

Education and Coloniality in the Nordics

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Introduction

Current research maintains that the Nordic countries, despite their contextual differences, are prone to amnesia and sanctioned ignorance in relation to their colonial histories, legacies, and structures (Eriksen, 2021; Fjellheim, 2023; Höglund & Andersson, 2019; Jore, 2022; Keskinen et al., 2019; Kuokkanen, 2023; Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012; Mikander, 2016; Pashby et al., 2020). As Quijano (2000) describes, European colonialism from the 15th century did not end with historical colonialism based on territorial occupation; enduring power and knowledge structures were installed in and through modernity, described as coloniality. Coloniality entails a specific colonial matrix of power (CMP), grounded in race as an organizing principle. CMP permeates social, political, environmental, and epistemological systems of capitalist modernity in local and context-specific ways. This special issue (SI) aims to advance critical discussions about coloniality in relation to education in the Nordic region. Education has been proven to reproduce coloniality, epistemic violence and racism, but represents at the same time potential avenues towards decolonial, socially just and sustainable futures.

A decolonial conversation must give room for a diversity of voices. This is due, not least, to the harsh pushbacks experienced by researchers who raise these concerns in the Nordic context. As scholars, we see worrying signs emerging from the consequences of mainstreaming of radical right-wing politics. These include cuts to welfare and development aid and limiting rights for refugees – all aspects which have commonly been seen as intrinsic to Nordic national identities. The recent case of Tobias Hübinette, a scholar in critical race and whiteness studies, is an alarming example of how academics are being threatened. A supporter of the radical right wing enrolled in his class recorded and disrupted the lecture, attempting to silence Hübinette's

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research on questions about racism in general. Despite the student being a threat to university staff and students, they were not expelled (Norheim et al., 2023). The case highlights the need for joining forces and making space for conversations across the Nordic community of researchers engaged in the issues of race, racism, whiteness, and coloniality.

The first articles in this SI were written by **Jore** and **Fagerheim Kalsås**, and open with theoretical discussions concerning approaches to coloniality in Nordic education. The following contributions show the richness of the field, taking on a diversity of approaches, including poststructuralist and critical whiteness theories, post- and decolonial perspectives, and indigenous methodologies, as well as more empirically oriented and descriptive pieces. Although these methodological strands have many overlaps and are in practice often combined in research, they are also at certain points conflicting (cf. Eriksen & Jore, 2023; Finbog, 2023; Groglopo & Suarez-Krabbe, 2023; Keskitalo & Olsen, 2021). We do, however, consider diversity as a strength. Coloniality is complex and can be considered a foundational concept that encompasses many distinct processes and structures at multiple levels (Kuokkanen, 2023).

With this editorial, the aim is to provide background knowledge and an axis of navigation for the articles in this SI. We start with a brief recap on the multiple ways in which colonialism, racial violence, and white supremacy form part of the history of the Nordic countries. As this overview shows, decolonial perspectives have been surprisingly belated in the region. We then give a brief introduction to education and decolonization in the Nordic region – a subject that is much better explored in the individual contributions. Then, finally, we draw special attention to acknowledging indigenous perspectives in analyzing decoloniality in the Nordic region and intra-Nordic relations.

Colonial histories and legacies in and across the Nordic region

A common characteristic of the Nordic countries has been their self-positioning as allegedly outside the history of colonialism and ongoing coloniality. This is significant, not only due to the incorrect historical understanding but because it has also facilitated the ongoing refusal to acknowledge racism, as well as the prevalence of white normativity (Fylkesnes, 2019), and white supremacy (Hübinette & Lundström, 2011). This refusal to acknowledge Nordic coloniality has led to Nordic subjects people being seen as almost intrinsically more prone to equality in general (Keskinen et al., 2019) and as exceptional (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012), filtering into various aspects of their wider societies.

