

## Editorial Preface

# Social Justice is Not Somebody Else's Concern!

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*We reveal most about ourselves when we speak about others. (Kojouri, 2018)*

*If you're trapped in the dream of the Other, you're screwed. (Deleuze, 2007)*

In his 1940 Magic Realism short story, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) describes the fantastic world of a fictional planet called Tlön. In the short story, the planet is discussed by Borges and his friend Casares, after pointing out the distorting function of mirrors. Casares quotes a scholar from Tlön whom, he explains, is said to have claimed that "...mirrors and copulation are abominable because they multiply the number of men..." Borges is intrigued by this quote and asks his friend for more information about its origins. The two friends then try to find more information about Tlön. However, information turns out to be scarce. They manage to retrieve an encyclopedia that provides details about the planet. Borges and Casares find out that Tlön has a very special, idealist philosophical view and curious beliefs, reminiscent of Berkeley's and Hume's idealism. As a consequence of their idealist mindset, Tlön's inhabitants are able to find things simply by expecting to find them, merely thinking and writing about objects and events can also make them materialize and occur. People are thus not interested in finding a truth, but a kind of amazement only.

Rereading this short story, while finalizing this issue of IJIBDE, we found many similarities with what the authors of the articles have to say. Most of the articles are from a part of the world that has been worshipped worldwide for its positive and successful engagement with social justice, equality, fairness and democracy (amongst others): the Nordic countries. What this issue shows is that, like Tlön, the 'fantastic' Nordics are fictional. Although many international rankings would have us believe otherwise and give the impression that these countries have solved the most 'wicked' problems in education, like Tlön's inhabitants, simply by thinking and expecting them to be solved, social justice issues are very much *their* issues too – not just somebody else's concern! The consequence of this idealist imagination is to blind observers and 'fanatics' of the Nordics.

We both work in teacher education in Finland – one of the most famous Nordic countries for its successful education system (Niemi et al., 2015). When we meet student teachers for the first time, they tend to share a similar mindset to Tlön's inhabitants. For them, the topics covered in this issue of IJIBDE (democracy, social justice, equality-equity, amongst others), are not real issues in this part of the world... because they are 'normal'... Let us give an example that will puzzle our readers.

After a series of lectures on intercultural education last year, we received the following e-mail from a future teacher. In the lectures we had tried to help our students reflect critically and reflexively on the realities of Finland and the Nordics.

Why exactly is ethnocentrism bad and cultural relativity good? To quote Carl Benjamin, Western culture is at the top of anything that can be considered good. Some examples:

Human development index.

Internet connectivity.

Freedom of the press.

Property rights for women, and women's physical security.

LGBT rights.

An absence of child labor.

An absence of slavery.

Overall, it's an indisputable fact that Western countries have better values than the rest of the world.

(...)

Note that the student doesn't refer to the Nordics here but to the 'Western world'. The series of lectures, which lasted a mere four hours, introduced student teachers to critical and reflexive education for diversity. During their five years at university during which they obtain a Master's in education, and qualify as teachers, these are the only hours that help them reflect on diversity in education. The reaction of the student shocked us: How could he have misunderstood us (we never claimed that ethnocentrism was bad and cultural relativity good)? But even worse: How could a young person who was going to teach at school in a year or two think that (it is worth quoting him again) "it's an indisputable fact that Western countries have better values than the rest of the world"? How could he be so naively idealistic?

Our reaction to the student's message (which according to our colleagues, is not rare amongst student teachers), could compare to the following anecdote from one of the founding fathers of the USA, Benjamin Franklin. In his Writings (1840, p. 456), Franklin tells the story of a Swedish minister who made a sermon to Susquehanna Indians (Iquonquin for people of the muddy river) informing them of the history of Christianity. At the end of his sermon, an Indian stood up and said:

*'What you have told us,' says he, 'is all very good. It is indeed bad to eat apples. It is better to make them all into cider. We are much obliged by your kindness in coming so far to tell us those things which you have heard from your mothers. In return, I will tell you some of those we have heard from ours. 'In the beginning, our fathers had only the flesh of animals to subsist on, and if their hunting was unsuccessful they were starving. Two of our young hunters, having killed a deer, made a fire in the woods to boil some parts of it. When they were about to satisfy their hunger, they beheld a beautiful young woman descend from the clouds and seat herself on that hill which you see yonder among the Blue Mountains.*

*'They said to each other, "It is a spirit that perhaps has smelt our broiling venison and wishes to eat of it; let us offer some to her." They presented her with the tongue; she was pleased with the taste of it and said: "Your kindness shall be rewarded; come to this place after thirteen moons, and you will find something that will be of great benefit in nourishing you and your children to the latest generations." They did so, and to their surprise found plants they had never seen before, but which from that ancient time have been constantly cultivated among us to our great advantage. Where her right hand had touched the ground they found maize; where her left had touched it they found kidney-beans; and where her backside had sat on it they found tobacco.'*

*The good missionary, disgusted with this idle tale, said: 'What I delivered to you were sacred truths; but what you tell me is mere fable, fiction, and falsehood.'*

*The Indian, offended, replied: 'My brother, it seems your friends have not done you justice in your education; they have not well instructed you in the rules of common civility. You saw that we, who understand and practise those rules, believed all your stories; why do you refuse to believe ours?'*

