

“I Almost Died”: Knowledges of Pain in a Finnish School for Refugee-Background Adults

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ABSTRACT

This critical ethnographic study investigated how knowledges of pain (KoP) surfaced and were negotiated in the classroom discourse of a Finnish adult basic education (ABE) context, more specifically, a school for adult learners with forced migration experience. The emergence of students' KoP, for instance, their stories of war, violence, and injury, are analyzed through the framework of Critical Race Pedagogy (CRP), which aims to validate and center the experiences of people of color (POC) in educational settings. Conceptualizing KoP as world knowledges, as invitations for self-reflection and re/positioning, and as interruptions, allows for an examination of their pedagogical and transformative potential. The findings show that a variety of KoP came to the fore, claiming and receiving different amounts of space and attention, including instances when they complemented the lesson content. KoP tended to cause minor interruptions to traditional power dynamics and classroom roles, which could nevertheless be entry points for developing ABE-specific CRP. Also, instances of teacher-imposed KoP were documented, which raises the question of how antiracist education can legitimize and incorporate students' desire for peace and belonging.

Keywords: *adult basic education; knowledges of pain; critical race pedagogy; forced migrant learners; ethnography; classroom discourse*

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Introduction

“I almost died.” In the face of such statements from students with forced migration experience, teachers may ask for pedagogical advice (e.g., Tweedie et al., 2017) or look into options for trauma-sensitive classrooms and mental-health interventions (Montero & Al Zouhouri, 2022; Tyrer & Fazel, 2014). The purpose of this article is to consider the knowledges such statements point to and how they are dealt with in the classroom context. Thus, this study asked: How are knowledges of pain (KoP) negotiated in the lessons of an adult basic education program in Finland?

Many branches of pedagogical theory argue for student-centered approaches that support learners in building meaningful connections between school and out-of-school

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knowledges. For instance, an ample body of literature argues for the integration of familial knowledges, so-called “funds of knowledge” (FoK) (e.g., González et al., 2006; Moll et al., 1990), in school-based learning. Additionally, important work exists that has documented students’ traumatic and resilient knowledges that surface in school contexts (e.g., Tyrer & Fazel, 2014) or argued for the inclusion of such knowledges in pedagogies (Ennsner-Kananen, 2016). However, the processes of how school and out-of-school knowledges are negotiated, particularly in the case of KoP, has not been at the forefront of pedagogical research. Given the growing numbers of students with forced migration experience and/or interrupted formal education, whose trajectories are oftentimes shaped by KoP, this area of research is becoming increasingly important.

This paper draws on Critical Race Pedagogy (CRP) to shed light on how the emergence of KoP is navigated in classroom interactions in a Finnish adult basic education (ABE) setting. It uses a CRP-informed concept of KoP as a lens to analyze classroom discourse data, originally gathered during a larger critical ethnographic study that investigated the legitimation processes of epistemic resources at the school. A variety of KoP came to the fore, claiming and receiving different amounts of attention, and raising questions about the negotiations they could elicit in the classroom context.

Theoretical framework: Critical Race Pedagogy and knowledges of pain

Critical Race Pedagogy

Having originated within legal studies (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Matsuda et al., 2018), Critical Race Theory (CRT) was introduced into educational scholarship early on, most prominently by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995). With its goal to build pedagogy geared to the experiences of people of color (POC), CRP is needed in institutions in the Global North, which tend to center the experiences, languages, and knowledges of white learners while pathologizing or dismissing those of learners from racialized, poor, and otherwise minoritized groups. Stovall (2006) and Parker and Stovall (2004) have laid the groundwork for CRP and criticized Critical Pedagogy (CP), among other things, for its color evasiveness and dismissal of Black philosophy to inform curriculum. As they explain, these shortcomings of CP perpetuate racial hierarchies and obscure the impact of white supremacy in education. Instead, the authors propose bringing together CP and CRT, arguing that “the historical and contemporary experiences of people of color can prove instructive about human interactions” (Parker & Stovall, 2004, p. 174).

