Becoming an anti-racist teacher: countering racism in education

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**ABSTRACT**
This article focuses on the who of anti-racism education by examining who the teachers are that are doing anti-racist work and what experiences influenced them to counter racism in their education practices. Taking a pragmatic approach, I use data on racism and anti-racism in schools from interviews with 27 upper secondary school teachers in Sweden to capture notions of becoming. To that end, I present five types of experiences: 1) personal experiences of racism, 2) personal experiences of other forms of oppression, 3) political socialisation, 4) encounters with anti-racism in education, and 5) experiences of racism in the professional teaching context. This plurality of experiences offers different paths to becoming an anti-racist teacher and emphasises the need to situate questions of anti-racist education in the day-to-day struggle of teachers’ lives.

**Introduction**

Racism and anti-racism in education is a loaded topic. It raises questions on how we understand racism in society and education (Gillborn, 2008; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and how education can be a force to counter racist patterns and expressions (Arneback & Jämte, 2022; Leonardo & Grubb, 2014; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Lynch et al., 2017). This article takes as it starting point the research field of anti-racist education that addresses questions on how we teach, what we teach, why we teach and who we teach in our efforts to transform structural inequality in schools and society (Lynch et al., 2017) by focusing on those who are doing the work—anti-racist teachers (Ohito, 2019).

How racism is understood is also dependent on national contexts, historical narratives and linguistic settings. Research has emphasised that racism is often seen as a historical and/or individual-oriented problem in schools (Arneback & Quennerstedt, 2016), but yet there is a need for understanding the structural nature of racism in education (Gillborn, 2008; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This is as true for Sweden as for any other country, since most Swedish education on racism has focused on the historical narratives of the Holocaust and WWII (Arneback & Jämte, 2022; see Eriksen, 2020 for a similar pattern in Norway). However, during the last two decades, notable shifts have taken place in Sweden both in how racism is understood and in increased political polarisation, leading
to tensions about the national self-image and who is responsible to address anti-racism in school and society and how. In 2016, the Swedish government established a national plan to counter racism that supported a broad definition of racism, including both racist structures and expressions based on ‘racial, national, cultural or ethnic origin, religion, skin colour’ (Swedish Government, 2016, p. 5; translated by the author).

This way of addressing racism also mirrors the situation in Sweden. One important aspect is the dominant talk about ‘Swedes’ and ‘immigrants’, based on large-scale migration to Sweden. (An indication of the scope of migration is that over 30% of pupils in Swedish schools are foreign born or have parents who are). However, the division between Swedes and immigrants is also often used to categorise who belongs, based on skin colour or features that can be linked to a person’s ethnicity or religion (Arneback & Jämte, 2022; Manga & Rosales, 2017). This also has consequences for people of colour’s employment and education opportunities and increases their risk of being victimised by discrimination and hate crimes. In addition, the treatment of indigenous people (the Saami) in the northern region of Sweden often goes under the radar in the discussion about racism. They are a minority group that is often categorised as White but still suffers from racist oppression and discrimination. They risk falling between the cracks; they are excluded from the White majority’s privileges and are not part of the larger community of the oppressed.

The effort to counteract racism in education in Sweden is regulated by international, national and local policies and laws (Arneback & Quennerstedt, 2016). Central in the various laws and policies is the Swedish Discrimination Act (SFS, 2008, p. 567), which states that schools and teachers are obligated to counter ethnic and religious discrimination and violations of any kind in the educational system. In contrast, national curricula have a more individualised orientation, referencing xenophobia and racism among students: ‘xenophobia and intolerance must be confronted with knowledge, open discussion and active measures’ (National Agency for Education, 2011, p. 4). The difference between the Discrimination Act and the curricula demonstrates the tension in Sweden on how to address racism (as discrimination, violation and/or xenophobia) and anti-racism (at the structural and/or individual level).

Teachers—the primary agents deemed with the task of anti-racist education—are situated in the midst of this tension. From earlier research (see the following section), we know that teachers address racism in their teaching to different degrees and in different ways and that teachers can, at times, be a part of the problem. Some teachers, however, position anti-racism at the core of their teaching—this article is about them. By analysing data on racism and anti-racism in schools from interviews with 27 upper secondary school teachers in Sweden, my intention with this article is to contribute to scholarship on knowledge of experience that influences teachers to do anti-racist work. In other words, how teachers become anti-racist educators.

