

Chapter 18

Racism in Finnish School Textbooks: Developments and Discussions



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Abstract While the Finnish education system has been celebrated for promoting equality, recent reports point to problems concerning racism within Finnish schools. Kristín Loftsdóttir suggests looking at racism from three angles: everyday racism, prior immobility, and structural racism. This chapter draws on this idea, showing how racism is present in Finnish school textbooks in history, social science and geography. Many textbooks seem to deviate from the curricular core values of equality by portraying the West as superior to the rest of the world. This is visible in different ways. While old racist or colonial words are removed from textbooks, the perspective may still only promote a Western worldview. Changes in textbooks might stay on a superficial level, rather than reaching the epistemological perspective. History textbook passages about colonial times might include images of racist caricatures to express the explicit racism of this era. Similar caricatures are being removed from consumer products, and we might ask whether they belong to history teaching, particularly if they do not encourage a discussion about continued racism. Using textbooks with racist content requires that teachers are aware of racism. The teacher needs to know how to lead critical reflection, while keeping the classroom safe from racist remarks. During a pandemic, when students are alone with textbooks, there is a particular concern about the democratic task of educating for anti-racism. This is especially important in a world largely influenced by a media discourse that makes certain racist opinions unremarked or seen as a matter of common sense.

Racism, particularly as a phenomenon that is part of society's structures, has not been debated very much in Finland. The education system has been considered part of a Finnish success story of equality.¹ Nevertheless, recent reports and studies, for instance, focussed on student experiences, teacher education and school textbooks, have shown that there is much to do with regards to addressing racism within Finnish schools. In a recent piece, Kristín Loftsdóttir² stresses the need for the Nordic countries to recognise the role of racism in social and cultural contexts, showing how the

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mainstreaming of populist claims works to give legitimacy to racism within Nordic societies. Loftsdóttir considers how racist rhetoric becomes meaningful, even considered common sense, in the Nordic countries through three intersecting points of emphasis: everyday racism and racist exceptionalism, the idea of prior immobility, and the continued existence of structural racism in multiple forms. These three are interlinked, strengthening each other in a discursive as well as material way. As an example, there are simultaneous political calls for tightened immigration policies including increased deportations and a strong discourse about Europe as essentially democratic and a bearer of human rights.

This chapter begins from the points of emphasis about racism put forward by Loftsdóttir and applies them to Finnish education. The main focus, though, is on Finnish school textbooks, asking how they reflect Loftsdóttir's points of emphasis. Textbooks uphold a privileged position; portraying knowledge legitimised by society and, concretely found in backpacks of entire generations within a nation. Values found in them reflect dominant ideologies of any society. In this chapter, the focus is on racism, school textbooks, and the use of these. What does the latest research say about Finnish school textbooks and racism? How are everyday racism, the idea of prior immobility and structural racism visible in textbooks? And finally, how have recent developments pushed for a change of old colonial imagery as historical documents in textbooks?

Since the teacher's way of using the textbook makes a difference to how students approach the text, there is a particular focus on research relevant to Finnish teachers' readiness to reflect critically on racist content. What we know about how prepared teachers are to deal with racist expressions in school textbooks is therefore also considered here. Finally, there is a need for a short discussion about the impact of the pandemic and school closures on textbook use and what challenges more remote education might pose to anti-racist education in the future.

Exceptionalism, Immobility and Structural Aspects—Racism in Finnish Education

By everyday racism, Kristín Loftsdóttir draws attention to a persistent tendency to explain away racism in the Nordics. Across the Nordic countries there is evidence of how people who do not pass as white experience exclusion and discrimination. Children with no other homeland than their Nordic country of birth may still have to prove themselves as Nordic because they are not white. They might have parents and even grandparents born in the country, but are still considered foreign. Loftsdóttir sees this as an effect of a persistent idea of the nation as a family, connecting particular bodies (white) to specific places (Nordic countries).