In a similar vein, Jennings and Lynn (2005) outline CRP as “a theoretical construct that address [sic] the complexity of race and education” (p. 25) and “is cognizant of the necessary intersection of other oppressive constructs” (p. 26). As main tenets of CRP, they identify “the negotiation of power; the critique of self; and the need to be counter hegemonic” (p. 25). They elaborate on these aspects by identifying four key features of CRP: (1) CRP echoes a key principle of CRT, the endemic nature of

racism in society and the intersections of race with other social constructs of power, such as class, gender, and ability; (2) CRP analyzes and resists such dimensions of power as they unfold in schooling contexts, for instance, as language practices, ways of dressing, institutional norms that are based on the dominant group’s values, and as goals towards which minoritized groups are expected to assimilate; (3) Self-reflection is a key component of CRP, including teachers’ and researchers’ explorations of their own sociohistorical and geopolitical positions; and (4) CRP foregrounds POC narratives to shed light on the mechanisms of oppression, as well as on acts of resistance. As Jennings and Lynn (2005) explain, “advocating for justice and equity in both schooling and education ... [is] a necessity if there is to be justice and equity in the broader society” (p. 28). In this article, I adapt existing CRP frameworks to a Finnish ABE setting.

Knowledges of pain within Critical Race Pedagogy

Within the framework of CRP, KoP are knowledges that arise from the experience of being part of a minoritized, oppressed, or disenfranchised group. Such knowledges include all forms of violence, as well as knowledges of survival and resistance. With an eye to my participants, these have been experiences of racism (Ennser-Kananen, 2021), displacement, war, violence, silencing, and all forms of physical, socio-emotional, psychological, and material harm, sometimes over the course of generations. Conceptually, viewed through a lens of CRP, KoP unfold as follows:

- (1) First, KoP understood through CRP are instances of *understanding the world*. As Delgado and Stefancic (2017) have pointed out, minoritized (including pain) knowledges encapsulate epistemic resources that are not available in the same way to members of dominant groups. In striving for change in society or education, it is thus critical to draw on minoritized epistemic resources (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), particularly on KoP, to better understand how society or education systems function (rather than excusing acts of oppression as unfortunate malfunctions). In this sense, KoP are world knowledges and recognizing them as such has two important implications: (1) It understands that the experiences behind KoP are experiences of systemic oppression rather than individual, coincidental, or outlier cases; and (2) It breaks with a deficit view of KoP, understands them as resources, and makes their dismissal problematic.
- (2) Second, KoP within a CRP framework refer to practices of *positioning oneself*. When the stories of POC and other minoritized groups are centered (Solórzano, 1997), KoP may come to the fore that invite or demand those who holds or witness such knowledges to position themselves vis-à-vis them. Spaces of neutrality become unavailable in the presence of KoP, because KoP fill every response to them – even silence or seemingly casual comments – with meaning. In line with Anya’s (2021) tenets for CRP in world language contexts, KoP are thus a call to learning about the entangledness of one’s own and others’ sociocultural and

geopolitical histories, in the classroom and outside of it, where they can encourage a power shift and inform liberatory pedagogies.

- (3) Third, KoP seen through a lens of CRP include instances of *causing interruption*. As Delpit (1995) explains, power in schools manifests in a variety of places, including policies, curricula, teaching strategies, interaction, discipline, writing, and language practices. Although all these aspects of schooling tend to follow the principles of the dominant groups, schools are also spaces of (potential) emancipation (Yosso, 2005). KoP interrupt epistemic hegemonies and established ways of schooling that serve majoritarian narratives. As Lac (2017) puts it, “counter-narratives represent a source of legitimate knowledge for teachers and students of color in naming their realities” (p. 4). In addition, in contexts like Finland, where educational institutions are predominantly white and valuable knowledges tend to be associated with dominant groups, KoP interrupt traditional property structures and uphold POC as legitimate knowers. While counterstories can be tapped for pedagogical purposes (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005), they also exist as valuable knowledges in their own right. As pedagogy, they can serve as a critical step in moving theory into practice (Anya, 2021) by opening up concrete possibilities for action towards racial and social justice as envisioned by CRP and CRT (e.g., Solórzano, 1997, 2019).

