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Article

Imagined sameness or imagined difference? Norwegian social studies teachers' views on students' cultural and ethnical backgrounds

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Keywords: citizenship education, social studies

- Some social studies teachers show discomfort when talking about cultural difference in class
- An imagined Norwegian "cultural sameness" was felt by some teachers as disrupted
- Some teachers found evasion of cultural difference a good strategy for avoiding discomfort
- Other teachers considered cultural difference part of the normal, and not disruptive
- Pedagogy of discomfort may provide tools for dealing with the discomfort of perceived disruption

Purpose: This study investigates how Norwegian social studies teachers express their views on cultural difference among students.

Design: Qualitative, semi-structured interviews transcribed and analyzed abductively using concepts of imagined sameness, color-blindness, and a pedagogy of discomfort..

Findings: The analysis shows on the one hand, prevalence of an imagined Norwegian cultural "sameness", where cultural and ethnic differences were seen as disruptive. On the other, there were attempts at relativizing "Norwegianness" and highlighting cultural difference as an advantage. The article discusses how teachers' challenging of their own views on culture can be both discomforting and necessary if social studies is to challenge injustice and encourage social transformation.

Research limitations: This study does not support statistical generalization. Further research is needed to determine whether similar mechanisms are prevalent in a wider selection.

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1 INTRODUCTION

One of the goals of education is to prepare students to become active and responsible citizens and advocates for justice. With this aim, one of the tasks for teachers is to help prepare students reflect critically about how cultural, ethnic, racial and religious differences are conceptualized and dealt with in society. In a context of polarized public conversations regarding cultural categorizations both globally (McWorther, 2018), and in Norway (Taraku, 2020), this task is as urgent as ever. This study takes a view of cultural identity not as essentialized and stable, but offering multiple possible subject positions, contextually produced (Hall, 2011, pp. 3-4).

Teachers' views of cultural difference affect how they approach this task, and in social studies, doubly so: First, taking student's ethnic and cultural backgrounds into account is central when attempting to teach in ways which relate to their varying experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In this sense it is a question of professional practice. Second, social studies topics such as politics, human rights, indigenous peoples, migration, and racism are framed by normative assumptions about cultural normality and difference, and thus, teachers' views on culture and ethnicity may raise didactical questions.

Empirically situated in Norway, the study contributes to a field of knowledge about how particular teacher notions of cultural difference might play out in social studies education. Specifically, notions of historical cultural homogeneity (Hylland Eriksen, 1993) combined with egalitarian education ideals (Nilsen, 2010) frame the sociocultural context, as I will elaborate below.

While there is research on social studies teachers' cultural responsiveness (Martell, 2017, 2018; Martell & Stevens, 2016; 2017; Pelkowski, 2015), attitudes (Callahan & Obenchain, 2016; Scott & Gani, 2018) and discourses (Crowley & Smith, 2015; Masta & Rosa, 2019), there seems to be less research in a Nordic context, possibly due to a historical focus on equality in Norwegian education. This study sheds light on this field by asking: *How do social studies teachers in Norwegian lower secondary school view students' cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and how do their views on culture play out in social studies?* This will be explored through qualitative analyses of interviews with five Norwegian social studies teachers. The aim is to explore and discuss some pedagogical and didactical aspects of social studies teachers' perceptions of ethnic and cultural difference among students, and thus further a conversation about how to provide equal and just social studies education to all.

I will now briefly outline the ideal of Norwegian egalitarianism in education, followed by an overview of previous research. Then I outline the analytical perspectives and method of study, before moving on to analysis and discussion.

2 NORWEGIAN EGALITARIANISM IN EDUCATION

The development of a unified school system in Norway after the second world war was characterized by social democratic ideals (Fasting, 2013), which also carried an element

of monoculturalism (Engen et al., 2018). While social equalization was thought to promote social justice (Lundahl, 2016), it has been pointed out that "learning Norwegianness" has been a central goal and outcome of unified education (Chinga-Ramirez, 2015). Although "adapted education", which denotes a principle of equity through differentiation, was introduced in 1975, it is only recently that education policy has recognized "diversity" as a resource (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017; NOU 2015:8, 2015). Tension between equality understood as sameness on the one hand (Gullestad, 2002), and multicultural adaptation on the other is immanent (Brochmann, 2015), although not discussed in recent education policy documents (Åberg, 2020). This leaves questions regarding the space for accommodating to cultural difference in Norwegian education.