After a 2018 EU-wide survey,³ *Being Black in the EU*, showed Finland to be one of the most racist countries in the union, the Finnish Non-Discrimination Ombudsman did a further study⁴ that concurred with the EU results. Together, the reports made it

clear that black people in particular in Finland witness harassment, threats and even physical violence more than is reported in other European countries. The Finnish report specified that two thirds of the respondents had experienced discrimination in education, on all levels and from both other students and teaching staff. Still, the discussion about the role of education in tackling racism as a societal challenge has barely begun. During 2020, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which originated in the US, spreading awareness about racist structures and calling for systemic change, brought people to the streets in Finland, too. In Finland, there were calls to challenge anti-black racism⁵ and to raise awareness about ethnic profiling that targets racialised minorities.⁶ Meanwhile, researchers have pointed to the phenomenon of Nordic exceptionalism⁷ to describe the imagination of Nordic societies as innocent and even incapable of racism due to their presumed lack of involvement in colonialist ventures. Claiming that the Nordics have a past free from colonialism has been proven invalid since the Nordic countries benefited from colonial trade, but also because they shared a colonial culture. The treatment of Sámi people can also be considered as acts of colonialism.⁸

The persistent idea of racist exceptionalism makes awareness about racism in education challenging. Racism tends to be more easily seen the further away it appears, geographically as well as historically. Teaching about Rosa Parks and the civil rights movement in US history is uncontroversial, but the topic of Finland's historical and ongoing racism towards Roma people⁹ has only recently, and marginally, been introduced as part of Finnish history. This phenomenon is obviously not restricted to education. Just like our fellow Europeans, we collectively shake our heads at Central American 'kids in cages' being held at the US border, but close our eyes to children and adults being washed up on Europe's southern beaches.

Connected to the idea of racist exceptionalism, Loftsdóttir raises the notion of prior immobility where the history of Europe is envisioned as having a pure and static past. Nation states are understood as natural, not historically constructed entities. The narrative is that everyone was in their own place until flows of migrants entered the area, abusing the original inhabitants of Europe through their demands of benefits. This makes it sensible to talk about the need for migrants to adjust or integrate into the (static) Nordic countries. In practice, it might not matter how hard migrants try, since they might never be considered Nordic. In this narrative, certain parts have been cut out of the fabric of history, such as colonisation but also past mobility throughout history. Importantly, Loftsdóttir remarks, this is not only the story told by right-wing populists, it is a well-circulated chronicle that is embraced even by those who do not see themselves as nationalists and who are in favour of allowing migrants to enter. A consequence of this idea is that it makes sense to request that these non-white migrants 'integrate' or 'adjust' into the society where they live (and perhaps have lived for generations).

Thirdly, Loftsdóttir points to EU immigration policies as seemingly neutral, structural aspects that facilitate populist rhetoric. The Dublin regulations have meant that people can be deported to inhuman conditions, denying them the right to apply for asylum. The regulations are not considered politicised, even though they divide people into those who deserve a good life and those who do not. The only way to

make sense of discriminatory policies is by arguing that the targeted people must have done something wrong. It is important to note how these policies, characterising certain people as less worthy, affect the Nordic populations watching the process from the side. Overall, Loftsdóttir's third point is a call for a widening of the debate about what is 'racist'. The concept of racism benefits from conceptual clarity. The Finnish discussion about racism during the 2010s circled around the entrance of the populist-nationalist Finns party as a large political player, media debate around the increase of refugees in 2015 and the integration of social or digital media into public debates.¹⁰

Importantly, racism is still often understood as everyday racist experiences and racist acts committed by extremist groups, thereby ignoring structural racism.¹¹ Structural racism refers to a system that produces and upholds a hierarchy of racialisation. Importantly, as Loftsdóttir suggests, structural aspects of racism facilitate populist rhetoric. In Finland, part of structural racism has been the hardening of immigration policies in the 2010s.¹² Regarding the relationship between education and racism, it is crucial to see the school system as an institution, which means that acts of racism within schools are more than just single events. According to *Being Black in the EU*, parents in Finland reported the highest levels of racist harassment and racial discrimination experienced by their children at school.¹³ School is where young people spend most of their days. They are required to learn and cannot opt out of classes even if they might experience racial harassment from other students or teachers. School materials, even features such as decorations on the walls might strengthen whiteness.¹⁴ Structural racism is thereby not referring to single acts of racism by teachers or other students, but ranging widely from curriculum to the non-interference in racism by teachers.¹⁵

