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## The power of opaque concepts in education politics

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This issue returns to the question of whether the most powerful concepts in education are both ‘familiar and alien at the same time’ (see Mathias, 2021). In the everyday lives in educational institutions and education policy making, certain concepts are familiar in a sense that they are taken for granted and used in habitual ways, but they are simultaneously alien in the sense that what they do is sometimes left unconsidered. All the papers presented in this issue, despite their varying theoretical frameworks and thematic contexts, discuss in one way or another the role of boundary concepts in education policy. They show how concepts that are fuzzy and opaque enough – concepts that have multiple meanings, and which can be considered everyday concepts or else resemble them – work to bridge separate groups of people and separate discussions. The fuzziness and opaqueness of these concepts allow them to be accepted by various groups of people with differing agendas and preferences. In the earlier literature, this has been conceptualized in multiple ways with a slightly varying focus: for example, as floating signifiers by the post-Marxist philosopher Laclau (2005), as boundary concepts within socio-cultural theory in the educational sciences (Löwy, 1992), and as travelling concepts in literary theory (Bal, 2002).

The powerful, opaque concepts presented in this issue are ‘competence’ (Schaffar, 2021), ‘psychosocial’ (Mathias, 2021); ‘free choice’ and ‘diversity’ (Dieudé, 2021), and ‘the best interest of the child’ (Ruutiainen et al., 2021). As the articles in this issue show, the opaqueness has consequences that interrelate: it might hide the value-laden part of the concept and presumptions related to it (Schaffar, 2021; Mathias, 2021); the meaning can change along the way, resulting in unintended consequences (Schaffar, 2021; Ruutiainen et al., 2021); and it can work as a powerful tool in legitimizing policy change (Dieudé, 2021; Ruutiainen et al., 2021).

In her article, **Birgit Schaffar** explores the concept of competence and its use in current educational theory and policy. She raises two distinct

uses of the term: ‘as expressive of a value judgment’ and ‘as pointing to a person’s (formal) qualifications’. The latter approaches competence as a calculable, measurable, and empirically assessable qualification, and it seems to overshadow the former use of competence, i.e. competence as ‘the value-laden aims of our endeavours in education’. Schaffar argues that even though both of these discussions are important, the concept itself does not hold analytical power; rather, it ‘enables us to blur one of the central distinctions in educational discussions’.

‘Psychosocial’ is another opaque concept often employed in education policy discussions. In her article, Gro Mathias examines the application of the term in Norwegian education policy by approaching it as a field of knowledge. Mathias argues that the terms ‘psychosocial’ and ‘psychosocial school environment’ are employed in seemingly habitual ways. She shows how the occurrence of the concept is characterized by multiple ambivalences. Mathias argues that ambivalences reflect “the contemporary blending of the tendencies of “the liquid modernity” and “the new solidity””.

In the third article of this issue, **Alessandra Dieudé** investigates how references are used in policy documents, with a special focus on the legitimization of contested private school policy changes in Norway from 2002 to 2018. Dieudé’s analysis shows that in the legitimization, the international references are consistently used in the documents by successive governments. Further, the references are used in an eclectic way so that similar international references have been used by different governments for opposing purposes – either to legitimize or delegitimize the liberalization of private school policy. Dieudé’s analysis highlights the significance of concepts in legitimizing private school policies. For example, the concepts of ‘choice’ and ‘diversity’, often used for the purposes of legitimization, resonate with both human rights discourse and market-oriented language. Thus, the opaque and floating nature of these concepts becomes deployed in advancing various, sometimes conflicting policy goals.

**Ville Ruutiainen, Maarit Alasuutari, and Kirsti Karila** examine how private ECEC providers in Finland describe their clientele from the point of view of selectivity. Private ECEC providers expressed selectivity based on children's age, gender, needs, or the hours they would attend ECEC. The exclusion of certain groups of children was justified by referring to the best interest of the child. The authors conclude that there is inconsistency between ECEC policy objectives – preserving universalism – and the actualization of policies related to the marketization and privatization of ECEC. This discrepancy was discursively managed by referring to 'the best interest of the child' – for example, stating that they do not provide a place for children who would participate in ECEC only part-time, as they would miss some pedagogical activities. Referring to the opaque concept of the 'best interest of the child' allowed private ECEC providers to practice selectivity in a cultural environment that has very heavily stressed universal services for all children.

The articles in this issue shed light on the important topic of the power of concepts, which has been a central focus in education policy research since the

linguistic turn. These articles call us to turn our attention also to the next step – to the moment when these boundary concepts become reified into recommendations for actions, and further, when they are put into practice in educational institutions. How do boundary concepts 'reincarnate' in our actions and the everyday lives in educational institutions?

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