The involvement of Nordic states in colonialism and imperial history was diverse, with some Nordic states being more directly involved through participation in empire-making. The borders of the Nordic countries have changed throughout the centuries, in addition to some countries temporarily ruling others. Areas of Finland have been under Swedish rule at certain times, while Iceland, the Faroe Islands, and Kalaallit

Nunaat/Greenland have been part of Denmark's global empire, which reached to the Caribbean, India and West Africa at different times (Jensen, 2015; Naum & Nordin, 2013). Similarly, Sweden in the 17th and 18th centuries sought to participate fully in overseas imperialism, such as in West Africa and the Caribbean (Fur, 2013; Keskinen et al., 2019). This also involved the use of slave labor by these empires (Naum & Nordin, 2013). Collecting and displaying objects associated with indigenous Nordic people like the Sámi by Sweden and Denmark could strengthen their status and symbolic importance within European imperialism (Nordin & Ojala, 2018).

Assimilation was key to the civilizing process of minorities and indigenous peoples, and the Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish states at different times decided what was best in terms of administration and cultural policies, emphasizing settlement in Sápmi¹(Lindmark, 2013) and Kalaallit Nunaat/Greenland (Graugaard, 2018). Nordic scholars contributed significantly to theories of racial difference in the 18th and 19th centuries, which were part of intensifying race science and eugenics in the 20th century (Hübinette & Lundström, 2011; Kyllingstad, 2004; Mattson, 2014). Forced sterilization, notably carried out on women with Roma or Romani/Tater backgrounds in Sweden and Norway, is one manifestation of this violence (Selling, 2022). Within the imperial centers, series of displays took place of colonized people, such as in Denmark (Andreassen & Henningsen, 2011), often in conjunction with Denmark's colonies, where the goal was to emphasize Denmark's superior position and the utility of the colonized people to Denmark (Loftsdóttir, 2019).

Nordic subjects had different positionalities regarding coloniality; positionalities that were historically shifting. Within ideas of scientific racism, Finnish people were racialized as not fully European (Keskinen, 2019; Kivisto & Leinonen, 2011), and people in Iceland were for a long time seen by elite scientific travelers, who came to Iceland for resource prospecting for possible advances of their empires, as existing outside modernity. Both in Finland and Iceland, there was anxiety among the intellectual elite concerning the nonrecognition of belonging (Loftsdóttir, 2019; Rastas, 2012, p. 90). These different positionalities are important to recognize, to understand better the different dynamics of racialization and coloniality in the Nordic countries. However, this does not mean that we have racist exceptionalism such as in the case of Finland and Iceland. Coloniality and racism existed in all the Nordic countries (Loftsdóttir, 2023).

Nordic people and states participated actively in settler colonialism in the 19th century, where they benefited from the racial policies of the settler states, based on white supremacy (Loftsdóttir et al., 2021; Sverdljuk et al., 2021, p. 5). As outlined by Sverdljuk et al. (2021), the experiences of these Nordic people were not equal, but reproduced to some extent the hierarchies found within the Nordic countries themselves. Sámi immigrants had to hide their identity, while classified in North

¹ Sápmi is the ancestral homeland of the Sámi people, stretching across Northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and North-Western Russia.

America as white (Jensen, 2021), and Finnish settlers were seen as inferior to Danish and Swedish settlers (Huhta, 2021; Kivisto & Leinonen, 2011). Within the Nordic countries, various creation, consumption, and reproduction of racist and colonial images and discourses has taken place historically, even though the racist character of these cultural symbols is today often fiercely disputed and their innocence within the national space defended (Kennedy-Macfoy 2014, p. 49–50; Lóftsdóttir, 2013; Rastas, 2012; Sawyer & Habel, 2014). Thus, everyday objects used in the Nordic countries were part of the world of imperialism and colonialism (Merivirta et al., 2021). The silencing of coloniality as part of the “official” Nordic nation state histories is pointed out in the articles by **Stachurska-Kounta** and **Kohvakka** in this SI, analyzing history textbooks from Norwegian and Finnish contexts. Stachurska-Kounta points out the ignorance in Norwegian historiography concerning the impact of Norwegian migration to North America in the 19th and 20th centuries on indigenous peoples. Kohvakka suggests that the lack of knowledge about the Sámi and colonization of Sápmi amounts to an “absent curriculum” in Finnish textbooks.