**The anti-racist teacher**

The main focus in this article is on anti-racist teachers. As Ohito (2019) puts it, to further anti-racist education, it is not only important to understand how, what, why and who we teach, it is also important to understand ‘who we [the ones who teach] are’ (p. 3; emphasis original). Research has shown the importance of life experiences in how people position
themselves vis-à-vis racism. Studies of teachers of colour report that they often suffer from structural racism, macro-aggression and colour blindness in school (Arneback et al., 2021; Kohli, 2018), and they are often positioned as an expert on anti-racism because of their race or culture (Osler, 1997). Leonardo and Porter (2010), drawing on Fanon (2004), take it further and argue that there is no safe space for marginalised and oppressed teachers and students in anti-racist education because ‘violence is already there’ (p. 149). Research has also shown that White teachers tend to be less aware of structural racism in education because of their privileged position and often unwillingly contribute to the reproduction of structural racism (Duncan, 2019).

Teachers’ emotions in relation to racism in schools has also been highlighted, as has the need for an ethic of discomfort, that is, emphasising ‘how discomfiting emotions and affects can be transformed into productive, positive expressions that promote social justice’ (Zembylas, 2010, p. 714). Matias and Allen (2013) have shown how White teachers easily get stuck in negative emotions of fear, shame and guilt, and they argue for the importance of love and humanity to overcome the discomfort of anti-racist work. When it comes to White teachers who are heavily involved in anti-racist action, Johnson (2002) report that they often experience oppression based on class or sexual orientation, have friends from non-White backgrounds, and have a strong belief in social justice (see, also Arneback & Englund, 2020). Altogether, scholarship in this field reveals that who teachers are and what they have experienced are important factors in becoming—or not becoming—anti-racist teachers.

**Method and data**

**Experience and the process of becoming**

I draw on pragmatism and the notion of becoming for the methodology of this study. Research on activism has raised the importance of becoming as an aspect of understanding ‘the phenomenon of anti-racist teaching’ (Ohito, 2019, p. 2) by highlighting *lived experience*. In this vein, I turn to Dewey’s (1978, 1988) work on experience, actions and aims (see, also Arneback, 2014). A basic assumption is that we as humans are in an ongoing transactional relationship with our environment, which is the crucible in which our experiences and habits are formed. We know how to walk because we have experienced learning how to walk. In the same way, based on our life experience, we develop our moral and political views. Our experience in life forms our views in a constant process of becoming, connecting our past to the present and the future. It follows that our views never occur in a vacuum but change over time with new life experiences. The teachers who were interviewed for this study all described their aim as counteracting racism in education, meaning that their actions had a specific goal (even if they differed in their understandings of racism and anti-racism). But what kinds of experiences influence teachers to do anti-racist work? How do they become anti-racist teachers?

Before turning to the study, something needs to be said about my own path to becoming an anti-racist scholar. I was born into a White, middle-class, family in Sweden and experienced what in this article is termed ‘political socialisation’ at an early age. I describe it as my social democratic parents investing me with a charge to work for change in the world, but how and to what end was an open question. After
gaining my teacher degree in history and civic education, I began working at an upper secondary school in a rural area where most students and teachers were White and where I experienced expressions of racism I was not used to. It made me question who I wanted to become as a teacher and how I could address racism in my teaching. These questions eventually motivated me to return to the academy to research racism and education, and my research has continued to provide new insights into my privilege and especially my limits as a White scholar who can never experience the oppression of racism herself. But it has also deepened my understanding of racism, leading to an interest in the different paths to anti-racist teaching.

Data and analysis

The data in this paper consists of two interviews each with 27 upper secondary teachers in Sweden (53 interviews in total) and is a part of a larger research project on teachers’ anti-racist actions. The teachers work in schools located from the south to the north of Sweden and in both urban and rural settings. They were selected based on three criteria:

1) teachers who were organised in anti-racist networks (N = 10), 2) teachers working in schools where racism was a manifest problem (N = 9) and 3) teachers working in schools where racism was considered a minor issue (N = 8).