3 PREVIOUS RESEARCH

While there is a considerable amount of research internationally on teacher views on students' cultural backgrounds (e.g. Coronel & Gómez-Hurtado, 2015; van Middelkoop, Ballafkih, & Meerman, 2017), and how to deal with it (Aragona-Young & Sawyer, 2018; Forrest, Lean, & Dunn, 2016; Karacabey, Ozdere, & Bozkus, 2019), here I will limit the focus to a Nordic context, since I hold the historical and cultural contexts to be somewhat comparable (Imsen, Blossing, & Moos, 2017).

Within education in general, teacher views on "cultural diversity" have been researched using various frameworks and terminology. There is research on teacher beliefs (Acquah & Commins, 2013), reflections (Niemi & Hahl, 2018) or degree of awareness (Acquah & Commins, 2013; Krulatz, Steen-Olsen, & Torgersen, 2018) concerning student ethnic or cultural backgrounds, as well as research highlighting teachers' stories (Mathisen, 2020) or voices (Gunnþórsdóttir, Barillé, & Meckl, 2019) concerning classroom diversity.

Moreover, there is research focusing on discourses of cultural difference in policy (Fylkesnes, 2019; Hummelstedt-Djedou, Zilliacus, & Holm, 2018; Åberg, 2020) and teacher education (Fylkesnes, 2018; Fylkesnes, Mausethagen, & Nilsen, 2018) and reproduction of social and cultural categories (Chinga-Ramirez, 2017; Mathisen, 2020) at school.

Regarding social studies in particular, there are some studies on approaches to culture, race or ethnicity in curricula (Mikander, 2016) and teaching material (Eriksen, 2018; Mikander, 2017; Røthing, 2015). However, there seems to be less research in a Nordic context on social studies teachers' views on students' cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This study shows how views on cultural difference may play out in a sociocultural context historically characterized by egalitarian education ideals. It therefore adds empirically to the field of research in a way which is relevant also to a wider Nordic conversation about social studies education.

3.1 Imagined sameness and the discomfort of disruption

This study analyses the empirical material in light of the concepts *imagined sameness* (Gullestad, 2002) *color-blindness* (Gillborn, 2019) and a *pedagogy of discomfort* (Zembylas, 2010, 2015; Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017).

The notion of "imagined sameness" has been described as a central concept of Norwegian self-understanding (Gullestad, 2002), and can be understood as a conceptualization of national identity focusing on equality/sameness (*likhet*) as central to being considered equal in value (Gullestad, 2002). Through accentuating agreement and harmony, and applying symbolic tools linked to kinship and ethnicity, sameness is given ethnic/racial and ancestral connotations. Such mechanisms have been described in Norwegian education too (Chinga-Ramirez, 2017; Mathisen, 2020). In this study, as will be shown below, some teachers expressed discomfort during talk of cultural difference, and I interpret this as linked to a notion of an imagined Norwegian sameness disrupted. Further, it is linked to "color-blindness" (Gillborn, 2019), a concept developed within critical race theory which denotes an unwillingness to consider race, skin color, or culture a social category which may affect peoples' social experience.

Based on a belief that it is a central task of education to raise awareness and transform patterns of privilege and marginalization (Kumashiro, 2002), a *pedagogy of discomfort* argues that "discomforting feelings are important in challenging dominant beliefs, social habits and normative practices that sustain social inequities" (Zembylas, 2015, p. 163), and that discomfort can be used constructively to promote individual and social change. For discomfort to reach its transformative potential for students, teachers must have reflected upon any discomfort they themselves might experience in the face of disruptive or challenging notions of difference. This article pays attention to discomfort in two different ways – teacher expressions of discomfort (and here, this study answers a call to bring attention to teachers' discomfort in multicultural classrooms (Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017)), and their thoughts about how to avoid student discomfort.

4 RESEARCH METHODS

The study is based on qualitative interviews with five social studies teachers in Norwegian lower secondary school (students aged 13-16). Participants have provided their informed consent, in accordance with the guidelines of the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. The interviews were transcribed, grouped by topic, and analyzed through abduction (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008, p. 55), utilizing the concepts of imagined sameness (Gullestad, 2002), color-blindness (Gillborn, 2019) and a pedagogy of discomfort (Zembylas, 2015).

4.1 Selection

Choosing interviewees, I aimed for a breadth of different student populations. Neither representation nor generalization was a goal - rather, the aim was to mirror some of the variation of student demography in Norwegian schools.

The interviewees were[1]:

- Linn (F, aged mid-30s), working at a large suburban school, with a student population which could be described as multicultural.
- Svein (M, aged mid-40s), teaching at a small, rural school where nearly half of the students had parents from one other country, the other half with a majority Norwegian background.
- Bernt (M, aged mid-40s), at a large, urban school with a dominantly majority Norwegian population, and a small minority of immigrant students from various parts of the world.
- Ingrid (F, aged mid-50s), from the same school as Bernt.
- Anita (F, aged mid-50s), at a small, rural school in a Sami administrative area[2]. Her group of students was mixed, with majority Norwegian students, as well as Sami students, refugee children and children of labor immigrants.