Meanwhile, the Finnish basic education curriculum has been considered fairly progressive, emphasising core values such as democracy and equality. Harriet Zilliacus and colleagues¹⁶ portray the latest curriculum as a step towards a more social justice focus in education, emphasising the need for students to become ethical and respectful. They worry that the endorsement of multicultural education will turn out to be limited to the integration of immigrant students, not as an intrinsic part of the school as a whole, which clearly is the curricular aim. Another concern is that textbooks might not be particularly loyal to the core values in the curriculum. A review even suggests that a majority of studies about educational materials show a discrepancy between values and norms visible in educational materials and curricular aims such as gender equality, respecting human rights and multiculturalism.¹⁷

Research About Finnish School Textbooks: Strengthening the Hegemony of the West

School textbooks that explain the world, such as books used to teach history, social science and geography, can either confirm or challenge ruling conceptions of the

world and global power relations. Most of the examples and discussions in this chapter relate to my 2016 discourse analysis of Finnish basic education school textbooks in history, geography and social science focusing on the concept of West and its Other.¹⁸ This research showed how Finnish textbooks deviated from the curricular core values, by portraying the West as superior to the rest of the world. The hegemony of a superior West was established in different ways, including descriptions of historical events as well as current global relations. While Finnish school textbooks in history, social science and geography have started to leave explicit racist words behind, the hegemony of a superior West remains.¹⁹ This is visible in textbook descriptions about different phenomena, ranging from wars, to population increase and trade. In descriptions of conflicts, past as well as current, Western violence is systematically hidden.²⁰ There is also a tendency to portray the West as superior, essentially democratic, and egalitarian.²¹ The strengthening of the hegemony of the West is particularly visible in relation to Islam or Muslims.

Finnish school textbooks have tended to portray questions of mobility differently depending on whether the movers represent Westerners or others.²² Racist rhetoric made meaningful in a textbook is for instance when it suggests that there “has been a need to restrict the number of” immigrants to a certain country. This is an example of how the political choice of limiting people’s movement is described as rational or neutral. Simultaneously, the movement of Westerners is not talked about as something that should be restricted. Students can be urged to circle places on a map, representing where they would like to live, work or avoid visiting. These assignments confirm the privilege of movement that students have, rather than evoking a discussion about equality. Finnish students’ right to move, and the idea that others’ need to be controlled are thus made into neutral, commonsensical statements, instead of highly politicised, racist proclamations. There are also differences in the descriptions of urban centres. Uncontrolled urbanisation is described as dangerous in non-Western areas, implying that there are too many people. Metaphors such as natural disasters or floods are used to describe the moving population.

Other studies published more recently largely concur with these results. Heinikoski’s²³ study of representations of free movement and mobility in Finnish upper secondary level EU textbooks shows that movement within Europe is considered more agreeable than movement from outside the EU. There are also stereotypical characteristics used to describe migrants and minority groups such as the Roma. Heinikoski notes a passive voice when depicting strategies and decisions, hiding the agent behind policies, as well as a portrayal of migration as uncontrollable and fear-inciting.²⁴ A recent study focusing on knowledge about Sámi people, languages and cultures in over 500 Swedish and Finnish language textbooks in Finland shows that the quality of knowledge varies, and that it is often poor. The descriptions focus on the past, not the present. There are portrayals and illustrations that enforce stereotypes and reduce diversity within the Sámi.²⁵

Eeva Rinne’s thesis²⁶ mixes the study of textbooks with research among young people who use these books. The students who took part in her research drew their own maps, wrote essays and took part in discussions about their own world views. Rinne suggests that national belonging as well as a Western-oriented world view is

valued and common among the students. They perceive the world as “roughly divided into the glorified West, suspicious or detestable East and unknown South”. The strength of this division surprised the researcher herself, even though she could find plenty of evidence in the textbook that would push the students to this conclusion. One way that the textbooks work to strengthen the division and the Western-orientation is by describing historical events through a European lens: distant places such as Japan or China are brought up mainly in reference to their meeting with Europeans. Another way is by stereotypical portrayals, such as of indigenous people. The students in Rinne’s study were asked to colour their own world maps to show which areas they considered in positive, neutral and negative terms. Western countries were considered positive, while the most negative areas were Russia, the Middle East (particularly Syria, Iraq and Iran) as well as North Korea. In interviews, the students linked Middle Eastern countries almost exclusively to war, terrorism, ISIS, poverty and religion. Africa and South America were often ignored completely or considered neutral. Students admitted that they knew little about the continents. Altogether the latest research on textbooks suggests that there is a gap in the curricular aim of promoting equality in school textbooks in Finland.