What the Indian is saying here corresponds in a sense to the Golden Rule (or law of reciprocity): *Do for others what you want them do for you.*

If we go back to the Helsinki student, clearly, his assertions (like the Swedish missionary above) about the West are fables, myths at most (see Dabashi, 2015, amongst others), which have not been corrected by (teacher) education. A quote from the female Hellenistic Neoplatonist philosopher, astronomer and mathematician, Hypatia of Alexandria, who lived in Egypt, came to our mind as we discussed his message (Krantz, 2010, p. 44):

*Fables should be taught as fables, myths as myths, and miracles as poetic fantasies. To teach superstitions as truths is a most terrible thing.*

What we tried to do during our lectures was just this: our conceptions of self and other, as national, supranational and regional beings, cannot but be fables, myths, fantasies and superstitions. What we say about 'us' and 'other' is often based on biased representations (racism, racism without race, xenophobia but also positive forms of devotion to the other: xenophilia, Americanophilia, etc.). Our main message was: as future teachers, you need to beware of the way you speak about yourself and the other, in order to avoid contributing to unfair and fallacious hierarchies in your classrooms and beyond. We also wanted them to bear in mind that no country can claim to not be affected by the woes of social injustice, and that, as educators, their role is to fight against it. This all leads back to the basic question of what education should be about.

But how many individuals think the same way as this student in the Nordics and in different parts of the world? MY ways are better than THEIR ways? We are the best, so we do not need lessons about social justice, equity and the likes. In the student's message, we are faced with typical Western-centrism/Eurocentrism (Amin, 1989). For Kang (2015: 25) Western-centrism "is closely intertwined with colonialism, imperialism, racism, and ethnocentrism". The scholar adds that, throughout the last centuries, the 'West' has created their own *weltanschauung* (worldview), which has influenced the rest of the world more than anybody else (ibid.). This worldview has also made the 'West' feel superior to others and made them believe that they hold the 'Truth' (see Said, 1978). It is important to note, however, that such hegemony does not prevent other parts of the world from having built up their own 'centrism' (e.g. sinocentrism).

We agree with Paul Valéry (1977, p. 50) that "The deeper education consists in unlearning one's first education". For teachers, researchers and decision-makers, from the Nordics and other parts of the world, this means unlearning, questioning, enriching and contextualising the meanings of the words they use (e.g. inclusive education, bilingualism, multicultural education, social justice and democracy). It also means that they need to 'purge' schools and broader societal contexts of ethnocentric myths about themselves so as to tackle 'real' issues and not feel self-satisfied. Some of the authors of this issue also note the importance of revising the way they use language in class, at school and beyond. Language is the most powerful tool to construct hierarchies and to protect one's privilege. Its use must thus be interrogated and reshaped. It is through these strategies that one can contribute to our own problems in education, but also to make us more modest about our achievements (social justice is a never-ending story) and to start working *with* other countries – rather than *for* or *against*. We believe that increasing our interests and cooperation with countries in the 'periphery' can also help us be humbler... We are all in the same boat – the Nordics too!

This issue is composed of six articles.

In the first article Hanna Ragnarsdóttir provides an introduction to the topics of equity and social justice in education in four Nordic countries (Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden). She shows that there are gaps between the fundamental values in education and the realities in schools. The article also presents results from a NordForsk funded project Learning Spaces for Inclusion and Social Justice: Success Stories from Immigrant Students and School Communities in Four Nordic Countries (LSP). The project represents an attempt to shift the focus from a typical overemphasis on the failure of migrant students to their success.

The next two articles are located in Iceland, a Nordic country of a population of about 400,000 inhabitants. The country has witnessed a sharp increase in migrant populations over the last decade. Anh-Dao Tran and Hanna Ragnarsdóttir, and Hermína Gunnþórsdóttir present their research about migrant students in Icelandic schools. In the first article Tran and Ragnarsdóttir examine the specific case of students of Vietnamese heritage in two upper secondary schools. They show that the students are aware of their teachers' limited and somewhat negative perceptions. They conclude that more needs to be done to empower these students. Hermína Gunnþórsdóttir's article complements the previous article very well by concentrating on how to prepare student teachers for student diversity during their initial teacher education.

The article *Community of Inquiry: Research-based Learning for Inclusive Practice* takes a detour via Germany, a European country that has a longer experience of diversity in education than the Nordic countries. The authors, Benjamin Brass and Heike de Boer, introduce the topic of language use. They examine how ways of talking contribute to or subtract from inclusive education.

The next article also deals with linguistic aspects of education. Petra Daryai-Hansen, Heidi Layne and Samúel Lefever look into Nordic parents' views towards language awareness activities (Denmark, Finland and Iceland). This represents a rare insight into parents' views on discussions on language diversity, language choices and representations of language learning in education.

The final article, written by Ashley Simpson, turns to the issue of democracy in Finnish education, another overused and often abused concept in the Nordics. The author focuses on the ways discourses about democracy and human rights within Finnish education are framed through nationalistic and/or ethnocentric ideologies, and calls for modesty when talking about these issues both in the Nordic country and when nation branders sell Finnish education to the world.

We very much hope that this new important issue of IJIBDE will 'correct' misconceptions about mythical places like the Nordics. Our hope is also to widen support to the idea that social justice in education is everybody's concern and that 'miraculous' solutions to injustices cannot always be found elsewhere. To paraphrase Deleuze, let's not be trapped in the dream of the Other.

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