In my study, KoP were ubiquitous, so much so that not writing this paper would have been a strange omission. To stir against the overfocus on pathologizing these knowledges, I propose the KoP/CRP framework, hoping that it will open up avenues for research that understand KoP as legitimate parts of classroom interactions. In addition to mental health support and trauma-sensitive pedagogies, such an approach could validate students’ experiences and recognize their epistemic work as valuable to the classroom/school community.

Literature review: Knowledges of pain

Valuable research exists that discusses teachers’ and school administrators’ preparedness, resources, and needs for serving learners who hold KoP, such as learners with refugee experience, and also points to critical needs for development (e.g., Okoko, 2011; Wilkinson & Kaukko, 2020). For instance, based on their work with Sudanese adults who are forced migrants in Australia, Burgoyne and Hull (2007) suggest several measures to improve their situation, including teacher training and increased attention to students’ literacy and practical work-life skills. In their study, very few instances of KoP, especially the effects of torture and trauma, were mentioned, and the teachers reported that learners “preferred to resolve their problems among themselves without assistance from teachers or counsellors” (p. 9). Such work raises two important questions. First, whose knowledges can be used for academic, policy, and pedagogical purposes? Burgoyne and Hull (2007) remind us that KoP are not always available for

curriculum development, nor should they be expected to be. If they are available, a second question to be raised is: Whose KoP are presented in the literature? As Pinson and Arnot (2007) have pointed out, research on forced migrants and schooling has foregrounded the perspectives and needs of policy makers, teachers, and teacher educators. In educational settings with students from marginalized communities, this is in conflict with the principles of CRT and CRP, which aim to center their stories.

Within educational contexts, one important strand of research that explicitly explores learners’ undervalued knowledges uses the framework “funds of knowledge” (FoK). These studies draw on work by researchers from the University of Arizona, who brought together school and community perspectives to reject deficit views of the life realities of working-class Mexican children and guided teachers in tapping the children’s wealth of knowledges at school (e.g., González et al., 2006; Moll et al., 1990; Moll & Greenberg, 1990).

Expanding on the FoK approach, Zipin (2009) reported on an action research collaboration between university and high school teachers in Adelaide, Australia. Based on their work and existing literature, they noted a problematic tendency to highlight “light” (positive) and dismiss or erase “dark” (negative) knowledges of students, as well as a focus on content knowledge rather than “ways of knowing and transacting knowledge” or what they call “funds of pedagogy” (p. 318, emphasis removed). The “dark” knowledges teachers in the study described were students’ accounts related to “violence, crime, alcohol, drugs,” as one teacher put it (p. 320). Recognizing this work, I propose KoP as an alternative term, as the equation of “dark” with “negative” and “criminal” draws on and perpetuates racist tropes.

In Finland and other Nordic countries, important work has contributed to understanding the needs of children and youth with refugee backgrounds at school. For instance, Kaukko et al. (2022) and Wilkinson and Kaukko (2020) have made a compelling argument for “pedagogical love,” which they found teachers in Australian and Finnish schools to enact towards their students. The rights of children and youth with refugee experience have also been discussed at a policy level, for example, as substantive equality in the context of the Finnish and Norwegian Education Acts (Riekkinen & Hanssen, 2022) or as analysis of policies and practices that apply to unaccompanied minors (Björklund, 2015). In addition, Borsch et al. (2019) have provided a review of the health, education, and employment outcomes of refugee-background youth in Nordic countries. In all, important efforts have been made to document, recognize, and improve the situation of refugee children and youth in the Nordic Region. While it is clear that many levels of care, advocacy, and intervention are needed, what remains rather unexplored in educational contexts is an understanding of students with forced migration experience as legitimate knowers, and an understanding of their stories as valuable epistemic resources.