4.2 Data generation

Interviews were semi-structured and were conducted at each teacher's workplace. Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes. A broad topic – differentiation and difference – was presented beforehand.

Cultural background is one of many ways in which students are different, and one possible critique is that this investigation risks culturalizing non-Norwegian students. However, if I want to investigate the extent to which teachers find cultural background of particular relevance to their teaching, I need to include it in the study. I have sought to minimize the risk by asking open-ended questions, and, as I will move on to show, by analyzing abductively.

The questions concerned differentiation, choices and dilemmas in social studies, pertaining to students' cultural and ethnic backgrounds. I also asked whether they found cultural background to be of particular importance to their teaching.

Transcribed sound files (about 8-12 pages of text for each interview) were grouped according to topic (for instance whether they thought of students' background as relevant for how they presented a subject topic; or whether they thought of students' ethnic or cultural identity during the planning of lessons). The advantage of this organization is that they put side by side interviewees' perspectives on the same issue. I do not purport to describe the teachers as "types" or examples of any generalizable trait. Rather, this organization highlights and opens up for a range of views.

4.3 The abductive process

The analytical work started out without pre-set analytical concepts. I applied an abductive/hermeneutical approach, which entails an empirical starting point, remaining open to analytical ideas as they emerge when working on grouping the material (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008, p. 55), and then reading and re-reading the material in light of the chosen analytical idea. One analytical idea, which "stuck" to much of the material, was the recurrence of expressions of discomfort when discussing students' cultural difference. Through pursuing this idea, the analysis focuses on some repeatedly expressed views, and discusses them through the concepts of imagined sameness and a pedagogy of discomfort. I will provide ample extracts from the interviews, illustrating different points throughout the analysis.

5 SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHERS' VIEWS ON ETHNIC AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCE AMONG STUDENTS

As mentioned above, I focus on two ways in which teachers' views about students' cultural differences come into play in social studies – through considerations about how to approach students' cultural and ethnic backgrounds; and pertaining to social studies subject content. I have structured the analysis around these two headlines. While they are certainly connected and will be treated as such, one of the aims of this article is to highlight particular ways in which views on culture might play out in social studies, due to the nature of much of its subject content. Thus, the analysis and discussion pertain to two different, but related, issues: professional practice, and social studies didactics.

5.1 Students' cultural backgrounds

When asked about whether they considered the students' cultural background to be of particular importance, two main and rather opposing, views emerged: Some expressed hesitancy to focus on cultural background, either because they saw it as irrelevant, or for fear of discomfort; others expressed a wish to pay attention to cultural as well as other forms of difference.

An example of the first can be seen in a quote by Bernt, who was clear that, as long as there were no obvious language problems, he did not consider students' cultural background to be particularly relevant:

> No. I look at it like this: They are here to follow the same curriculum as everyone else. As long as there are no great language difficulties and they are socially integrated in class, it is all good. If they need terms explained, and help understanding questions, then you have to step up.

Dismissal of taking cultural background into account, could be read as an egalitarian viewpoint (Barry, 2002), or in terms of a liberalist argument which favors individualism over group categorization. However, it risks ignoring minority students' experiences,

under the guise of "equal treatment". A similar mechanism is seen also in the next quote, where hesitancy to focus on immigrant students' backgrounds took a more ambivalent form. Here, Svein considers whether a student wishes to be identified as "foreigner":

> I have one girl who is [Turkish][3] and I am not sure whether she is proud of her own background, so whenever I make a point of it, I am not sure how she feels. She sort of becomes "the [Turk] in class", when really she is not. At that age, for the most part, one wants to be as much a part of the group as possible, needs to feel belonging, and perhaps doesn't want to stand out too much. So, I try to be aware of that.

The dilemma is difficult: whether, and how, to bring attention to the cultural backgrounds of immigrant students in ways which avoid, on the one hand, alienating the student in relation to their fellows, and, on the other, making their background and experiences invisible (Røthing, 2017). This school was located in a small community with a fairly recent influx of immigrants from one other country, [Turkey], and roughly half of the students had parents from [Turkey] and had either immigrated as children, or been born in Norway. Even though they made up half the school's population, being considered "the [Turk] in class" was considered "standing out" in this quote. It could be that the girl in question shared this feeling, and appreciated being "left alone" in terms of discussing her cultural background. However, when "attention to cultural background" is represented as an opposition to "belonging", the underlying assumption is that "belonging" necessarily entails attachment to the cultural majority, implying a significant distinction between Norwegian and Other. In a rural context, a group of immigrants from the same country, albeit substantial in numbers, was categorized as standing apart from the rest of the community. This also points to how both the school and the teacher are situated in a local community, with its cultural dynamics and processes. I will return to this point. A category ascription of belonging and standing out, implies a notion of imagined sameness (Gullestad, 2002), attached to Norwegianness – creating the "Other" in opposition to it (Said, 2003).