Rinne’s results are an important reminder of the fact that school textbooks do not exist in a vacuum. They are hardly alone to blame for stereotypical attitudes that students reading the book might have. It is also near impossible to try to verify a causal relationship between textbook texts and attitudes. Nonetheless, Rinne’s study is an interesting one since it shows the division that so many students use to make sense of the world. This confirms Loftsdóttir’s thesis of the persistent Nordic idea of the nations as a family, connecting particular (white) bodies to a particular place (the Nordic homeland), while simultaneously denying the existence of racist exclusion and discrimination.

From Colonial Advice to Cancelling Caricatures

When school textbooks are republished, the texts go through revisions. Sometimes the revision of texts are revealing of the debate about racism in the surrounding society. The following example taken from my work with Harriet Zilliacus of how textbook text changes from one edition to another is an example of how racist language and racist structures can appear.²⁷ A geography textbook printed in 2005 describes Uluru in Australia as mainly a tourist attraction, calling it by the colonialist name Ayers Rock. The textbook goes on to explain what the rock looks like, and continues by stating that “Hundreds of thousands of travellers come every year to admire Ayers Rock. The first rays of the morning sun colour the rock a glowing red. The rock should be climbed directly after sunrise, since the temperature during midday often rises to more than 40 degrees”.²⁸ In a new edition of the book, published 2010, the description of the place is the same, but the name of the rock has changed from “Ayers Rock” to “Uluru”.²⁹ The last sentence with the advice to climb early in the morning has been removed. The revisions thereby means that the text changed the

old, colonialist name and removed the practical advice, or even command, to visitors (“should be climbed”) to climb Uluru.

It can be assumed that the editors have learnt about the sacred nature of Uluru to the Anungu people of Australia and their long quest to prohibit people from climbing it during the time between the editions. These changes make the textbook more educationally relevant to its readers. If the earlier version was not racist, it was at least highly ignorant towards other versions of knowledge than old colonialist alternatives. Would it, however, be safe to say that the changes erased any traces of a structurally racist worldview? One could argue that the structural part of the racist description of the text remains, since it is still considered from a tourist’s point of view. In the improved version of the text, Uluru is still primarily described as something that draws tourists. From an educational point of view, it is hard to justify this. The visitors are placed in focus, not what historical meanings are given to the rock by the people who find it sacred. The changes made would thereby be superficial rather than on any deeper epistemological level.

At the same time, seemingly superficial changes can be meaningful. As a wider example that can be related to school textbooks, changing racist names and images on consumer products have been one part of antiracist struggles in Finland during the past years. When such demands have been made public, they have usually become the kind of news that have gathered plenty of activity in the comment sections, much of which has consisted of ridicule and resistance. Nonetheless, packaging has often changed either quickly or after some time.³⁰ Chocolate and liquorice wrappings have for instance scrapped their blackface images during the last decades, while some racist product names are still in use. The Finnish debate reveals clear resemblances to similar discussions in other Nordic countries. Referring to the Danish debate about a racist liquorice package, Mathias Danbolt³¹ connects people’s fight for their right to consume racialised products with questions of history, memory and nationhood. The product packages might have long histories that connects to majority people’s upbringing, and these people might not want to face the fact that their upbringing has been in racist settings. This would be yet another example of how Nordic exceptionalism works. The idea of national self-identity as pure and innocent is a topic that Tobias Hübinette³² has theorised extensively in relation to Sweden. He has also linked resistance towards changing racist packaging to a crisis of Swedish antiracism. It is an inability or lack of will to see the images as signs of a racist past or present, as a reluctance towards recognising one’s own role as upholder of a racial hierarchy. Hübinette concludes that there is a need for majority Swedes to let go of their presumed monopoly over what is racist and what is not.

