identities (Zilliacus 2014). The Swedish curriculum highlights the role of identity in religion (with its nine mentions, the highest of any single subject) and ‘other outlooks on life’. Still, the identity of Swedish society is described as based in Christianity, ‘with the ethics borne by Christian tradition and Western humanism’ (Swedish National Agency for Education 2015, 7). Although pluralistic perspectives in both countries are growing, religious identity remains tied to specific traditions.
Social class as absent marker

There are many aspects related to the view of students’ cultural identities to be explored in the discourse of the national curricula, including some not presented here. For example, students’ social class remains in the fringe in both Finnish and Swedish curricula. Social and economic equality is a general aim in both, but class identity is invisible. In the Finnish text, the general term ‘equality’ is central (46 instances); however, references to social class differences among students are not made explicitly. In the Swedish curriculum, neither the terms ‘social class’ nor ‘in/equality’ are specifically mentioned.

Discussion

This study shows that despite common endorsements of the values of equality and equity in education, Finland and Sweden present different discourses on cultural identity in their curricula. The Finnish curriculum creates an imaginary of ‘culture’ as dynamic and including all students, with every student being a multicultural student. Consequently, ‘cultural identity’ does not emerge as a differentiating and Othering concept that marginalizes certain students. Instead, identities are seen as complex, particularly in the discourses on language and gender. Also, a global, human rights and ethical perspective on identity is emphasized, which brings the discourse on multicultural identity close to conceptualizations such as a global or cosmopolitan identity (Banks 2008). In sum, compared to previous curricula, Finland is moving away from essentialist and nation-bound views of cultural identity. Sweden, on the other hand, lacks the explicit discourse on cultural identity observed in the Finnish curriculum, and handles the challenging concepts of ‘cultural’ and ‘multicultural identity’ by avoiding them. An exception is seen in the discourses related to language identity, where ‘culture’ is present but linked to Other (minority) students.

Somewhat surprisingly, the many decades of welcoming a diverse student population into the Swedish classroom are not clearly reflected in the Swedish curriculum. Instead, in Finland, a nation relatively new to migration, the curriculum offers an explicit recognition of diversity and students’ dynamic cultural identities. Several possible explanations for this exist. According to Åstrand (2016), the marketization of the Swedish school in the 1990s led to a decreasing focus on equality and democratic principles in education. While neoliberal trends also appeared in Finland in the 1990s, the educational sector has been able to withstand marketization and globalization to a large extent. It has continued to build on the values of equality and social justice emanating from the 1970s rather than on competition (Sahlberg 2012). According to Hyltenstam and Milano (2012), Sweden is a ‘mainstream oriented’ society with a strong pluralistic national discourse, however our study indicates that the official pluralistic ideology has not reached the curricular level. The Swedish discourse of a ‘democratic credo’ has emphasized solidarity with the Third World and equality among all, but put less focus on domestic marginalization and discrimination of different groups, also in the educational field (von Brömssen and Olgaç 2010). Another reason for contrasting discourses may lie in Sweden’s longstanding focus on language identity and language as key to integration, rather than culture, starting with the wave of immigrants in the 1960s which eventually led to the introduction of Swedish as a second language as a subject in schools, while Finnish as second language in Finland was introduced several decades later.
In conclusion, while the Finnish curriculum creates spaces for combatting marginalization and ethnocentrism, the spaces in the Swedish curriculum remain limited for now. In the Swedish discourse, the lack of explicit inclusion of all students as multicultural may become problematic if the implementational spaces (Johnson 2010) created in the curriculum result in inequalities in education as teachers may or may not consider individual needs and address different identities in the classroom. A policy which treats students alike may be inefficient and counterproductive in promoting equality if strong local or teacher-driven initiatives do not exist. Students may be relegated to remaining ‘the Other’ if they must look outside Sweden for their culture or if they are instructed to view cultures as static and separate. However, aspects of human rights do take more space in the present Swedish curriculum than in previous ones, affording the possibility for teachers to interpret the education policy in ways that do promote and encourage ethical and multifaceted identity development. Also, in both curricula some transformative views of students’ identities emerge, particularly regarding gender. Still, the relatively fixed view of religious identity together with the absence of social class as an identity marker indicate that there is still room to deepen comprehensive non-essentialist discourses of identity and to promote transformative changes through education in both country contexts.

The Nordic education model stipulates one school for all, but in order to reach this goal, questions of identity in education policy must be addressed. Through policies and teaching we need to create imaginaries that invite all students to bring their full range of cultural resources and diverse histories into the classroom. This study show how discourses related to the equality of students are not resolved solely through general manifestations of core values, but are constructed throughout the curricula. We maintain that the discourse on cultural identity and equality needs to saturate the curriculum as a whole and – above all – be unambiguous.

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