

Introduction

Troubling educational cultures in the Nordic Countries: Introduction

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Let's make trouble!

In her book, *School trouble: identity, power and politics in education*, Deborah Youdell (2011) calls researchers and educators to be *trouble makers*, who contest the normative assumptions that frame, for example, notions of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, learning and behaviour in the context of education. From the point of view of a non-Nordic audience it might look as if there is very little to *trouble* in Nordic countries, which score well in terms of formal equality of opportunity in education. Still educational inequalities related to economic, social and cultural dimensions have remained; young people of working class, ethnic minority or special education background tend to end up in culturally less-valued educational routes more often than white middle class youth (e.g. Dovemark and Beach, 2016, Berhanu, 2016a, 2016b; Niemi and Mietola, 2017; Rinne, 2012) and higher education and especially the economically most rewarding and culturally appreciated fields, such as medicine and law are still accessible mostly for well-to-do families (e.g. Beach and Puaca, 2014; Nori, 2011). Moreover, the most recent aims for tightening policies towards all groups dependent on any kind of social services or support signal decreasing solidarity towards less privileged people. For example, the Nordic Countries elaborate their immigration policy aiming to take care that they are not more tempting to asylum seekers than their neighbouring countries.

The authors of this book have taken the *call for troubling* seriously and are enthusiastic in applying it to the Nordic context. As we were troubled about the concept *troubling* in the title of the this book, we decided to start by exploring that particular concept and how the articles in the book are related to it. First of all, we do not view trouble as something that needs to be resolved, but rather something that challenges how particular categories exist without being in the need of troubling. Thus, rather than resolve the trouble we seek to *make* some trouble. Here we are inspired by Judith Butler's idea of gender trouble concerning the need to contest normative assumptions about gender and sexuality. *Gender trouble* for Butler is a process that reshapes norms that produce heterosexuality

and two opposite sexes as natural and real. Along these lines, the trouble we put forward in this book seeks to contest the normative assumptions that frame notions of ability, ethnicity, learning and behaviour in the context of education. For Butler (1999/1990; 1993a), gender trouble is an inevitable process that happens when the illusion of heterosexual hegemony (Butler, 1993a) is disputed just through the existence of various bodies which do not conform (or which rather accidentally fail to conform) to the order that the heterosexual hegemony wants to maintain. Thus, almost everyone troubles heterosexual hegemony in some sense. Robert McRuer's (2006) reading of a critically queer version of gender trouble (see Butler, 1993b), however, emphasises intentionality.

From the perspective of cultural studies, Robert McRuer (2006) suggests that the *critically queer* version of gender trouble does not merely imply that the maintaining of heterosexual hegemony can only fail. Rather, it emphasises various forms of collective work that actively challenge the normative notions of bodies and sexualities. In this version of gender trouble, people who actively resist heteronormativity (in spite of their sexual identities) engender gender trouble. Following McRuer (2006), we want to trouble educational cultures in the critically queer sense of gender trouble. In this respect, we highlight the importance of the methodological perspective of cultural studies. Cultural studies aims to articulate social circumstances in a way that it enables less-familiar articulations to emerge and the political nature of everyday life to become evident (e.g. Morley and Chen, 1996). It highlights that there are struggles of the understandings of everyday life. This means that we pay attention to how we conceptualise phenomena, such as globalisation, gender, sexuality or for example learning, and how our conceptualisations are connected with our political aims.

While various agents intentionally reshape norms they cannot control how their work functions and is later interpreted. A viewpoint that resists closures and emphasises effects rather than fixed meanings is at the core of the methodology of cultural studies (e.g. Morley and Chen, 1996). In addition, when this book focuses on educational cultures, we also want to underscore the ways that education can engender surprising effects because it changes its subjects. As Kevin Kumashiro (2002: 8) claims we cannot control what students learn. Moreover, we cannot control how students will use what they have learned. To trouble educational cultures means that we acknowledge the unexpected nature of education and learning. We also acknowledge that education can be troubled also by those who are not considered to be formal authorities of educational practices. In this book, this means, for example, queer youth who

seek to challenge heteronormativity in schools (Taavetti in this book) and pupils who aim at taking over a pedagogised school yard for free play and wandering (Rönnlund in this book).

As well as problematising dominant ways of making sense troubling education means commitment to seek paths to critical thinking and more progressive pedagogical practices. Jón Ingvar Kjarran and Ingólfur Ásgeir Jóhannesson consider the processes of challenging heteronormativity in classrooms and how the National Curriculum Guide can be used to put forward countercultural knowledges of sexuality. Kjarran and Jóhannesson show that even a formal school can sometimes be a queer counterpublic. Drawing on postcolonial theorisations that challenge still existing colonial reasoning, Pia Mikander demonstrates how discourse analysis makes visible unequal global power relations, hence having the potential to shake euro-centric worldviews in social sciences teaching. Riikka Taavetti explores in her chapter what kinds of forms of resistance queer students imagine. Taavetti asks, how could the heteronormative culture of schools be challenged from the perspective of queer students? Her analysis shows that young queer students correct and criticise their teachers and even imagine ways to support adult queers. In all these three chapters educational settings emerge as sites that contest taken-for-granted positions of learners.