Further, Svein expressed a wish to focus on what was shared between the two cultures, rather than what was different:

> Actually, we have focused on it a bit, we had "[Turkish] days" last year. And now we picked it up again, and we keep returning to it, that we should not only focus on difference, but also what unites us.

This quote is quite ambiguous. While the school regularly organized [Turkish] days and in that sense embraced what they referred to as "duo-culturality" (although a once-a-year event could be seen as somewhat symbolic), they (as referred to by Svein) repeatedly found the need to emphasize similarity also on that day. On the one hand, this could be seen as an attempt to lessen a sense of distance between two cultures, by focusing on recognizability, unity and a sense of something shared. On the other hand, this urge to downplay difference could be seen in light of Gullestad (2002), who points to a logic of

sameness as a prerequisite for Norwegianness, leads to an emphasis on commonalities, and downplaying of differences. Gullestad (2002, p. 47) writes:

> Often [the egalitarian logic] implies that there is a problem when others are perceived to be "too different". […] [D]ifferences are concealed by avoiding those people who, for one reason or another, are perceived as "too different", and by playing them down in social interaction with those who are regarded as compatible. […] [D]ifferences between "Norwegians" and "immigrants" […] become discursively salient.

However, the situatedness of the school in a local community seems important here. It seems clear that the school attempted to include the [Turkish] parts of the community in school life, while also expressing their own role as trying to unite two sides. This is seen even more clearly in the next quote, which illustrates a sense of conflictedness. Here, Svein reflected on the role of the school in the presence of prejudice in the local community:

> There is no doubt there are different attitudes. So, we have to avoid talking about these issues. There is talk in the local community, and you have to be above that. Even though it is perhaps not merely prejudice, you don't want to plant that kind of seed in the younger generation, that "those people are like that" kind of thinking. We have to be above that, in school at least.

On the one hand, this quote expresses commitment to an ethos of tolerance, and rejection of stereotypical representations. However, this extract leaves little room for including [Turkish] content, experiences and perspectives without disrupting a sense of cohesion, or harmony (Gullestad, 2002). The intention of avoiding talk about differences and "being above" it, signifies a color-blind approach (Gillborn, 2019) resting on an assumption that by avoiding talk of "the other" culture, they are treated equally.

Further, the extract also addresses talk in the local community, a broader discourse where cultural differences present in the community are represented as troubling. Struggling to counter stereotypical representations and a sense of distance between two "sides", Svein expresses a need to avoid too much talk of cultural difference.

Teachers expressing discomfort regarding students culturally unfamiliar to them have been described before (Zembylas, 2010; Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017), and Zembylas (2010) suggests that: "…teachers' and school leaders' emotions and affects can be used constructively, [in order] to problematize (in)equity in schools and transform pedagogical practices" (Zembylas, 2010, p. 706). The situatedness of both teachers and students in local communities are among the fundamental assumptions of a pedagogy of discomfort – indeed, it is recognized as one of the causes of discomfort in the face of difference. However, the question of how discomfort can be turned productive, who's discomfort to encourage, and who's to avoid, is connected to the teacher's judgement of the students' situatedness, and how dwelling on discomfort will play out for them. In the case above, the teacher is left in an in-between position: on the one hand, an underlying notion of two distinct cultures, where one is harmonious, and the other somewhat disruptive. On the

other hand, the ethos of the school of countering stereotypes and advocating tolerance. The resolution to this discomforting dilemma is sought through focusing on commonality, and downplaying differences.

Ambivalence and hesitancy such as that expressed in the three quotes by Svein, entail a potential to engage in critical scrutiny of one's own underlying assumptions and perception of others (Boler, 1999, p. 177). However, through contending that one has to avoid such things "in school, at least", a *goal of neutrality* is implied as possible and desirable in school (Rugkåsa, 2008). Such a goal characterizes the discourse of imagined sameness, and it may create an obstacle toward scrutinizing one's own situatedness.

On the other hand, Anita also pointed to othering mechanisms in her local community:

> It takes so little in a small village like this, for a family to be seen as different. It is like that in these small, rural environments, that if you don't do things exactly the same way, then you're different. That difference becomes so visible in a rural environment, I find. And the adults around the place maybe talk about "us" and "them", right.