Inspired and alerted by prior work, the questions guiding this article are thus: **How do knowledges of pain (KoP) surface in the lessons of an adult basic education program in Finland and how are they (not) negotiated in this setting?**

Context and methodology

The data stem from an ongoing five-year critical ethnographic research study that has a goal to examine the legitimacy of epistemic resources that exist in an educational context. Undergirded by anticolonial scholarship that acknowledges the epistemic erasure and oppression of non-“Western” knowledges (e.g., Mitova, 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018), it set out to ask how the legitimacy of knowledges (Ennser-Kananen, 2019) is negotiated in a school space. During the process of data analysis, it became evident that the recurring instances of KoP deserved closer attention, which motivated this paper.

Context and data

The setting for the study is an adult basic education (ABE) context in rural Finland, which serves a population of adult students with migrant, primarily forced migrant, backgrounds. In Finland, ABE is offered by schools, municipalities, and, as in this case, community colleges, and follows a comprehensive curriculum that includes languages, math, natural sciences, arts, and sports. The students at the research site come primarily from West-Asian and African countries, including Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Somalia. Many of them were prevented from attending formal schooling or completing their schooling trajectory, typically by war, poverty, repressive policies, or familial ideologies. Their goal is to complete their program within 2–5 years and acquire the certificate for compulsory school that enables them to seek further education, either in vocational or upper secondary schools. In all, the study involved 12 teachers and 55 students, and included closer collaboration with 4 of the teachers and 4 of the students. The data set for the study currently consists of field notes from 110 hours of participant observation, 88 lesson recordings, 35 open-ended semi- or unstructured interviews with students and staff, and about 880 photos of student work and classroom materials. As this paper examines classroom activities, I focused my analysis on field notes and lesson recordings.

Data analysis

After organizing and transcribing the data, the research team of three began thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by coding for any types of knowledges, including, for example, those related to schooling, family life, or migration processes. In all, we worked with seven codes, each of which had between two and four subcodes. As the first round of coding strongly hinted at KoP as an important focus of analysis, I continued to work on the KoP data set with another round of coding. Although KoP came up in interviews as well, I was particularly interested in how they surfaced and played out in classroom interaction, so that I limited my analysis to data from in-class activities. While clustering and connecting codes in a search for larger themes, it became clear that the instances of KoP did not fall neatly into clear-cut categories,

so I decided to arrange them on a continuum based on how much space they claimed in a lesson, ranging from “no uptake” to “part of the lesson.”

Positionality and ethical considerations

Importantly, the analysis of KoP was conducted by me, a white European woman, who was born and raised in the Global North and educated almost exclusively in primarily white institutions in Europe and North America. I have thus been socialized into white normativity, which, despite my conscious attempts to unlearn this socialization, affects my ways of thinking and my ability to recognize knowledges and interpret literature and data outside of my familiar frameworks.

All participants in the study were asked for written and oral consent, after information was shared with them in writing (Finnish and simple Finnish) and with the help of drawings and pictures. Consent was repeatedly asked for throughout the data collection phase. All names used in the data excerpts are pseudonyms. All excerpts were translated from Finnish into English, but for shorter passages, I decided to retain the original in the text in order to make the participants’ languages visible. I made a choice not to “clean up” participants’ language, in order to preserve their voices and underline the legitimacy of their language practices.

Findings and discussion

Examining the data through the lens of CRP and KoP yielded a variety of themes, which fell on a continuum based on how much attention and time they took up in a lesson. I introduce 3 points on this continuum: (1) Instances when there was no space for KoP; (2) Instances when KoP interacted with the curriculum; and (3) Instances when KoP were imposed on students.

