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Linguistic Diversity in Teacher Education: Examples from the Nordic context

Dear Reader,

What is the role of teacher education in a superdiverse global society? Over the last 25 years, many scholars have explored increasing mobility alongside growing linguistic and cultural diversity (Vertovec, 2007; Blackledge & Creese, 2017; Mazzaferro, 2022), especially in the Global North. In research on mobility and linguistic diversity, different aspects of global social and economic inequality and immobility have been highlighted, as well as the restrictions on physical and social movement (Canagarajah, 2017; Kell, 2017).

Although linguistic minority rights and linguistic diversity are recognised at European and national policy levels, this is not always reflected in education. On the contrary, a monolingual norm prevails in education (García, 2009; Duarte, 2016; Cummins, 2021), where the majority language(s) is often the language of instruction. Students are then expected to study English (if it is not the language of instruction) and/or an additional language. At the same time, other languages spoken by children and adolescents at home or in their spare time are expected to be left outside the classroom. While some languages are promoted and valued in teaching and learning, others are silenced. Teachers play a crucial role in whether diverse languages are included or excluded in the classroom (Cummins, 2000; 2021). Therefore, it is important to investigate how teachers are taught and trained to teach in linguistically diverse classrooms. Although neither linguistic diversity nor multilingualism is a new phenomenon, globalisation processes have made them more visible (Cenoz, 2013). Today, many children and young people

use a variety of languages on an everyday basis. However, teacher education rarely meets the demands of preparing teacher students for such a reality (Zilliacus, Paulsrud & Holm, 2017; Hermansson et al., 2021).

The authors of the articles in this special issue explore if and how linguistic diversity has a place in teacher education in three Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland and Sweden. As in many other contexts, the Nordic countries are largely characterised by linguistic diversity and are furthermore portrayed as being at the forefront with regard to linguistic rights and equity in education.

Research on linguistic diversity and teacher education has often been conducted in the Global North, particularly in a North American context (e.g., Athanases et al., 2018; Yang & Montgomery, 2013). Research from the United States emphasises the importance of supporting student teachers to reflect upon their cultural and linguistic background (Haddix, 2008). Others have shown challenges in addressing ideologies within the academic context of teacher education (Rodriguez-Mojica et al., 2019). These studies imply a critical perspective that is also visible in the development of language awareness research, where a framework of Critical Multilingual Awareness has been developed (García, 2017). From Canada, Wernicke (2021) shows an attempt by a university to challenge previous assimilation policies that made the indigenous people invisible and at the same time empowered the French-speaking minority. From South Africa, research shows that multilingualism can be seen as a resource in the classroom and that student teachers can develop identities that cross ethnolinguistic boundaries (Makalela, 2017).

This research does not automatically translate to the Nordic context, where the linguistic, cultural and social landscapes differ. Thus, it is important to examine the affordances and challenges facing teacher education in specific contexts, such as the Nordic countries. As in many other contexts, minorities, such as the Sámi, live across the constructed nation state borders of Finland, Sweden and Norway, and face different policies regarding language and education (Kroik, 2023; Keskitalo & Jannok Nutti, 2025). Even though national minorities are recognised, colonial processes of land theft, displacement, and linguistic and cultural oppression

are often left unseen in the historical narratives of the nation states. Nor are minority languages considered in talks about linguistic diversity, which is, instead, tied to global migration, thus reproducing narratives about the imagined nation state as culturally and linguistically homogeneous.

In a Swedish context, legislation (Language Act 2009:600) ensures the right of everyone to learn and use both Swedish as well as other languages. Research shows that Swedish teacher education is deficient when it comes to preparing future teachers to work in classrooms with linguistic diversity and supporting students' varying linguistic needs (Zilliacus, Paulsrud & Holm, 2017; Hermansson et al., 2021). Moreover, Swedish teacher education has been identified as "fairly nationalist" (Carlson, 2009:1). Syllabus studies by Hermansson et al. (2021) have shown an invisibility of issues of multilingualism outside language subjects, while Zilliacus et al. (2017) have highlighted a predominantly ethnocentric perspective, where students with a linguistic background other than just Swedish are exoticized. In the Norwegian context, Iversen (2020) found that although students talked about multilinguals as "the other", they also expressed a desire to use both their own and the pupils' multilingualism as resources in their teaching. Overall, there is a need for further research to create knowledge about how teacher education can prepare future teachers to teach students with varying linguistic repertoires.