Rather than aiming for neutrality, however, this extract shows a relativising view of Norwegianness. Further, Anita pointed to how implicit assumptions may play out:

> We do a lot of strange things, we Norwegians as well [laughter]. And then we're dragging them along on skiing days! They have no choice – if it says skiing day on the lesson plan, then everyone goes. […] Information is one thing, but we can inform till we drop, but from that point, to someone actually going over, ringing the doorbell and saying: "Hey, do you want to borrow our sleeping bag for the trip this weekend?" Instead of the parents saying: "Our child has to stay at home because we don't have a sleeping bag". Managing to be generous like that – or rather, remembering to be generous like that, because that's what it's about, really – there is room for improvement there.

These extracts feature reflection about how an imaginary of normality and difference can be implicit. One effect of such implicitness, is that one is cut off from the possibility of challenging the ethnocentrism at the core of this imaginary, because it is expressed just as much through what is *not* being said or done, as what is. Putting instances of not being aware, of taking for granted, or forgetting, into words is a way to challenge this implicitness, *relativising* conceptions of normality. This connects to insights from critical and anti-oppressive pedagogies, where the aim is fostering critical awareness of structures of normalisation and othering, and one's own situatedness in relation to such structures (e.g. Freire, 2014, Kumashiro, 2002). Kumashiro (2002) addresses the problem of implicit neutrality through suggesting a *curriculum of partiality*, introducing several voices and social perspectives in order to challenge dominant majority cultural assumptions. This point is relevant also to social studies didactics, and I will return to it in Section 5.2.

Others explicitly challenged a notion of harmonious sameness. Exemplified by Linn:

> A few years back we had one of those international days here, where everyone who had a traditional costume could wear it this one day. We talk a lot about not being afraid of differences, but rather to recognize them and learn from each other, and that is not just about cultural background, it is about everything we bring into it, everything we are as people. So, in my experience, that distance becomes smaller if they get to talk about where they come from or what they carry with them.

Commenting on whether to focus on the cultural backgrounds of the students, she answered like this:

> Yes, I find that it does [matter]. That goes for all of us – it's what we carry with us.
>
> We do not consider background as such, but we do see the student, and we consider them, not really who their parents are or where they live. But, of course, what they carry with them is part of them, so in that sense we consider it.

While this quote too, expresses resistance toward granting priority to cultural background, it is referred to as equally important as other aspects of what "the students carry with them". However, in contrast to underplaying cultural and ethnic differences, this quote explicitly values seeing and acknowledging students' identities, while simultaneously resisting the idea of reductionist ascriptions of cultural identity. This accompanied Linn's expressions of seeing diverse student backgrounds as a resource:

> The students have many different experiences, and we see that as an advantage, really, both in learning situations, and in the breaks and in-between classes.

Difference, here, was the underlying assumption, rather than disruptive of an imagined sameness.

Challenging a notion of harmonious sameness does not necessarily imply that dealing with difference is effortless or something which comes naturally. Linn referred to the systematic work with team building which she and her colleagues undertook:

> Everything is connected, and the foundation that we build through class building and all that, it sounds like we are just playing around and building spaghetti towers, but it comes down to that we want the students to develop understanding and respect for one another, because it is good for everyone in the group that we are different, but the students need to experience that – that we need each one.

Here, the teacher reflects on how drawing on peoples' differences as strengths is a performative measure, something the students need to experience to realize. This bodily and performative focus connects to a central point in a pedagogy of discomfort: by dwelling in situations which may be perceived as challenging (such as, in this case, giving the students a difficult task which they must solve together), a space is opened up for challenging one's own perspective and ideas of a solution.

Thus far, the analysis has outlined two different main views: One revolved around a notion of imagined sameness, reproducing difference as disruptive and potentially uncomfortable. The other challenged the notion of harmonious sameness, and to some degree relativized conceptions of 'the Norwegian'. Importantly, however, the analysis does not imply that teachers can be seen as expressing "pure" versions of these main views. Rather, these are traits which can be seen in unequal amounts in the different interviews. Moving on, I will explore how these two main views came into play in relation to subject content.

5.2 Social studies subject content

Considering whether the cultural or experiential backgrounds of the students affected their teaching of social studies subject content, we see contours of the two different views outlined above – one featuring and the other challenging the notion of imagined sameness and discomforting difference. In an example of the first, Svein expressed caution of perpetuating prejudices he felt already existed in the local community. Such caution put strains on approaches to subject content:

> When it comes to cultural differences, mentioning [Turkey] comes naturally. And then one has to tread carefully so that one doesn't enhance the stereotypes and this, what we find challenging about the [Turkish] ways. […] There are some differences in attitude, so we have to try and steer clear of those issues, and rather look at what we have in common […] or emphasize the neutral differences – food and history and such things. […] In social studies it could be focusing on industries, what they do in [Turkey], geography, landscape, climate. There are many things to compare which are neutral things and not a minefield.