Theme 1: No space for knowledges of pain

The first theme represents instances when KoP surfaced in the classroom, but were not taken up by teachers or peers. The example presented here occurred during an English lesson in an interaction between teacher Minna and Zenja, a woman from a Central African country, during a time when school was conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Example 1: My brother died

This is the first lesson after the winter break, so Minna asks her students about their holidays. Minna screen-shares a Google doc, which she uses to write down important words and sentences. She asks the class: “How do you say ‘*mitä teit lomalla* [what did you do on your holiday]?” Zenja turns on her microphone and answers: “What did you do on your holiday?” Minna writes it into the document and responds, “Perfect”. Then Minna asks everyone, one by one, about their holidays, and writes down the

answers as past tense sentences, highlighting the verb in bold type. Several students respond, “*Minä menin Helsinkiin* [I went to Helsinki].” Minna reacts with “Oh, no” and “Oh, my goodness.” She asks students if they wore masks during their trip and if they are feeling healthy. Some students respond “*Ei* [No]” to the question about masks, but quickly change their answers after noticing that Minna does not seem pleased. After a while, Minna switches to Finnish and says, “*Älkää nyt matkustako minnekään, jos ei ole pakko. Nyt ei matkusteta!* [Don’t travel anywhere now, if you don’t have to. Now we don’t travel!]” and continues to explain, “*Nyt on tärkeä, että olette kotona, ei saa mennä ystävän luokse, ei kuntosalille, voitetaan korona!* [Now it is important that you are at home, you can’t go to a friend’s place, nor to the gym, let’s beat corona!].” Zenja tries to take the floor by saying, “*Ope, ope* [teacher, teacher!]” and finally starts to speak. The sound quality is not very good, but I can make out the phrases “*Ope, minun perhe* [teacher, my family]”, and “*on korona*” [has corona] and “*veli kuollut*” [brother died]. Minna and the other students stay quiet. I write in the public chat “So sorry to hear, Zenja (crying emoji)” and she responds, “Thank you”. Minna proceeds to share a website from the national health services (THL) that offers “*Koronatietoa eri kielillä* [corona information in different languages].” There is information about COVID-19 in several languages, including Finnish, simple Finnish, Swedish, Russian, Arabic, Sámi languages, English, and several others. She shows students how to find information about COVID-19 regulations and recommendations in different languages. After that, Minna switches back to writing base form/infinitive and past tense for each verb that was mentioned in the holiday activity (Field notes, March 2021).

On this side of the continuum, where KoP do not receive any attention or lesson time, the analysis needs to tap into the area of possibilities. Importantly, the point here is not to criticize Minna for missing Zenja’s account. Rather, this instance should be taken as impetus for examining the different types of knowledges that do or do not receive attention during a time of crisis. The few words Zenja uttered point to her knowledges of the harm COVID-19 can do. Not only is she aware of the fatality of the virus, she also holds knowledges of loss, family separation, and mourning during a time of a global crisis. As a woman from an African country and migrant of color in Finland, she may also be aware of the globally unequal access to healthcare, specifically during a pandemic (*world knowledges*). In her attempt to bring her KoP into the lesson, Zenja claims space for her story in her life and educational experience in Finland. She positions herself in a space between her Finnish life and her African family, which she seeks to bring together and make relevant for each other. Part of this positioning is also her role as a survivor, which enables her to share KoP from both contexts. However, Zenja’s claiming space for KoP did not seem to affect Minna’s positioning, which is enacted through her focus on the lesson’s content on the one hand and COVID-19 recommendations and regulations and her effort to make them accessible to her students on the other hand: She interrupts her past tense lesson to share the link to official health care information, repeats the importance of wearing

masks and refraining from traveling, and adds a motivational message (“Let’s beat corona!”). With this, Minna not only claims her role as educator of English, but also of life in Finland, and, specifically, her role as a representative of the Finnish health services, which reaches into the students’ leisure time (*positioning oneself*). It must be noted that the role Minna assumes is already a response to an interruption, namely the one constituted by COVID-19 at the time, locally and globally. Zenja’s story did not penetrate this multilayered crisis response, as her claim for attention to KoP of mourning and loss is not taken up in a discursive space that is dominated by official regulations and the lesson’s agenda (*interruption*). In other words, the teacher’s choice and positioning, the context of remote learning, and the societal state of crisis produce a power dynamic that leaves no space for Zenja’s KoP.