The interviews were conducted by four team members and lasted from one to two hours and was carried out after informed consent from the interviewed teachers. They were all recorded, transcribed and coded in NVivo. The teachers were interviewed twice based on two semi-structured interview guides (Patton, 2002) on four themes: i) definitions of racism, ii) their experiences of racism and anti-racism, iii) instances of racism in their school and iv) their anti-racist actions. The focus in this article is on the second theme, their experiences of racism and anti-racism that influenced them to do anti-racist work.

In the analytical work of this paper, experience is central, inspired by pragmatism and the process of becoming. This analysis was done in four steps: 1) The data were coded in NVivo according to the four themes of the interview guides. 2) I paid particular attention to the experience codes and read the relevant interview excerpts so that I could capture and conceptualise different types of experiences that influenced the teachers to do anti-racist work. 3) I identified patterns in the empirical data and selected quotations from the interviews to illustrate the patterns I found. Teachers were seldom influenced by only one type of experience. In fact, teachers often described two or three types of experiences as important even if one experience stood out as the main reason for, or even a turning-point in, the teacher’s actions. In this article, the voices of the teachers are used to describe experiences and not a specific person’s view or journey of becoming an anti-racist teacher. 4) The results are discussed in relation to research on anti-racist teachers and anti-racist education.

Results

The results reveal five types of experiences that influenced teachers to do anti-racist work: 1) personal experiences of racism, 2) personal experiences of other forms of oppression, 3) political socialisation, 4) encounters with anti-racism in
education and 5) experiences of racism in the professional teaching context. Types 1 to 3 are personal experiences rooted in teachers’ upbringings and personal lives. The fourth and fifth are directly related to their professional training and teaching.

(1) Personal experiences of racism

For some teachers, their own experiences of racism were fundamental to their anti-racist work. Sandro and Fatima illustrate this pattern. Sandro moved from southern Europe to Sweden in his youth. His previous university credentials were viewed as inadequate in Sweden, and he often feels that he has to control himself to avoid being stereotyped as a temperamental foreigner: ‘I’ve had to work on keeping a neutral and calm tone in my voice and in my gestures when I have felt annoyed or so’. He has a relative that was a doctor during the fascist period in Italy and need to flee ‘because he was a communist during the period of Italian fascism’. Sandro feels that nothing can be taken for granted, but finds support in the Swedish welfare state and democracy. But if Sweden were to become a more of a nationalistic society, he would consider leaving his teaching job and moving to another country. His and his family’s experiences of oppression are important in Sandro’s work as an anti-racist teacher, and they motivate him to take up the fight for democracy.

As a Black woman, Fatima recounted many examples of how racism shaped her, including her first memory of racism from when she was eight years old. She, along with a group of other girls, were invited over by a new child in the neighbourhood. But Fatima was stopped by the child’s mother from entering their apartment:

And then we went up the elevator and stood outside the door and when they opened up the door and let all the girls in and then when it was my turn to enter, she [child’s mother] said no, you can’t come in here. People like you, Black people, are not welcome here . . . . I just remember how sad I felt and I went down the elevator and then walked away and looked up and saw them standing there on the balcony and I thought, why is no one speaking up?

Since then Fatima has experienced racism many time, both in her personal life and in her role as a teacher. She described how she often needs to reflect and act in relation to both macro-aggressions (Kohli, 2018) and explicit racism in her role as teacher. Her experiences of oppression have motivated her anti-racist work.

For Sandro and Fatima, questions of racism are a part of their life, leaving them less space to choose for themselves whether or not they want to be anti-racist teachers (Arneback et al., 2021; Osler, 1997)—it is always there in one way or another (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Their experience of racism has been a painful path to becoming anti-racist teachers, but they continue to act because they know what it is like to be discriminated against, and they want to make a change.
(2) Personal experiences of other forms of oppression

Some teachers that hadn’t experienced racism first-hand turned to their experiences of other forms of oppression, whether gender, class or sexual orientation, as an inspiration for their anti-racist work (cf., Johnson, 2002). This type of transference of one’s own experience of oppression to another kind of oppression, occurred among White anti-racist teachers. Linda and Hanna are examples of this pattern.