More recently in the 20th century, ideas of Nordic exceptionalism were entangled with conceptions of the Nordic welfare-state model, as identified by Gullestad (2006) as “equality as sameness.” Within the welfare systems of the Nordic countries, eugenics were presented as “health interventions” where ideas of white supremacy and class have been important in social work (Merivirta et al., 2021). As emphasized by Merivirta et al. (2021), those who provided the service were not trained to see the structural inequalities and power relations, where those doing the social work often had quite different backgrounds from those who the service was directed at. The emphasis on the heteronormality and masculinity of the welfare state (Norocel, 2013) has successfully been mobilized in the present by populist parties, by creating the sentiment that racialized others and people with migrant backgrounds are a threat to the welfare system (Hübinette & Lundström, 2014). Thus, the welfare state has been appropriated by right-wing forces to blame racialized others or people with migrant backgrounds for weakening welfare states (Andersson, 2009, p. 240). Educational systems that overprioritize cultural differences and emphasize assimilation (Harðardóttir et al., 2021), thus based on the naive assumption of cultural differences, certainly facilitate such mobilization.

Decolonizing education and academia in the Nordic region

Calls to decolonize education and academia have gained momentum on a global scale over the past few years, also in the Nordic countries (Eriksen & Svendsen, 2020; Groglopo & Suarez-Krabbe, 2023; Sandset & Bangstad, 2019). Decolonization is simultaneously a political imperative and a demand revolving around questions of material structures related to justice, access, and representation in education, and a series of epistemological questions (Eriksen, 2021, p. 35). Decolonization entails acknowledging colonial power relations both at the institutional and individual levels,

as well as taking action to counteract them (Kuokkanen, 2023). In other words, decolonization simultaneously involves critical analysis of how coloniality shapes educational institutions and knowledge production, and experimentation with alternatives (cf. Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

The conversation on decolonization in Nordic academia emerged as a conversation between activists and scholars that shed light on the historical experiences and lived realities of people in the Nordic region positioned as “non-belonging,” “absent,” or “racialized others.” Central voices and movements include indigenous communities (Sámi and Kalaallit), scholars and activists with Latin American backgrounds, and Afro-Nordic associations and movements (Eriksen & Svendsen, 2020; Groglopo & Suarez-Krabbe, 2023). Student movements have called for more diverse approaches to knowledge production, research, and education (Jensen et al., 2020). Several contributions in this SI point out the need for engaging more deeply with coloniality in Norwegian higher education. **Olsson, Yri and Fylkesnes** report from a course on decolonization and pedagogical practice offered at a Norwegian higher education institution, pointing out the need to interrupt Western epistemological dominance. Sharing auto-ethnographic reflections from his own experiences with education programs for refugees, **Abamosa** argues that the language training programs are characterized by false generosity and may further marginalize refugees by sustaining the status quo and rejecting disruptive pedagogy. The widespread Nordic practice of student mobility to the Global South is explored in the contribution by **Massao and Bergersen**, looking at internationalization initiatives between Norway, Tanzania, and Zambia. Their findings show that the project reproduces asymmetrical power relations exerted through mobility.

While interculturalism in education was the norm for a long time, there has been a shift that increasingly emphasizes questions of power and social justice over questions of culture (Mikander et al., 2018). A growing body of scholarship points out the need to confront the tenacious denials concerning race, racism, and whiteness in Nordic education, upholding color blindness and white emotional equilibriums (cf. Ahmed, 2004) in education at all levels (Eriksen, 2022; Fylkesnes et al., 2024; Harlap & Riese, 2023; Helakorpi, 2020; Hummelstedt, 2022; Khawaja, 2022; Loukola, 2023; Lundberg, 2021; Masoud, 2024; Vertelytė & Li, 2021). We also see an increase in research networks focusing on coloniality, racism, and critical whiteness in separate Nordic countries, as well as in the Nordic Educational Research Association, signaling a need for cross-Nordic dialogue around these issues. With her contribution to this SI, **Klarsgaard** adds to the emerging literature on whiteness in Nordic education. Reporting from a critical ethnographic fieldwork in a Danish ECEC institution, Klarsgaard argues that regulatory language practices can be understood as part of shaping the ECEC institution as a white space and (re)constructing specific notions of Danishness. Also using a critical ethnographic approach, **Ennser-Kananen** explores minority students’ experiences with pain, such as their narratives of war, violence, and injury. This is analyzed through a framework of critical race pedagogy as

the approach seeks to affirm and prioritize the experiences of individuals from marginalized racial backgrounds, specifically people of color, within educational environments. **Kurki and Niemi** extend the perspectives on whiteness to intersections with sanism and ableism in their account of the lived experiences of young people of color as users of student support services (student welfare services and support for learning and schoolwork) in Finland.