The conception of some topics as minefields, indicates discomfort considering the perceived cultural differences. Moreover, differentiating between "we" who find [Turkish] ways challenging, and the Turks, perpetuates othering mechanisms already described. Again, an underlying notion is that by leaving the cultural identities of the [Turkish] children untouched, one remains "neutral" – a constitutive aspect of a color-blind approach – and this may comprise a hindrance for scrutinizing one's own position as part of a cultural majority which to a large degree possesses the power of definition, and the power to construe the majority position as neutral (Rugkåsa, 2008).

Situated in a local community which seemed to exhibit some tension between the Norwegians and the [Turks], it seems the discomfort of bringing up touchy issues, and fear of invoking negative stereotypes which already existed, affected didactical choices. This raises some difficult questions regarding how teachers may navigate responsibly a didactics of discomfort, considering that they know about, and have thoughts about, how it may play out in relation to the community. I will return to this in the discussion.

Bernt expressed even stronger concern:

> You have to be very much on guard […] You can never predict what the students are going to say – you don't have a clue what is being said at home in front of the TV. But then, we have to teach about [Islam], so we just have to be on guard and pay attention to postures, facial gestures, stares, things going on.

This extract illustrates a sense of watchfulness, in case talking about differences might lead to discomfort for someone. There is concern for the students, particularly of putting students from cultural and religious minorities in uncomfortable positions:

> I have religion as well here, and we're learning about the world religions. When we talk about Islam, in the ninth grade, there are some students who are a little quick about the connection between Islam and extremism. So, when you go in there to talk about the religion and everyday life of a Muslim, then maybe things are said which are not OK for some. That has happened. […]

This teacher clearly found it difficult to discuss Islam in a way which avoided the risk of derogatory comments. On the question of how to deal with uncomfortable scenarios spurred by subject content, avoidance was repeatedly referred to as a good solution. In the case below, the context was education about democracy, where Bernt worried it might put students from other countries in a bad light:

> I think the best thing is to look at the Norwegian democracy in isolation […] You have to present it so that students are not put in a bad situation.
>
> I think it is better if they answer questions from the book about it. Not all the students are ready for big discussions about this, and if someone feels poorly treated or has comments thrown at them, you want to avoid it.

On the one hand, this quote expresses a strong concern for the comfort of minority students. The teacher seems to be watchful of a risk that majority students may put minority students on the spot as less familiar with the rules and values of democracy, or make negative comments about their country of origin, a situation he seemed determined to avoid. As he saw it, not all students were "ready" to have substantial discussions about democracy, and he seemed concerned that instigating such discussions in class would lead to troubling situations for minority students. On the other hand, the underlying assumption seems to be an understanding of Norwegian students as more familiar with values and practices of democracy, that minority students as a group were prone to feel less connected to them, and therefore vulnerable to negative comments if he attempted to discuss democratic values and practices in class.

A different view, also repeatedly expressed throughout the interviews, was that having students share their experiences, could be valuable as subject content. In general, the teachers who showed signs of discomfort at talk of cultural difference, were the most hesitant to include students' stories as subject content. Anita, however, showed a cautious desire to include immigrant students' knowledge and histories in her teaching:

> You know, I would very much like to involve these students who have first-hand information about a topic. […] But about the Syrian student I have, I don't really know her background well enough. [….] I don't know which side of the conflict her parents would have been on. […] In order not to step on anyone's toes, you have to tread a little carefully.

Including the histories and perspectives of minority students as subject content in order to make it relatable, is argued for by several scholars of multicultural education, prominently Banks (2009). The concern expressed above, however, that one might hurt the student or their family, is probably salient in any classroom where students have fled from war or intolerable conditions. While the need for teachers and other public servants to acquire knowledge about trauma, and conflicts in students' countries of origin, is an important concern, it will not be further discussed here.

Recognizing student's cultural and experiential backgrounds is, however, not just an issue of "having students tell the class about their home country", an approach which risks conflating a resource-based approach to difference (Hauge, 2014) with "using students as resources". There is, moreover, another risk of using students as providers of area-specific knowledge: that of turning them unduly into representatives of "their culture". Such representations may be inaccurate or unrecognizable for the students, risking reinforcement of exoticising and essentializing notions of the cultural Other (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 42).

Another point related to including students' own experiences as subject content was raised by Linn:

> It may foster a new type of understanding, if someone comes up and says "I experienced something like that" or want to share something about a difficult issue.