Hanna is a White teacher who situates questions of racism and other forms of oppression as central, both in her role as a teacher and in her personal life. When talking about racism, she uses her painful experience of being an LGBTQ woman in a heterosexual, patriarchal society to try to understand how it feels to be oppressed by racism:

I’m White, I’m not racialised, I myself have very little experience of being subjected in that way. But I’m a woman and a homosexual so I can feel those structures, how they affect people who are racialised. And how I worked against this is that I, like, well, in the past I was active by going to different protests, arranged counter-protests against racists and Nazis, took to the streets and such.

As this quotation shows, Hanna transferred her experience of gender oppression to racism, combined with a notion that she is in a privileged position when it comes to racism. Even if she feels connected to people who experience racism because of her experiences of oppression, she also emphasised that her position as a White woman blinds her to subtle expressions of racism:

Of course I’m affected by existing racism, but I’m not subject to it since I’m White and so I’m thinking, it’s in my bones if someone says something that touches upon sexism or homophobia and that I have way better analyses for this, so I’m thinking that I miss a lot of things that are racist.

Linda is a White teacher who works in a school where students are often openly racist. She transferred her experience of being a working-class, underprivileged child to incidences of racism in her school and her anti-racist work as a teacher in relation to the students who express racist ideas. But Linda still considers herself in an underprivileged position because of her class.

I’m from a working-class background, have moved up from working class to middle class since I’ve studied to become a teacher. That, that’s how it is . . . I’ve noticed it myself that I have this with me because it’s alienating to come from the working class, which people don’t discuss.

Linda’s experiences make it easier to relate to students with a complex family background. Her upbringing also makes it possible for her to take a proactive approach in her anti-racist work with students who express racist ideas by not being easily provoked by their resistance to the school and society:

I mean, it [working-class background] has both positives and negatives. You’re often told [by students] that “I can’t get anywhere because I live . . . am from this part, this is my background”. Then I think, you can do that, I did it, why can’t you?

Linda uses her working-class background both as starting point for understanding students who are racist but also to emphasise a possible way forward.
Hanna’s and Linda’s experiences differ to some extent, since they focus on different aspects of racism in their anti-racist work. Hanna works on structural racism and her own privileged position in it, and Linda addresses explicit racism among her students and works to understand and relate to these expressions. But they also have something in common; they both draw on their experiences of oppression and underprivileged positions in their personal lives to sustain their work as anti-racist teachers.

(3) Political socialisation

Another pattern that occurs in our data is teachers who turn to their experiences of political socialisation as a child when describing their drive to counter racism in education (cf., Arneback & Englund, 2020; Johnson, 2002). However, the socialisation can be of different kinds. To illustrate this pattern, I turn to the interviews with Oscar and Tove, two White teachers who share experiences of political socialisation but live in different parts of Sweden.

Oscar grew up in a nice area in one of the larger cities in Sweden. When explaining why he became committed to anti-racist teaching, he described it as the result of a knowledge-based and liberal upbringing. He remembers that he ‘was one of those who already in the 80s jumped on this “Not Touch My Friend” thing’. It was a large anti-racist campaign in Sweden, but he says that he didn’t understand the strong message then. Instead, it was more of ‘a general approach to good manners’. But Oscar’s political interest grew over time and ‘then New Democracy [a right wing populist party in the 90s] came along . . . . I was older then and there were many including me at my high school who reacted to this’. Oscar’s liberal values and clash with right-wing populism fuelled his anti-racist interest and, in the long run, made him an anti-racist teacher. He expressed concern about the growing nationalism and racism in Sweden: ‘When people in the history books say “why didn’t anyone stand up to this?” Something like how we’re now studying the rise of the Third Reich. I’m not going to be on the list of people who did nothing’. Oscar’s anti-racist work as a teacher had a foundation in liberalism and democracy, and he was clear about his obligation to stand up for those values as a teacher.

Tove grew up is on a small town in rural Sweden. In her home, as a child, it was important to take a stand for humanist values:

Yes, I grew up in a political household, where you always talked about things that were going on around the world. I have parents who have a very strong, who themselves are dedicated to their fellow human beings, who’ve helped during earlier refugee crises, who’ve, yes, supported the oppressed, or people who somehow are in need of help, who’ve shown that voluntary work can produce fruitful results. I mean, if it weren’t for them I don’t think I would’ve become a teacher.