The inherently violent nature of our modern-colonial modes of existence also comes to the fore in questions concerning current ecocide and (un)sustainability. Norgaard (2011) characterizes denials concerning climate change as a social phenomenon that obstructs the capacity to initiate action and assume responsibility, even in the face of clear indicators. Ekberg et al. (2023) examine the different ways in which climate action has been obstructed and how “we” in the global North, who are historically responsible for human-induced climate change, fail to acknowledge historical and ongoing injustices. Informed by critical educational analysis, Sund and Öhman (2023) outline the problems of denial in the face of the climate crisis and the call for education that deals with the root causes of environmental injustice in depth. In the article by **Roberts and Eriksen** in this SI, we hear from youth in Norwegian upper secondary schools, who share their thoughts on how present curricula prepare them for an unknown future. In conversation with the stories narrated by the youth, Roberts and Eriksen argue that if sustainability is to provide an educational avenue of hope and change, it requires facing the limitations of modern-colonial habits of being and knowing.

Indigenous peoples of the Nordic region: Resistance, reconciliation, and (im)possible reparations

While Nordic countries were strategically nurturing national self-images of exceptionalism and colonial innocence, the colonization of Kalaallit Nunaat/Greenland by Denmark and Sápmi by Norway and Sweden were far from being more “benign” forms of colonialism. These processes held striking ideological similarities to the settler colonial processes of other empires, amounting to a routine form of settler colonialism (Finbog, 2023; Össbo, 2023).

The Act on Greenland Self-Government (Naalakkersuisut, 2009) released Kalaallit Nunaat from its formal colonial subjugation by the Danish state. However, in practice, coloniality still marks Kalaallit–Danish relations today, upholding the Danish influence and the positioning of the Kalaallit culture and identity as inferior (Lynge, 2008; Maegaard & Mortensen, 2022). The Danish-Norwegian priest Hans Egede initiated the Danish colonization process in 1721, whereby the state conducted a so-called “civilizing” mission in which it forced the Kalaallit to convert to Christianity, suppressed indigenous language and culture, worked to destroy traditional communal structures, and took control of trade. The efforts were intensified in the aftermath of the Second World War, introducing a systematic “Danization” (Søgaard, 2020). These policies were emphasized in the report of the Greenlandic

Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 2017, which described the particularly harsh and violent consequences of coloniality, notably through measures such as the forced adoption of Kalaallit children by Danish families.

The colonization of Sápmi by emerging Nordic nations can be traced back to the 14th century at least, by referring to the definition of tax areas (Finbog, 2023). However, the state-led, systematic assimilationist policies from the early 1800s onward are often emphasized as the consolidation of colonization (Minde, 2003). The Sámi, like other indigenous peoples across the globe, were forcibly incorporated into settler colonial states through harsh racist policies (Kuokkanen, 2020). Although the policies as well as the lived experiences were different both within states and across national borders, a common denominator was the weaponization of education as a key strategy in the operationalization of assimilation and colonial policies toward the Sámi, as well as other national minorities. Residential schools and educational policies have been common facets of the settler-colonial strategies aiming at “elimination of the native” (Wolfe, 2006), and were the main driver of epistemicide toward Sápmi (Finbog, 2023).

Today, the Sámi are recognized as indigenous peoples in the constitutions of the Nordic states in which Sápmi stretches across. Consequently, although both the legal framework and practical policies of the three nation-states have significant differences, the Sámi hold rights to the protection of their culture and language, as well as to their ancestral homelands. The legal recognition of the stands in stark contrast to continuous processes of dispossession of Sámi lands and livelihoods through state-led industrial development initiatives such as logging, mining, mass tourism, power plants, and infrastructure across Sápmi, commonly referred to as ongoing settler and green colonialism (Fjellheim, 2023; Kuokkanen, 2023; Normann, 2021; Øssbo, 2023).