This special issue is based on the understanding of issues of linguistic diversity as intrinsically complex, variable and changing. Language and languaging are central to all aspects of teacher education, and there are few, if any, practices in teacher education where they are not crucial. Although we recognise the fact that teacher educators and students use language and other semiotic resources to their advantage and that these resources are situated in expanded social, material, historical and geographical scales (Canagarajah, 2018), we also recognise the importance of naming languages in order not to silence and deny linguistic rights to certain particularly minoritised groups (Cummins, 2021).

Addressing teacher education in Nordic countries implies addressing educational systems that are strongly controlled at a national level and where official national languages, such as Swedish in Sweden, are dominant. In addition, English plays an important role, as it does in education

at the tertiary level in most countries in the world. However, in this special issue, the question of the role of English will not be in focus.

This special issue addresses and problematises the question of linguistic diversity in teacher education. Including linguistic diversity in teacher education requires acknowledging and addressing linguistic complexity at multiple levels, as language-related issues in education cannot be reduced to simplistic solutions. The articles in this issue represent research that aims at creating an understanding of the width as well as the depth of linguistic diversity at various levels. This means that the (in)visibility of linguistic diversity is considered in the case of teacher students and teacher educators, as well as their future pupils. This includes questions about how teacher students learn about linguistic diversity as well as how they can teach about it and how they will deal with it in their teaching. The articles approach linguistic diversity from different theoretical and methodological perspectives. Overall, they show that linguistic diversity is essential to different subjects and all parts of teacher education. As language(s) is/are essential in teaching and learning, we also need to ask which languages and whose languages are positioned as legitimate or not, as the case may be, as well as how we enable all pupils to learn in their classrooms. The articles collectively interrogate how linguistic diversity is conceptualised, enacted and sometimes resisted within teacher education programmes, revealing both structural limitations and innovative practices.

The article “Et andenordensdidaktisk perspektiv på tværspørglig undervisning i engelsk og fransk på læreruddannelsen” (Eng. *A second-order didactic perspective on cross-linguistic teaching in English and French in teacher education*) by Jacobsen, Andersen and Löbl, provides an in-depth empirical account of how playful plurilingual and task-based approaches are implemented in English and French teacher education at University College Copenhagen. Framed through the lens of second-order didactics, the study draws on data from 42 teacher students to examine how modelling and reflexivity in teacher education influence the design of plurilingual learning spaces in the Danish *folkeskole* (primary school). By emphasising the importance of reflective scaffolding and pedagogical transfer, this article illustrates and discusses both the potential and the challenges of how teacher education can prepare student teachers for teaching in plurilingual learning environments.

In the article “Discourses of cultural and linguistic diversity in mathematics teacher education policy in Sweden”, Alhadi Alhasani, Svensson Källberg and Roos deepen the thematic focus by examining how policy frameworks shape, or constrain, multilingual pedagogical possibilities. Focus is thus shifted to the policy level. Through a discourse analysis of 55 course syllabi and 20 curricula, the study investigates how cultural and linguistic diversity is discursively constructed in Swedish mathematics teacher education for grades 4-6. Two dominant discourses are identified: one emphasising cultural and linguistic homogeneity, the other promoting cultural and linguistic plurality. Their article reveals how symbolic references to diversity often mask monolingual norms, underscoring the need for more explicit and coherent policy support of cultural and linguistic diversity to foster equitable mathematics education.

Dahlström and Norberg explore the theme of how emerging technologies intersect with linguistic diversity in higher education in their article “Andraspråksstudenter och generativ AI: En potentiell väg för att omforma akademiska literacypraktiker?” (Eng. *L2 students and generative AI: A potential way to reshape academic literacy practices?*). Based on interviews with teacher students, the authors identify how GenAI can be used to support students’ L2 development as well as their comprehension and academic confidence. The study extends the understanding of the effects of GenAI on L2 students’ participation in academic discourse by, on the one hand, showing how it can foster independence and inclusion, while on the other hand raising concerns about plagiarism, overreliance and unequal access. It highlights both the promise and the pitfalls of digital tools in supporting linguistically diverse learners.