Studying school textbooks in history sometimes gives a reason to return to this debate and ask whether or not it should concern images and texts in textbooks, too, particularly those that are used to describe colonial times. Many history textbooks include images that, if they were printed on a box of chocolates, would call for boycott or replacement. In the textbooks, they are used for educational purposes. To illustrate how Europeans historically have viewed people on other continents as less intelligent, the books tend to include pictures that mock these people, such as racist pictures used for advertising or branding in those days. Rinne³³ describes an

example of a blackface on an old liquorice box that is pictured in a history book, accompanied by a text that asks how it differs from today's liquorice bags. The answer to the question is assumed to be that these kinds of images are racist and no longer (widely) acceptable, however, Rinne points out that this is left for the reader to decide. These kinds of assignments make assumptions about today's world as if it were free of racism. In order to teach students to be aware of racism in its many forms, an assignment like this does not help to see persistent structures, instead, it nurtures the idea of exceptionalism. There have been several accounts of Finnish history textbook assignments that do similar things. Another example is from an analysis of a history textbook passage about relations between Europeans and China.³⁴ The students are asked to analyse what a ridiculing image of a Chinese person with the face of a monkey tells about the attitudes Europeans used to have towards the Chinese. Ironically, this assignment is followed up by another question that urges the students to construct a program to improve the lives of Chinese women, presented in present tense. The idea that Chinese people need advice from 'us' is not considered problematic, even after a question that attempt to reveal European racist attitudes towards the Chinese. Some textbooks include racist quotes from old textbooks, such as passages about different biological races. The meaning of these is to show how explicit racism used to be, for instance in the 1930s. To challenge these quotes would be for instance to ask what implications it might have had on generations of Finnish people to have been taught to divide the world into racial hierarchies.

It is relevant to ask whether any colonial, ridiculing images in general should be part of history textbooks, if they would not be suitable on consumer goods. Can we justify them? A brief look at recent history textbooks shows that they are getting scarcer. Would getting rid of them be considered some kind of cancel culture, or attempt to erase history? After all, history education is often defended as a means to make sure that past atrocities never happen again. Is it, however, possible to tell the history of racism without any risk of spreading racist ideas? What would be lost if the caricatures were left out? A first answer could be that we should not ban racist images that teach students about a racist past, but as so often, context matters. If the pictures risk spreading ridicule and laughter, making the classroom a place that strengthens racism rather than challenging it, or if they endorse the idea that racism of colonial times is long outdated, they might not be very relevant in the educational setting. Images that all students learn from, accompanied with assignments that call for critical thinking would be all the more important in order to learn about a colonial past.

With the right teacher, the quality of textbook texts might not be decisive for students' learning. However, one study shows a particularly challenging history textbook text about Muslims in Europe.³⁵ The chapter is about Islam being considered a new politics and includes the following passage.³⁶

Migration and refugee flows have brought Islam to the heart of Europe. In among others France, Belgium and Germany, Muslims have showed that their faith shall be seen in everyday life—through clothing and ways of life. And they want Islam to have an impact on the governing of the states.

I have argued that passages such as these are problematic, even dangerous, since they leave little room for a reader to question the dominant message of Muslims as essentially different and threatening. The idea that Muslims have a collective will, for instance, strengthens a racist discourse, dimming the fact that people with Islam as their religion are people with a range of different opinions, experiences and ways of life. Additionally, it blurs the historical roots that different Muslim groups have had in Europe for centuries. The text feeds the idea of prior immobility, suggesting that European populations have been static and governed by a given set of values until the latest arrival of migrants and refugees.