In Norway, a TRC was established in 2018 to examine past injustices committed against the Sámi, as well as the national minorities Kvens and Forest Finns, by the Norwegian state. As TRCs were appointed in Finland and Sweden in 2021, the processes are still ongoing at the time of writing this editorial. In the Norwegian report, it is clear that knowledge and education are key pillars of the suggested reparative work. The Commission presented its report in 2023, concluding that although the Norwegianization policy had been formally discontinued, many patterns of action, attitudes, and social structures that it had contributed toward have continued (Sannhetsog forsoningskommisjonen, 2023). As earlier research has shown, this concerns both the sanctioned ignorance of colonialism and Sámi, Kven, and Forest Finn history, culture and knowledge within so-called “mainstream” educational institutions at all levels (Eriksen, 2018, 2021; Kuokkanen, 2008), and the lack of resources allocated to the development of context-specific institutions and pedagogies for the Sámi school (Gjerpe, 2017; Keskitalo et al., 2013; Kuokkanen, 2005). As Kuokkanen argues (2020, p. 294), without a structural approach to justice, reconciliation can work as a continuation of settler colonialism under the guise of progressive, liberal-democratic politics.

Contextualization of the colonization of Sápmi in terms of epistemicide is not tantamount to declaring Sápmi knowledge as *lost*. Rather, Sámi knowledge is not

rendered visible within educational and academic institutions based on modern-colonial, monocultural understandings of epistemology. As pointed out by Porsanger (2004), the “theoretical value of indigenous approaches has been denied because ‘theorizing’ has been evaluated on the premises of Western academic knowledge and epistemology” (p. 112). Sámi knowledge transmission and practices are kept alive and redeveloped through community-based relations (Finbog, 2023), and Sámi knowledge is also gaining visibility in wider society through practices of political resistance and counter-storytelling (Fjellheim, 2020). We believe that a central part of the work that needs to be done by mainstream educational institutions to enable pathways of decolonization is to position themselves to listen to the stories of the indigenous communities, making themselves eligible for receiving the gifts of indigenous, local, and experience-based knowledge (Kuokkanen, 2008).

In this SI, we present context-specific examples of how decolonization of education in and for Sámi and Greenlanders/Kalaallit can possibly take place through reclaiming definitional power and ownership of educational institutions, practices, and discourses. **Skogvang and Massao** address the role of Sámi festivals in supplementing the Norwegian formal education system to revitalize Sámi culture from within, and **Nutti, Johansson and Kuhmunen** investigate how explorative work with the Sámi narrative tradition of *skábma* in early childhood education can initiate decolonizing processes. Providing a unique and important insight into the context of Greenland/Kalaalliit Nunaat, **Jensen and Arnfjord** describe efforts to decolonize social work education through student-driven learning and local knowledge.

Final reflections

In line with Stein et al. (2020), we contend that decolonization of education is not tantamount to offering normative prescriptions for practice and actions, but rather allows for a multiplicity of approaches to enable imagining and experimentation with other options of (co)existence in and through education. With this SI, we hope to invite and enable new conversations in the field of education across the Nordic region, united by a collective concern for humanization, sustainability, and decolonization, while allowing for complexity, tension, ambivalence, and uncertainty.

Author biographies

Kristin Gregers Eriksen is an associate professor in social studies education at the University of South-Eastern Norway. Her research is within decolonial approaches to knowledge and education, anti-racism, and Sámi knowledges and perspectives in education. She is especially interested in the connections between social justice and sustainable futures.

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Kristín Loftsdóttir is a professor of anthropology at the University of Iceland. Her research has focused on Nordic exceptionalism, postcolonialism, whiteness, gender, racism, mobility/migration and crisis. She is currently the PI for the research project Creating Europe through Racialized Mobilities.

Pia Mikander is a university lecturer in history and social studies didactics at the University of Helsinki. Since her PhD in 2016, *Westerners and others in Finnish school textbooks*, her research interests have focused on questions around democracy, active citizenship, norms and power in relation to education, particularly within the subject of social studies.

Louise Sund is an associate professor at Örebro University. Her research draws on postcolonial and decolonial theoretical resources to examine productive pedagogical tensions in the intersections between environmental and sustainability education and global citizenship education. Her research investigates the possibilities and challenges teachers face when taking up ethically and politically charged issues in a classroom.

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