Here, students' own experiences are presented as an entrance to discussing subject content, potentially opening the door to the sort of experiences which could eventually lead to transformation (Kumashiro, 2002). Further, in the two extracts below, Linn's view expressed a clear contrast to the tendencies of avoidance seen above:

> As teachers we have a special responsibility, I find, in facing the kind of issues which may be sensitive or difficult. […]
>
> We do not avoid any of the topics in social studies because someone might find it [intimidating/personal], but we do have a close dialogue with the students if something is difficult. And then, it always comes down to having a good relation to them, knowing your students and being sensitive to them – catching signals, having the time to listen.

Here, the focus is on building trust, in order to make venturing into troubling terrain less intimidating. While it could be argued that a basis of safety makes it more likely for a pedagogy of discomfort to reach its transformative potential, there is some debate

concerning the role of safety within a pedagogy of discomfort (Røthing, 2019). I will return to this in the discussion.

Interestingly, with regards to discomfort Bernt reported that he did like to challenge majority students' conceptions of Norwegianness, what he saw as a Norwegian "smugness" or "world champion attitude". This included confronting students who opposed the exhibition of other flags than Norwegian ones during the celebration of constitution day on May 17th.

> Those discussions are OK, because then their attitudes are challenged, the Norwegian majority's, I mean, and I find that cool, to stir that up a bit. […] I don't embrace this "we Norwegians as a group" thing, so I like to challenge it a bit. I usually do that in May, but that's not really a big thing. […] And about 1814 – "Jews have no admittance to this kingdom[4]". I can use that, which has perhaps been downplayed a bit.

This illustrates a conscious challenge of (expected) attitudes of majority students which seems to run contrary to the previously expressed urge to evade discomforting differences. This may represent a differentiation between the students who need protection, and those who need (and can bear) to be challenged and highlights a difficulty which relates to the pedagogy of discomfort, which is the identity ascriptions at work when determining whose cherished beliefs to challenge, on which occasions and in what ways – and whom to protect. I will return to this in the discussion.

6 DISCUSSION

The research question bears repeating: How do social studies teachers in Norwegian lower secondary school view students' cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and how may teacher views on culture play out in social studies?

I wish to discuss two points: First, displays of discomfort during talk of students' cultural and ethnic differences are seen as a notion of imagined sameness disrupted. This is discussed in connection to the prevalence of a color-blind conception of school as neutral. Second, some didactical implications are discussed.

The analysis pointed to notions of imagined sameness in some teacher views – where an attempt at creating harmony based on sameness served to reinforce othering (Gullestad, 2002). Differences perceived as disruptive were concealed, avoided, or seen as outright problematic. Avoidance was explicitly linked to a notion of school as a neutral place, or to contentions that the students deserved equal treatment, and I interpret this as color-blindness.

However, I also pointed out another prominent feature: By taking cultural as well as other aspects of identity into account, while insisting on a commitment to seeing each student, a space was opened up for "deconstructing the norm/Other binary" (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 64). By situating "the cultural majority" as fundamentally characterized by

diversity, and relativizing "the Norwegian", the prevalence of imagined sameness constituted by an imagined Other, was weakened.

Teacher displays of discomfort regarding cultural difference took different forms – as doubt, caution, insecurity, ambivalence, and concern. There was a prevalent tendency to deal with discomfort through evasion. Considerations of avoiding minefields, not stepping on toes, or preventing hurtful comments were cited. There are at least two possible ways to understand this. First, it can be read as a focus on creating a safe environment for students. While this may seem uncontroversial, if it manifests as attempts to stay "neutral", then it creates a hindrance toward challenging conditions which may already be uncomfortable for some students. By invoking color-blindness, in effect, only some are blind-sided. This speaks to a paradox described before (Chinga-Ramirez, 2017) where discussions of cultural, ethnic or racial differences become almost impossible against a backdrop of Norwegian self-understandings as kind, tolerant and peaceful. Moreover, it may be impossible to create equally safe spaces for everyone, especially if attitudes and beliefs of some students are troubling to other students (Røthing, 2019).

Here, however, it is important to distinguish between *safety* and *comfort*: the latter is not necessarily a prerequisite for the former (Zembylas, 2015). Although It is, conceivably, possible to dwell constructively on discomfort without compromising anyone's safety, it does raise questions of how to tell the difference, and who has the power to decide whether a comment, argument, or other kind of tension is harmful or merely discomforting. This kind of difficulty seemed to be underlying the watchfulness of both Svein and Bernt, when they avoided certain topics altogether. But even setting that distinction aside, the question of deciding who's comfort to prioritize may be difficult enough, and it connects to the point that it comes down to how the teacher judges the students' situatedness, their positionality in relation to cultural, ethnic or racial categorisations – and their resilience. There is a risk inherent in applying pre-set categories of privilege and marginalization to decide this: the risk of perpetuating static and reductionist notions of the very categories one set out to challenge. Students' social identities are complex, and no-one's relation to the other is one of pure dominance or subjugation. Therefore, I support a call to apply a nuanced and contextualized understanding of social relations and cultural identity when working within a framework of a pedagogy of discomfort (Røthing, 2019).