Conclusion: The Need for Anti-racist Teaching and Texts

Apart from the factual misrepresentations in the textbook passage above, it is an example of a discourse that delivers quite an educational challenge. The tone of the text calls for alarm—the Muslims are here, in the heart of Europe, what are you going to do about it? For a teacher to turn the classroom debate from the alarming tone towards a more democratic and antiracist perspective after reading the passage out loud might be demanding, since much of the Islamophobia in the text is also echoed in the surrounding society. What kind of discussion does the text spark? This question is also relevant to the racist caricatures in history textbooks. What about if they cause racist remarks in the classroom? Will it still feel safe for all students? A teacher would need to be prepared to handle a situation where the assignment calls for students to understand that the use of racist stereotypes was a sign of historical times, while critically assessing how the image might spur more racism rather than challenge it. Reading the text about Muslims in Europe would require a follow-up, analysing the text and the hegemonic perspective presented, dismantling the threat and alarm together with the students, but this kind of antiracist pedagogical act is not necessarily easy to carry out without enough training, experience and self-assurance. The task is none less than challenging the persistent idea of racist exceptionalism: racism is usually found only in other times and places, not here, not now. Dismantling texts such as the one above requires teachers to be aware of power relations, hierarchies and the impact of Islamophobia in everyday discourses. Teachers would also need to feel confident to discuss the topic, while keeping the classroom safe from racist remarks.

Emmanuel Acquah shows in his research³⁷ that there is plenty to be done in what he calls the field of culturally responsive teacher education in Finland. More multicultural education courses can help, but these would need to include critical reflection. Critical reflection should be seen not merely as an inward process, but as directed towards an active societal responsibility.³⁸ Ida Hummelstedt-Djedou and colleagues³⁹ point out how multicultural education courses for preservice teachers do not always contribute to social justice in education—some rather reproduce inequality through conservative discourses about multiculturalism. These include the

image of the multicultural student as the Other. As Sandra Fylkesnes⁴⁰ has demonstrated, there is a great deal of conceptual imprecision within teacher education around concepts such as multicultural education and cultural diversity. Conceptual questions such as this need to be clarified. Perhaps changing the focus from multicultural to antiracist pedagogy⁴¹ would contribute to a teacher education that would equip teachers with the tools needed to handle racist discourse in school textbooks as well as in society. Teachers entering schools after their training need to be prepared for this work and have knowledge about textbooks, including that they do not always reflect curricular values. The above-mentioned textbook passage about Muslims in Europe is an example of a text that not only includes false premises but also contradicts the values of the curriculum. At the same time, it could probably even pass without much discussion since it is part of a discourse that is common in other media.⁴²

Since the COVID-19 pandemic school closures and lockdowns all around the world have led to remote education and more students learning independently. As earlier research shows, independent learning increases the role of materials such as school textbooks.⁴³ Even during normal circumstances, teachers tend to underestimate the role of textbooks in their subjects.⁴⁴ As has been showed here, there are textbook texts in Finland that promote racist structures, and dismantling these requires knowledge about racism as a phenomenon as well as a critical mindset. This is a particular concern in history, social studies and geography. While many textbooks provide different perspectives to these kinds of topics, others do not, or present only a dominant perspective that does not encourage critical thinking. A competent teacher can elevate topics and texts to a larger discussion, inviting students to challenge hegemonic ideas and to teach the students to use their own voices and, importantly, listen to each other's opinions and perspectives.⁴⁵ In a remote education situation, these important parts of learning are, however, difficult to achieve. Without classmates or the teacher present, the angle presented by a textbook risk becoming the only authority or a single voice for a remote education student.⁴⁶ Learning to understand complicated educational topics, such as in mathematics or science, with only the help of a book and limited online time with the teacher can be hard. From a democratic and antiracist point, studying with the help of only a textbook might not be good enough. Learning to live together in a world of diversities and hierarchies does not take place through reading but through the democratic process of discussing, listening and thinking critically. While we are right to worry about students left alone with difficult chemistry or physics texts, we should be equally concerned about the democratic task of educating for antiracism. This is particularly important in a world largely influenced by a media discourse that makes certain racist opinions appear neutral or common sense.

In the best of worlds, school textbooks make up an alternative to information 'bubbles', actively engaging students to question media discourses that build on racist narratives, inviting everyone to the discussion. However, democratic education needs to be deliberative, allowing students to voice their own opinions and most of all, to listen to each other. On a global scale, UNESCO has been calling for more textbooks in order to reach the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality education) for years.

These calls are now complemented by demands for textbooks to be better suited for self-study.⁴⁷ So far, reports and research about the enormous educational impact of the covid-19 pandemic has mainly covered access to education and students at risk.⁴⁸ It will be important for future research to focus on the impact of remote learning on democratic and antiracist education as well.

Notes

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