Troubling culture

What are we talking about when we say the aim is to trouble educational cultures? By *culture* we mean on the one hand various human-made works including literature, architecture, films, and different cultural texts of different genres. On the other hand, drawing on Raymond Williams (1961), we understand the term culture in a wider way. For Williams (1961: 41), 'culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour.' This broader definition of culture makes it possible to explore diverse practices of everyday life in educational contexts. It enables a focus on the sites that for some 'are not culture at all (ibid.: 42)'. This means exploring habits, practices and styles—*ways of life* and *way of making* (de Certeau, 1984) that also appear to be mundane or low but express the broader values of society.

We also want to pay attention to how globalisation and globalised networks are present in Nordic societies (see Anthias and Lloyd, 2002: 2). In the first chapter of the book, Dennis Beach makes a synthesis of educational experiences of young men in multi-cultural, multi-ethnic suburbs. Based on extensive

meta-ethnographic analysis, he highlights the reasons for potential feelings of alienation of these young men but at the same time emphasises the young men's capacity for creativity and learning. The crucial question is whether the actors in the Swedish education system are able to recognise this potential and put it to work for a safe, equal and democratic society.

The book particularly aims at analysing and troubling educational cultures, their complexity and distinctive meanings given to them. The approach matters because school is crucial in children's and young people's subject formation. It frames how they understand themselves as learners and more broadly as human beings. Moreover, school, when guiding students to follow particular paths has very material effects on young people's future prospects. We cannot talk about a fair and equal education system until school is a place where all students can equally reach a sense of adequacy regardless their various backgrounds, genders, sexual identities or capabilities.

For us, the troubling of educational cultures can be done by unexpected agents too and it can take us in unforeseen directions and while we connect the troubling of educational cultures with the context of anti-oppressive education (Kumashiro, 2002), we still want to leave it open what kind of work troubles education. According to Kumashiro (2002), a process that troubles education can never be finished. It is an ongoing process that seeks to interrogate educational ideas and practices, over and over again, in order to make a more just society possible. Kumashiro claims that if we seek social change that would make less oppressive futures possible, we have to constantly trouble education. In Kumashiro's (2002: 202) terms, this work should 'simultaneously be anti-oppressive in some ways while troubling those very ways of being.'

The title of the book leads a reader to examine and trouble Nordic educational ideals. It explores in detail the cultural practices that emerge from the Nordic educational landscapes, especially in Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Sweden. Equality, social justice and democracy have traditionally been ideas through which Nordic countries have imagined themselves as Nations (see Anderson, 2006). Schooling was seen as crucial in the development of the Nordic welfare state, where everyone was supposed to have equal opportunities regardless of social background, abilities, gender or region of living (Blossing, Imsen and Moos, 2014).

Traditionally, Nordic Countries have had a mainly publicly funded and governed comprehensive schooling system free of charge for pupils. But neo-liberalism with its emphasis on economy, marketisation, new public management

and individualism (e.g. Arnesen, Lahelma, Lundahl and Öhrn, 2014; Beach, 2010), have fundamentally shaken the grounds for Nordic self-understanding and ideas of the aims of schooling. How and to what extent this transformation has happened varies among Nordic Countries. The extreme case is that of privatisation in the Swedish education system, which has been argued to be one of the most market oriented education systems in the world (e.g. Hudson, 2011). In Finland, the public attitude towards the selection and free school choice has been somewhat suspicious and one can still strongly question the relevance of the concept of *school market* (Kosunen, 2014). School choice is an urban phenomenon, most probably occurring in ethnically and economically diverse areas (Kosunen, 2014), so leading to the polarisation effect (Ahonen, 2014). Polarisation occurs when particular (in this case middle class, European) ways of life are seen as more favourable and exceptions to them as suspicious. We argue then that it is extremely important to challenge the idea that there exists a particular Nordic way of life particularly at this moment when racism in Nordic Countries takes forms in which cultural diversity is occasionally opposed as if it were something new. So to trouble culture means to challenge the notion of a homogenous Nordic way of life that was pure and uncontaminated in the past. Pia Mikander's chapter calls educators to problematise the cultural explanations that take views of hegemonic groups for granted and leaves others in the margin, for example through silencing, victimising or even demonising practices (see also chapter by Beach).