The second reading relates to the teachers' own discomfort. While the analysis pointed to expressions which seemed founded on a notion of imagined sameness, and to a potential for critical and reflexive scrutiny of one's underlying assumptions, I nevertheless find it important to take teachers' discomfort in the face of cultural difference, seriously. Discomfort is, of course, genuinely uncomfortable, and the sense of relief in its absence, accordingly relieving (Røthing, 2019). As Kumashiro (2002, p. 48) points out, critical awareness of privilege and othering does not necessarily lead to transformation – it may lead to distress, and resistance toward approaching the topics and perspectives which cause discomfort. Dealing constructively with discomfort (Zembylas, 2015; Zembylas &

Papamichael, 2017) entails questioning beliefs which are emotionally charged (Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2008, p. 285). This point is no less salient when remembering that schools, students and teachers are situated in local communities, and part of the teacher's discomfort may relate to negotiating their role as a teacher in the midst of social and cultural dynamics in the community.

Challenging implicit notions and taken-for-granted beliefs of cultural normality and difference has a didactical side to it as well. The analysis indicates that imaginaries of Norwegianness as harmonious and difference as discomforting may lead to teachers opting to avoid certain topics, or treating them with less depth or substance, for the sake of avoiding discomfort. Are there other options for the teachers, didactical tools making it easier for teachers to make a leap into the unknown, into the minefields, in constructive ways?

First, I believe it is necessary to look beyond the question of whether, and how, to include minority students' cultural backgrounds as subject content. By looking past a dilemma of either placing too much or too little emphasis on students' cultural or ethnic background, it becomes clear that this dilemma is contingent on the notion of imagined sameness, because the underlying assumption is that the experiences of majority Norwegian students are less unique – more "normal".

Second, and as previously mentioned, the notion of a curriculum of partiality (Kumashiro, 2002), introducing a wider spectrum of cultural experiences, stories and voices might have been an aid in approaching subject topics perceived as "minefields", challenging preconceived notions of one neutral Majority Culture. Explicitly and critically pointing out the partiality of the stories told; including alternative voices and histories (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 64) entails letting go of notions of neutrality. This could serve as a way to disconnect discussions about values, attitudes or politics from tensions in the community, the discomfort of the situation could become less urgent, lowering the threshold for venturing into possible minefields. If the discomfort is too intense, we are less likely to be able to use it constructively. If we, however, manage to put it just far enough at a distance, we may approach difficult conversations about social, cultural, ethnic and racial identities, values, politics, privilege and marginalization, democracy and other social studies topics with more depth and substance. This is not easy, and it may be discomforting – for teachers, as well as students.

7 CONCLUSION

The analysis and discussion point to two prevalent views: one where an imagined Norwegian sameness was sustained, leading to color-blindness in the face of discomforting differences; and another where imagined sameness was challenged, and 'the Norwegian' relativized, leaving more space to deal constructively with discomfort.

The result of a conception of imagined sameness and evasion of "minefields" may be that, in the name of avoiding discomfort, minority students' varying cultural backgrounds are silenced. While a goal of neutrality, comfort and sameness expressed by some teachers

may be well intentioned, preparing students to become active and responsible citizens and advocates for justice, may not be achievable without facing uncomfortable topics or difficult conversations.

The discussion explores how a pedagogy of discomfort might serve as a tool for pursuing a goal of transformative education in social studies in ways which enable both teachers and students to challenge emotionally charged beliefs pertaining to cultural and ethnic identities, while underlining the necessity of adopting a nuanced conception of social categories.

If social studies is to reach its transformative potential in pursuit of social justice, then social studies teachers must venture a scrutiny of their own views concerning cultural and ethnic sameness as a prerequisite for Norwegianness. I propose to see this not only as a pedagogical task, and a self-reflexive move, but also as a potential didactical tool.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The names are fictional, and characteristics which could serve to identify their workplace, have been changed.

[2] Being in a Sami administrative area entails (among other things) that both Sami and Norwegian are official languages, and that certain sections of the Educational Act granting Sami students the right to receive education in Sami, come into play.

[3] The reference to [Turkey] indicates that the actual country of origin has been changed for the sake of anonymity. In the cases where country origin is not bracketed, it has not been changed.

[4] This is a reference to the original constitution of 1814, where Jews were prohibited from entering Norway.

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