Tove’s humanistic upbringing was an important factor in her decision to become a teacher and to devote herself to anti-racist work. But the political socialisation of her background also brought challenges, since the small town she grew up and works in ‘has by tradition had a problem with racist and even Nazi movements’. She sometimes struggles with how to handle her position in local society, especially in her own family. Even if her commitment to anti-racism is strong and is central to
her professional life, she sometimes avoids the topic in her private life because she ‘doesn’t have the energy to take on the discussion cause it gets so inflamed and it’s with people I’m related to’.

Oscar and Tove have different upbringings and are from different geographical contexts, which conditions their work in different ways. Together they illustrate how experiences of political socialisation (in these examples, of liberal and humanistic values) influences teachers to counter racism in education.

(4) Encountering anti-racism in education

This type of experience is different from the first three types because it isn’t situated in the personal experiences of the teachers but in their institutional education over the course of their lives. The examples of Helene and Petri illustrate how education can be an important component of developing an anti-racist understanding and, in the long run, becoming an anti-racist teacher.

Helen is a White teacher strongly committed in democratic education and anti-racist work. She emphasised how her education prepared her for this task: ‘I wasn’t engaged in organisation or anything, but it wasn’t like necessary cause the school provided it anyway’. She highlighted one of her teachers who instilled in her a desire to become a teacher:

It was mainly because of one specific teacher. Many teachers altogether, but it boiled down to a teacher who taught me philosophy and religion. And she was . . . this completely open person who opened the doors for, how can I put it . . . she was somehow passionate for showcasing the human at all times. If we studied religion it was never from this exotifying ‘us and them’, but she was always so from within. Whatever she talked about, she was from within.

Helen also described the many teachers ‘who engaged in those kinds of issues’. She was inspired to take part in ‘protests for peace or observe the anniversary of Hiroshima’, and when Amnesty International showed up at her school she ‘was up all-night writing a petition for this man who is in prison in Iran’. This strong commitment to democratic values in her primary and secondary school greatly impacted Helen, and it was this kind of experience that provided a base for her current work. ‘So I’ve got this very much with me in the teaching profession, that schools’ democratic mission has always been extremely important for me’.

Petri also turned to his education when describing how he become involved in anti-racist work. Today he is ‘strongly committed to the subject. I think it is incredibly important, but this has not always been the case’. Petri still struggles with views he learned from his family in early life: ‘I mean, I grew up in a family where you don’t have, it hasn’t been customary to educate yourself, and am probably raised with a fair amount of racist, I mean, and this is always hard to talk about’. He described how it was hard to change perspective, to move from the prejudiced views that he absorbed in his childhood to admitting the error of that perspective. For him education was a path away from his early socialisation:
But when you’ve educated yourself and worked with these issues you realize that, shit, that’s like not okay. Well, yes, racist statements and like that you didn’t reflect on when you were little . . . I work with my own prejudices against things like, actually, I think a lot about it because I grew up in a context where this is commonly occurring, I would say.

Petri’s experience shows the importance of making room in educational training for reflection on socialisation and rethinking prejudices. Together, Helen’s and Petri’s experiences illustrate the importance of educating teachers in anti-racist work, especially for those whose early life experiences included exposure to racist values.

(5) Experiences of racism in the professional teaching context

The final type are experiences teachers had in their professional lives and school contexts. This kind of experience often occurred in situations when they witnessed racism in their students or colleagues, which drove them to become anti-racist teachers. To illiterate this, I turn to Milla and Dennis and their experiences of working in schools where racism is overt.

Dennis, a teacher who lives in a large city, described his students, who live in rural Sweden, as ‘afraid of the city’. When he started teaching at the school it soon became apparent that a large group of students were prejudiced against minority groups in Sweden, and some of them expressed their racism openly. Dennis believed that the racism he encountered among his students was a result of rural isolation and social media discussions:

You saw all this, which you can read about online, all this crap about . . . yes, ‘there are only criminal foreigners’ and ‘there are only Swedish women being raped’ and it is . . . yes. What you find in many places on the internet, these prejudices and fears, these racist thoughts have . . . a lot of it was boiling inside and then surfaced.

The situation at his school and in his classes convinced him that anti-racist work needed to be prioritised both in his school and in his own teaching. Over time his determination contributed to the development of a project at the school intended to disrupt cultural isolation and create opportunities for positive meetings between students from different backgrounds. Dennis’s story is an example of how school environments can influence teachers to do anti-racist work.