Zenja’s attempt to foreground KoP raises questions about the potential of a larger societal and local legitimation of stories of mourning and loss during an already interrupted time. Foregrounding KoP might not only have offered first-hand knowers some relief and provided teachers with an opportunity to approach the topic of pandemic recommendations and regulations more effectively, it would also have been an important interruption to a majoritarian narrative (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) that reduces a global pandemic to a manageable and controllable risk and erases painful knowledges about the unequal availability of health care and the randomness and inexplicability of loss.

Theme 2: Knowledges of pain interact with the curriculum

Theme 2 represents instances in which KoP and the curriculum, or lesson content, interacted with each other. The following exchange occurred during a Finnish class during a unit on visiting the doctor’s office. I (J) sat next to Issaka (I), a student from an African country who came to Finland via Russia, where he lived in a subway station for over a year. In the first part of the class, we read a text about someone who sees a doctor and went through some of the vocabulary in the text. During this phase, teacher Paula (P) tries to determine the students’ familiarity with the Finnish word *röntgen* (“x-ray”).

Example 2: I almost died.

1. P: X-ray, x-ray. (Writes the word *röntgen* on the whiteboard). Who has had an x-ray?
2. I: (hand shoots straight up): Me! I go, Russia – Finland, Russia – Finland.
3. P: You hm?
4. I (turns to me): Long walking, very cold, very very.
The teacher pauses and watches us, following our conversation. Along with her attention, the eyes of many students in the class are also on us.
5. I (to me): 34, 34.
6. P: Was it minus 34?
7. I (to Paula): Yes, 34! Very cold and I no, no (points to hands).
8. P: Mittens? Aa, you didn’t have mittens, yeah.
Issaka is focused and engaged, his body upright and leaning toward the board and the teacher, almost lifting from the chair.

9. I: I almost, ice, ice (looking for words). I almost died, because it was 34. The doctor says, off, this (points to his hands, making a motion of cutting with one flat hand).
 10. J: Hands? Off?
 11. I: Yeah, yeah, hands off and me no, no nothing. (He pinches the skin on his hand).
 12. J: Ah, you didn't, like, you didn't, there was nothing (meaning no feeling in the hands).
 13. I: No, no. Then wait, wait 3 days, and – oh! (He opens his eyes wide and moves his hands open and up).
 14. J: It came back?
 15. I: Yeah, back, hands. Then this (points to board) *röntten* (meaning *röntgen*, x-ray).
 16. P: Aa, then you got an x-ray of your hands?
 17. I: No, no, whole (points to himself from head to legs). Whole picture.
 18. P: Okaaay. Well, well. You know what an x-ray is. (Proceeds with other words from the text.)
- (Field notes and recording, September 2021)

Issaka's story shows knowledges about living as an unhoused person, about poverty, physical pain, Russian winter temperatures, undergoing treatment in a hospital (including a full-body x-ray), and a (surprising) recovery (*world knowledges*). By bringing up these topics, he draws on his identity as a (formerly) poor person, who lived in a subway station and almost froze to death. Rather than staying quiet about this part of his life, he is quite eager to share it and connect it to the lesson's topic. Through this, he normalizes his KoP and claims for them to have a rightful place in the classroom. In addition, he positions himself as a teacher and learner who has overcome many obstacles and is able and willing to draw on his KoP. Paula, in turn, takes on the role of making his experiences accessible for others (e.g., rephrasing and asking for clarifications in lines 6, 8, and 16), and connecting them to the lesson content (line 18) (*positioning*). Although Issaka's intention may not have been to interrupt, but rather to engage with the lesson, his story causes (at least) two interruptions: of traditional teacher-student power dynamics as well as of the unproblematic and overly optimistic representation of medical services and recovery in teaching materials, which, in this case, featured a patient with flu-like symptoms receiving immediate medical care as well as sick leave (*interruption*).

This instance shows how even seemingly mundane topics, such as visits to the doctor's office, and everyday classroom activities, like checking for student understanding of a vocabulary item, can open up into a story of KoP, and then come back to the lesson's agenda again. Although a near-death or near-amputation experience could be a difficult subject for a class, Issaka's experience seemed to have received the attention it needed at that point, with the teacher providing the space for KoP, focusing on its linguistic realization rather than its content (lines 6 and 8), and bringing the lesson back to the official agenda at the end.