It has been argued that neo-liberal reasoning pushes a rights-based model of citizenship toward consumer oriented, entrepreneurial and economic subjects (Peters, 2011: 174). However, in Iceland the dramatic economic downfall in 2008 influenced the political climate challenging neo-liberal reasoning (Sigurðardóttir, Guðjónsdóttir, and Karlsdóttir, 2014). Iceland, then, is an example of country, where the trend has recently been towards more inclusive education (ibid., 109). Moreover, by legitimating queer studies as both as a source of teaching as well as course content the current Icelandic curriculum is extremely progressive even in the Nordic context. Students' interviews introduced in Kjaran and Jóhannesson's chapter shows that both policies and practices matter when taken as granted views are troubled.

At the beginning of the neo-liberal turn, Danish educational politics were relatively reluctant to reflect economic policies. However, in the last ten years participatory democracy and the idea of *education for all* have given way to an emphasis on excellence (Rasmussen and Moos, 2014) and the ways that schools

have specific profiles. For example health or sports related specialisation is increasing among schools (Otrell-Cass and Kondrup Kristensen in this book). Furthermore, as Kathrin Otrell-Cass and Liv Kondrup Kristensen show in their chapter, in this context there have been attempts to include physical activity into the lessons of general studies and in this way foster the potentialities of students. They show how these attempts can take a form that eventually dismisses the ubiquitous ways embodiment and learning are connected with each other.

Troubling ability

In recent years, many disability studies scholars (McRuer, 2006; Campbell, 2009; Goodley, 2014; Kafer, 2013) have suggested that it is necessary to investigate not only disability but the cultural processes that engender able-bodiedness as the normative ideal that appears to express humanity in the most perfect sense. We suggest that cultural studies in education, too, ought to interrogate ideals of ability. In this sense, following McRuer's (2006) formulation of *ability trouble* we want to make ability trouble in order to reshape the way we tend to think about education. By *ability trouble* we mean intentional and accidental processes that undermine normative notions of disability/able-bodiedness. Ability trouble for us means on the one hand the ways in which various bodies/minds do not conform the norm of able-bodiedness and on the other the conceptualisations of disability rights movements and disability studies that challenge a worldview that assumes able-bodiedness.

We suggest that the educational cultures of school, academia and everyday life consist of many, often unacknowledged, assumptions around ability. This applied to not only mean academic skills but also more mundane skills and abilities. Consider how school shapes the circadian rhythm, controlling when students wake up, and when they move and eat. We might suggest that these mundane ways of controlling the bodies of students, let alone the learning of physical skills and the emphasis of good social skills, reflect the ableist ideals of wider society. Ina Juva and Touko Vaahtera pay attention to the ableist dimensions of understandings of social skills in the context of comprehensive schooling. They highlight the contingency of the idea of social skills and argue that when social skills are understood in relation to the labour market, not all forms of sociality can be recognised as socially skilful behaviour.

While the book turns to these daily issues, the ability trouble that we put forward emphasises the various contexts around ability norms, where the ideal of able-bodiedness is reinforced through the practices of education. For example,

Juva and Vaahtera consider what kind of abilities school wants to fortify. We also ask what are students' possibilities for negotiation and resistance. In her detailed micro level classroom analysis in a special education unit (SENU), Yvonne Karlsson examines students' aims to establish their adequacy within school culture, which continuously defines them as problematic.

We explore how students and learners are named and shaped in the practices of education through socially constructed binaries, such as active/passive, competent/poor and disabled/able-bodied (Niemi and Kurki, 2014). In this respect, we ask what kind of specific aims and ideals intertwine with the educational aims that attempt to activate students. Socially constructed binaries often define what is regarded as *normal* being and behaviour, hence some subjectivities and bodies become incompatible— even impossible— with the school's notions of a (desirable) student and a learner. (Niemi and Kurki, 2014; Youdell, 2006; Ashton, 2011; Grue, 2011).

In this book, Rönnlund and Juva and Vaahtera unpack the idea of the active student, showing how the idea of the active student is also a way of controlling students. Juva and Vaahtera analyse how the idea of social skills in the context of schooling reinforces an individualistic idea of social behaviour. In the chapter *Schoolyard cultures*, Maria Rönnlund demonstrates how a schoolyard, often seen a rather irrelevant part of the school, actually enables many pedagogical interventions and is still a place where the aims of the official school can be disputed. Cultural materialists such as Williams (1961, 1977, 1983) and McRuer (2006) understand that culture always includes conflicts. By conflicts we mean disagreements of how cultural categories, concepts and practices can be used and to what ends do particular cultural understandings lead us. In this respect, to trouble culture means that we acknowledge the contingent nature of culture as *a way of life*. Thus, we do not assume that everyone has affinity for the same community and the same cultural products. Furthermore for us, the culture without a conflict of its content seems alarming since such an understanding can lead to a totalising view of culture. On the other hand, the authors of the book also pay attention to how conflicts in regards to culture as a way of life emerge when we note how many cultural practices are exclusive (see Goodley, 2014; Yuval-Davies, 2011; Niemi and Mietola, 2017).