In a similar way, Milla described her experiences of students who expressed racist views in the classroom. She remembers a critical moment in her teaching that made her understand the importance of anti-racist work:

I had a class with students of transportation, students who will become truck drivers and such. And they, we discussed the topic of who is Swedish, and then they had a very clear view including the Svensson family (puppy, house, Volvo)² and all such things and very strong opinions. Such strong opinions that I wasn’t able to rebut them or at least open their eyes in any other way so I had to call in another teacher to stand up for me and help me out. That’s how racist they were. It was very hard . . . . The most uncomfortable thing was that there were two students with a different background; they were from Somalia. They just had to listen to all of this. I felt completely defeated.
Milla felt that she lost the fight and sought support from a colleague. The situation become a wake-up call and she emphasised the importance of anti-racist work. She ‘feels that we need to work with this early and talk about it, so it does not go so far’. The excerpts from Dennis’s and Milla’s interviews show how experiences of racism in school contexts influenced their teaching and made it next to impossible for them not to do become anti-racist teachers.

**Concluding discussion**

According to policies that govern teaching in Sweden, it is the professional responsibility of all teachers to counteract racism (Arneback & Quennerstedt, 2016). But all teachers are not the same. Their life experiences—upbringing, education and work experience as teachers— influences who they become as teachers and if and how they do anti-racist work. I agree with Ohito (2019) that more attention needs to be paid to the question ‘who we are’ as teachers in the research field of anti-racist education. As part of this question of becoming, this study contributes knowledge of the different paths teachers take to become anti-racist teachers. There is not a uniform path that everyone follows. Rather, teachers make decisions based on their life-long experiences and position(s) in life. Becoming an anti-racist teacher is a struggle, built on the pain of the oppressed, the discomfort of the privileged, internal tensions and the imbalance of power between groups of people. But it is a struggle this group of teachers was willing to take on in their efforts to make a difference.

If anti-racist education is to be a force that counters racist patterns and expressions (cf., Leonardo & Grubb, 2014; Lynch et al., 2017), the who question helps to further address various positions, experiences and processes that strengthen teachers’ position and work. For teachers of colour, their anti-racist work challenges patterns of power that have limited their own lives. Consequently, if they want to act (in a White-dominant society) they have to talk and work from an un-privileged position to make a change (Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Osler, 1997). But there are also other paths to becoming an anti-racist teacher. This study illustrates how teachers are also influenced by their experiences of other forms of oppression, political socialisation (Arneback & Englund, 2020; Johnson, 2002) and encounters with racism in their educational and professional life. Altogether, the data also shows a differences between those who have internalised these values at an early age and struggle to counter racism in their environment and those who have internalised anti-racist knowledge and values later on in life, which sometimes leads to internal struggles.

Taking seriously the who question, this study emphasises the need to be aware of the plurality of experiences that influences teachers to do anti-racist work. This is of importance both for theoretical and empirical research on anti-racist teachers and teaching and for practical discussions on how to support teachers in their anti-racist work. As a theoretical contribution, the different forms of experiences presented in this article can be used to further the who question by situating questions of anti-racist education in the day-to-day struggle of teachers’ lives.

As a contribution to the teaching profession and educational training, this study emphasises the need to incorporate the question of who we are as teachers into the discussion of anti-racist education, to prepare teachers with different experiences for the task of anti-racism education and to form a base for an anti-racist network of teachers.
Given the plurality of the teachers’ experiences, this needs to be done with a sensitivity to the pain and challenges the task brings, but without backing away from the discomfort (Zembylas, 2010), risk and violence (Leonardo & Porter, 2010) that is present in their personal and professional lives. To do so, is to open up the possibility of creating transformative learning opportunities for students and, hence, challenge patterns of racism.

Notes

1. One of the interviewees was not able to participate in a second interview.
2. The expression ‘puppy, house, Volvo’ (in Swedish: vovve, villa och Volvo) is used to describe what is seen as normal for a Swede.

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Notes on contributor

*Emma Arneback* is an Associate Professor in Education at Örebro University. Her reaserch intrests are change processes initiated in order to create more equal opportunities in educational contexts.

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