Theme 3: Imposing knowledges of pain

Throughout my data analysis, one theme refused to align nicely with the rest: instances when KoP were imposed by the teacher. This happened particularly in the

case of Emilio, a Finnish-Latinx teacher who identifies as a strong believer in anti-racist education and activism. The following interaction between him and Hanadi is taken from a class in a course on interculturality and antiracism.

Example 3: The Finnish Taliban

1. E: [...] There is war, peace, there is hope, and desire, which is in us all very strongly.
2. H: Yeah, teacher, all are humans, uhm migrants, there is country, there is war, I know.
3. E: Yeah.
4. H: I know, teacher.
5. E: Yeah, good, yeah. And we talk about that thing that war is one thing that unites us all.
6. H: Yeah.
7. E: So, we all have experienced war, we have experienced also peace. And desire is then, like homesickness. I am homesick, uhm for my parents' place, my friends' place, my relatives' place, I want to eat those foods that I ate in my home country, and so forth.
8. H (interrupts): Yeah, teacher, I, I –
9. E: What did you say?
10. H: I don't want my home country because, hmm, my home country is war. Now I don't want. Maybe, maybe Afghanistan will be peaceful, maybe I, I want [incomprehensible]. Now I don't want.
11. E: Okay.
[...]
12. E: Well, like I said then, there are those people in Finland who don't want you to be here. Sorry for telling you. “We don't want migrants” and we have talked about that there are these parties, who are interested in, who do that kind of politics, where they hope that migrants leave Finland. [...] That is why I said that [...] it would be important, your response to this, that Finland is our home and who, who we are and why we are here.
[...]
13. E: (Introduces the extreme right True Finns Party, shows image of people marching in military outfits, explains they are the second most popular party in Finland at that time, and that they are xenophobic and Islamophobic). It is a bit like if you went, well, to Afghanistan. And there would be, well, the Taliban. They could be like the Finnish Taliban, same kind. So, they don't like foreigners and and everything that comes from outside, that is bad and that has to be resisted and so on.
[...]
14. H (interrupts): Yeah, but, yeah is but, is totally, uhm people Finnish and Finland country is totally is peaceful and good and everything and all migrants are want, uhm uh, life in Finland.

15. E: Yes, yeah, and the biggest part of migrants want to be in peace, do work, be part of the society, and live in peace, right? But you can't live in peace if there is is a group like the True Finns, who want, every, all the time talk badly about migrants.

(Recording, December 2020)

In this instance, Emilio presents his knowledge of racism as a systemic and constant threat. Due to his role as the teacher, he has the opportunity to share a variety of knowledges with his students, including that of the political system in Finland, particularly the right-wing scene, but also other racist, Islamophobic, and xenophobic discourses that persist in the society (*world knowledges*). Emilio positions himself as a teacher and knower of Finnish society and politics, and the bearer of bad news. Hanadi, then, is positioned as an interrupter, doubter, and the one who insists on the goodness in Finnish society (*positioning*). To do this, Hanadi has to, quite literally, interrupt Emilio (lines 8, 14), who, in turn, breaks with common discourses of Finnish color evasiveness, innocence, and exceptionalism (Kallio-Tavin & Tavin, 2018; Rastas, 2012). With these, Emilio also interrupts Hanadi's discursive construction of safety, specifically of building her new home in a peaceful environment (*interruption*). This becomes particularly evident in line 13, where he equates a Finnish extreme right party, the True Finns, with the Taliban, whose regime and violence Hanadi is closely familiar with (see Theme 3), and in the last turn, where he reframes her depiction of Finland as a peaceful country (line 14), replacing her image of the reality as the unfulfilled wish of migrants, which is broken by extreme right groups like the True Finns. Through his discursive moves, Emilio delegitimizes Hanadi's notion of a peaceful Finland, which raises the question of whether knowledges of peaceful Finland can be legitimate in the context of this class. In a similar vein, although in the context of research with Indigenous groups, Tuck and Yang (2014) argue that one of the reasons for withholding research is that "the subaltern can speak, but is only invited to speak her/our pain" (p. 226, emphasis removed). They elaborate on the harm "(d)amage-centered" research does to marginalized communities in order to feed academia's voyeuristic fetish for stories of pain. While the context and intention certainly differ, we may ask, together with Tuck and Yang, about the potential harm of pain-centered pedagogies and classroom discourses. If the subaltern is not allowed to speak of peace, home, and safety, what are their opportunities for experiencing these things? This is not merely a critical question for the classroom discourse observed under this theme, but a crucial caveat for a pedagogy of KoP in general.