The specificity of ethnographic methodology in cultural studies in education

When the aim is to examine the complexities and nuances of educational cultures, methodologies, that address everyday life of schooling are required. Ethnography, emphasising embodied experiences in a site of interest and the utilisation of various data-production methods as well as analytical strategies, has been recognised as a tool for deeper understanding of how education *works*. There is a strong tradition of educational ethnography, among Nordic researchers of educational sciences, specifically among researchers inspired by cultural, critical, youth, feminist and/or policy studies in education (see e.g. Lahelma, Lappalainen, Mietola and Palmu, 2014; Paju et al., 2014; Gudmundsson, Beach and Vestel, 2013; Gordon, Lahelma and Beach, 2003). Nordic scholars have been influenced mainly by the Anglophone world; drawing both from the British tradition, with sociological interest in relations between structures and agency, and the US tradition in cultural anthropology (Delamont and Atkinson, 1995; Gordon, Holland and Lahelma, 2001). Generations of Nordic educational ethnographers have grown up with Paul Willis's *Learning to labour* learning to understand the school as a site of political, social and cultural struggle, and the way that youth identities are constituted within schools (Dolby and Dimitriadis, 2004: 2). Policy reforms, for example, are not seen as innocent but shaping educational cultures sometimes with unexpected effects.

Kathrin Otrell-Cass and Liv Kontrup Kristensen have conducted micro-level analysis on the effects of the *New Nordic School* reform introduced in Denmark, 2014, with the aim of increasing physical activity into everyday schooling. This policy intervention was justified by referring its positive effects on the learning and health of young people. But in their detailed analysis Otrell-Cass and Kontrup Kristensen show how *learning by moving* does not necessarily improve students' sense of learning and might even lead to new forms of marginalisation by favouring capable embodiment. Here an educational practice that seeks to emphasise an embodied aspect of learning and in that way enable a more complex understanding of being a student, might eventually turn out to strengthen the establishment. Nordic ethnographers have been interested in examining how changes in education politics and policies re-shape educational cultures (e.g. Lunneblad, Odenbring and Hellman, 2016). They might have also been enthusiastic in examining in detail how school cultures turn out to produce and reproduce social, cultural and economic divisions despite a comprehensive

schooling system, free of charge education and *goodwill* in developing inclusive practices (e.g. Moldenhawer, 2009; Niemi and Kurki, 2014; Hjelmer and Rosvall, 2016). By combining ethnographic fieldwork with autoethnographic reflections, Jukka Lehtonen pays attention to how practices that seek to intervene in hegemonic understandings fail. Lehtonen analyses the educational outreach work of the Finnish LGBTI¹ rights organisation Seta and suggests that while Seta aims to challenge sexual norms, the way that Seta emphasises the ordinariness of non-heterosexual lives does not challenge the heteronormative culture.

What we think is important in Nordic ethnographic research done in the field of educational sciences is the capacity in producing reflexive and critical insights into the practices of educational institutions, expected to be exemplary in terms of equality and social justice (Beach, 2010). The ethnographic contributions presented in this book opens up diverse viewpoints to analyse and trouble the educational cultures, practices and distinctive meanings given to them by the actors in the field. Yvonne Karlsson's text is an example of ethno-methodological classroom study, in which particular pedagogical practices and situations are analysed closely by attempting to understand, what is happening in those practices and how the participants of the study are positioned in the practices of the classroom.

The starting point of this book project was when the Nordforsk funded Nordic Centre of Excellence (NCoE): Justice through education in the Nordic Countries (JustEd) suggested that researchers affiliated to this center would seek answers to the question, How do systems, cultures and actors in education enable and constrain justice in the context of globalising Nordic welfare states? The authors of this book have focused on cultural processes, examining the blind spots of education systems considered to be the most equal in the world: they have shown that young people who do not fulfil cultural expectations are still relatively easily pushed into the margin; they have highlighted how the pedagogical practices aimed to promote equality might turn out to establish the privileged position of hegemonic majority or even create new forms of marginalisation. However, the potential for counter politics that occurs both in young people and grass root educators has been pointed out. As Kjaran and Jóhannesson's chapter shows, education policy, which does not uncritically give

1. In this book, authors use different versions of this acronym (LGBTI/LGBTIQ). We have deliberately chosen to use different versions because it shows how the acronym is changeable and it emerges in different forms in specific local and social contexts

in to neo-liberal reasoning, can create space for fair, sensitive and intellectually inspiring education.

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