Perspectives related to multilingualism, from a student-centred lens, are explored by Kautonen, Ruohotie-Lyhty, Rosvall, Mård-Miettinen and Suomela in the article “Educating for multilingualism? Language teacher students visualising future language education”. The article explores how future educators envision multilingualism in their professional practice. The student teachers, who are, at the time of writing, enrolled in teacher programmes for Swedish language teachers in Finland, were asked to visualise and narrate their imagined professional futures. In the study, differences were identified in the teacher students’ focus on multilingualism, specifically whether they focused solely on the language(s) being taught or on pupils’ language repertoires. The authors argue that addressing the question of multilingual

practices in the teacher education community is of great importance, as is recognising the increasing multilingualism of students in teaching practices.

The question of teacher educators' multilingual awareness is dealt with in the article by Hermansson, Norlund Shaswar, Rosén and Wedin titled "Conceptualisations of linguistic diversity: Critical multilingual awareness in Swedish teacher education". In this article, conceptualisations of language and multilingualism among teacher educators in primary school teacher education programmes are explored. Based on interviews with teacher educators, the analysis showed that while linguistic diversity was generally acknowledged, deeper critical awareness of its social and political dimensions was limited. The article calls for a more robust integration of critical perspectives on languages into teacher education to better support inclusive language practices in schools.

Together, these articles illuminate the multifaceted nature of linguistic diversity in Nordic teacher education - from policy and pedagogy to student and educator perspectives. They collectively argue for more inclusive, critically aware and context-sensitive approaches to preparing teachers for multilingual classrooms. Based on these articles, we see promising tendencies in the form of research resulting in new knowledge about linguistic diversity in teacher education.

However, a recurring argument we encounter as both researchers and teacher educators is the notion of *curriculum overload*, which implies that there is ideological but not implementational space (cf. Paulsrud & Zilliacus, 2018) for knowledge about linguistic diversity in Nordic teacher education. This notion reveals an underlying hierarchy of knowledge that tends to relegate multilingualism to a secondary position, rather than recognising it as a foundational dimension of teacher professionalism. Such a stance must be challenged if teacher education is to align with the linguistic realities of contemporary schooling. In practice, this means embedding critical perspectives on language (e.g., language ideologies, power and equity) into foundational courses on pedagogy, assessment and classroom management, rather than treating multilingualism as a discrete specialisation. Without such knowledge, teachers will be ill-equipped to teach in a way that supports knowledge development in all their pupils.

In Sweden, although no national policy explicitly mandates linguistic diversity in teacher education syllabi, the Education Act (SFS 2010:800, appendix 4) states that all the needs of all children and pupils should be taken into account. Interpreted through the notion of curriculum overload, this legal imperative does not require “adding more content” so much as reconfiguring what counts as core content: integrating multilingual awareness as part of teachers’ professional judgement, assessment literacy and subject didactics. In other words, the solution to curriculum overload is not subtraction; instead, it is making linguistic diversity a constitutive principle across existing structures, rather than an optional appendix.

Taken together, the contributions in this special issue make clear that linguistic diversity is not a marginal concern but a defining condition of contemporary education that demands not only sustained scholarly attention but also institutional commitment and pedagogical courage. By illuminating both the constraints and the transformative possibilities within Nordic teacher education, the articles invite us to reconsider both how teachers are prepared as well as how educational systems imagine the linguistic realities of their learners. Ultimately, they call for a shift from viewing multilingualism as a challenge to be managed to recognising it as a fundamental resource for knowledge building, participation and equity in schools. We hope that this special issue will inspire further research, critical dialogue and concrete action towards teacher education practices that more fully acknowledge, value and cultivate the diverse linguistic repertoires that are present in today’s, and will be present in tomorrow’s, classrooms.

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