Concluding remarks

As my analysis shows, a CRP/CRT-informed framework can be a helpful tool in understanding KoP of students with refugee experience. The following points can serve as incentives to stimulate further research, activism, and discussion:

First, students in this ABE context hold a variety of KoP, including of war, death, illness, injury, and poverty, which relate to familial/communal, historical, institutional, and systemic knowledges about the world. All of these may surface in classroom contexts, whether prompted or unprompted, and may be available as epistemic resources for learning and teaching. They may demand very different amounts of attention from teachers and peers.

Second, when sharing KoP, all students claimed epistemic legitimacy and positioned themselves as survivors and inhabitants of multiple sociocultural and geopolitical locations, which allowed them to destigmatize KoP and bring them into the school. However, the students’ KoP were not systematically tapped for learning, which raises the questions of teachers’ resources and preparedness to do so.

As the data analysis showed, KoP had the potential to interrupt the classroom agenda or power dynamics, but interruptions were momentary or minimal. Thus, teachers’ positioning remained by and large intact, and an observable repositioning occurred only on the interactional level. While this may be a small step in acknowledging KoP, it doesn’t address key CRP components, such as the recognition of racism as endemic, which could incorporate even small interruptions into a CRP curriculum that is specifically tailored to ABE learners.

Importantly, KoP are not recounted in a vacuum but are often shared in environments that are already interrupted and complex. The interaction of different interruptions (e.g., students and teachers affected by COVID-19, trauma, and oppression) demands more attention from researchers and teacher educators.

Emilio’s investment in KoP deserves special attention. As he stated in two interviews, his intention is to provide student-centered antiracist education and important life skills for the learners in his classroom. However, analysis of classroom discourse suggests that the KoP he provides tend to become nearly impenetrable for students’ epistemic claims of hope and justice. In this sense, his approach is not co-constructive but delegitimizes student knowledges and affirms the teacher as rightful knower. This necessitates further discussion of what effective antiracist/epistemically just education entails.

Empirically, this article contributes to the literature on education of refugee-background learners, ABE (in the Nordic countries), and epistemic justice, and importantly, ties those strands of scholarship together. In a context like ABE, where there is a constant risk of infantilizing learners and dismissing or erasing their knowledges, it is important to provide and promote work that recognizes and counters this risk.

Theoretically, this article has developed and applied a CRP/CRT-informed concept of KoP. What remains beyond the scope of this study is the potential of KoP to incite pedagogical and curricular change, which could be a fruitful angle for future research. Given the variety of KoP and the unpredictability of their emergence in the classroom, it would hardly be helpful to call for teacher preparedness for all eventualities. Instead, I reiterate my arguments for the less prepared teacher (Ennser-Kananen, 2020), “What if we cultivated the un(der)prepared teacher who is courageous enough to leave spaces

to be filled with students' stories, interests, needs, and goals, not the demands of the (white-dominated) school, curriculum, or economy?" (p. 18). Fostering such a state of unpreparedness in teaching and teacher education means developing the readiness to drop a lesson plan, deviate from the curriculum, and instead become an intense listener and safer-space provider, especially in times of crisis. Shifting priorities in this way can open opportunities for legitimizing KoP and processing them collaboratively in ways that support healing and learning.

Author biography

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