On the Shoulders of a Perfect Stranger: Knowledge Gap About the Indigenous Sámi in the Finnish Teacher Education Curriculum

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ABSTRACT
Motivated by the growing discussion of the decolonial significance of teacher education (TE) and the problematic mainstream knowledge gap about Indigenous peoples, this study examines Finnish TE curriculum discourses that limit or enable attaining knowledge about and from the Sámi people (henceforth, ‘Sámi knowledge’). The topic is approached through critical discourse analysis and Susan Dion’s theory of the ‘perfect stranger’, a subjective position impeding engagement with Indigenous-related knowledges and reforms. The findings indicate that the formal curricula of the renowned Finnish TE perpetuate future teachers’ perfect stranger position by overriding critical and Indigenous perspectives with biased narratives and liberal discourses uncommitted to social change. Contextualizing the findings within the Finnish system, this study discusses how inadequate institutional support for disrupting the perfect stranger positionality leaves the reality of Sámi knowledge unsustainably dependent on future teachers and calls into question the education system’s capacity to address the knowledge gap undermining Sámi rights in Finland.

Introduction

Our school system, one of the best in the world, is still unable to provide basic knowledge about the Sámi people. This means that bridging the deep knowledge gap rests on the shoulders of the individual. Helga West (2021)

Sámi communities, scholars, and international antiracism bodies alike have criticized Finland for the Finnish mainstream society’s deep knowledge gap about the Indigenous Sámi people (ECRI 2019; OKM 2021; Ranta and Kanninen 2019). The knowledge gap (elsewhere also ‘settler ignorance’) about Indigenous issues is underpinned by the pervasiveness of majority narratives and processes of oppression – or, otherwise put, by constructions of denial and power that shape ‘what can and cannot be known’ (Cook 2018, 15). Following the conceptualizations of Godlewska et al. (2020), we consider educational institutions that promote ignorance about Indigenous peoples as central
structures upholding ongoing colonialism and that, thus, ‘[u]nderstanding ignorance and its sources is as important as understanding knowledge and its development’ (151). This article examines the issue from the perspective of Finnish teacher education (TE) and its contribution to overcoming the structural gap. Specifically, we focus on the TE curriculum and how it limits and/or opens opportunities to build adequate Sámi knowledge among future teachers.

The quote from Sámi author and scholar Helga West (2021), translated above, illustrates how the structural knowledge gap is a concern connected to education (also ECRI 2019; Rice et al. 2022). In Finland, where the gap is reflected by the long-standing disregard for Sámi matters in primary education curricula (Aikio-Puoskari 2016) and learning materials (Miettunen 2020), commitment to Sámi knowledge in nationwide education depends, principally, on teachers. Acting on this responsibility is no small task for an educator. Working at the cultural interface of education, where tensions between Indigenous and majority worldviews are systemized and negotiated, is challenging in itself (Nakata 2007). Moreover, as the knowledge gap acts as a powerful logic creating resistance to dealing with the ‘hard truths’ of Indigenous education, teachers socialized to accept the gap often struggle to open themselves up to new ways of knowing (Poitras Pratt and Hanson 2022; Rice et al. 2022). Thus, openings to engage in ‘difficult’ learning (see Simon 2000), where teachers’ prior understandings and subjectivities can be transformed with new knowledge about and from Indigenous people, would be best embedded in ongoing teacher education programs (Dion 2007; Poitras Pratt and Hanson 2022). This invites us to ask: Does the Finnish TE curriculum ensure such openings? If not, can we expect future generations of teachers to act as promoters of Sámi knowledge even though they themselves have been systematically denied of it?

As the knowledge gap is conceptualized not as a simple absence of knowledge, but as a strategic, distinct not-knowing underpinned by oppression and denial of colonial histories (Cook 2018), we are engaged in a critical and decolonial paradigm. Thinking with Susan Dion’s (2007; complemented by Higgins, Madden, and Korteweg 2015) theory of educators’ complex ‘perfect stranger’ position, we understand Sámi knowledge as knowledge teachers need to bridge the knowledge gap in themselves and through their teaching. The perfect stranger position, which many teachers are found to embody in their relationship with Indigenous peoples, is twofold: It is ignorance of Indigenous issues intertwined with incapacity (or unwillingness) to acknowledge oneself as a being surrounded by and (re)producing colonial narratives (Dion 2007). Drawing on this, we also understand educators’ Sámi knowledge to have a two-pillared structure, being dependent on adequate opportunities to address Sámi perspectives and one’s own position within the existing, colonial dynamics. Referring to such interrelated pillars as ‘indigenization’ and ‘decolonization’, Somby and Olsen (2022) identify that for appropriate Sámi-inclusive mainstream education, ‘we need both’ (3). The term Sámi knowledge is, thus, not used here synonymously with Sámi people’s distinct knowledge system(s) but refers to educational knowledge that can arise about, from, and in relation to the Indigenous people.

We understand the TE curriculum as a dynamic, socially negotiated entity, a ‘complicated conversation’ (Pinar 2004, 185). Curriculum knowledge and its ability to empower students to change pressing social issues has been of particular interest in educational sociology (e.g. Wheelahan 2010), a field much influenced by Bernsteinian
conceptualizations of educational knowledge as a major regulator in the maintenance/ transformation of relationships and the formal curriculum as a determinant of what knowledge counts (Bernstein 2003). Alongside decolonial conceptualizations of curriculum’s long history as a forum of both settler colonialism and Indigenous resistance (Tuck 2015) and higher education’s role as the gatekeeper of which types of knowledge and representations of the world are ‘universalized’ in society (Shahjahan et al. 2022; Smith 2012), these notions have informed us on the relevance of examining TE curriculum knowledge.

Setting out from a structural gap in knowledge, we approach the curriculum through critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 2001, 2003). CDA entails interrogation of social practices and power relations which (re)shape colonial inequalities (Hogarth 2017) and guide the ‘selection of certain structural possibilities and the exclusion of others’ (Fairclough 2003, 23). It provides a framework for identifying forces affecting Sámi knowledge, present in both what is included and what (or who) is absent.

Context of Finland – Setting of Innocence or Ignorance?

Finland is one of the Nordic welfare countries whose histories and self-promoted reputations have been fundamentally shaped by sentiments of ‘exceptionalism’ and ‘innocence’, especially regarding their emphasis on democracy, equality, and education (Kasa, Brunila, and Toivanen 2023; Keskinen 2019). Contemporary critical assessments have questioned these narratives, situating their foundations in a Nordic denial of complicity in global colonialism and racism (e.g. Kasa et al. 2021; Nyyssönen 2013). This denial has been widely reproduced despite the actions of Nordic states, particularly those towards the Indigenous Sámi, now being understood as fundamentally colonial processes (Lehtola 2015). The image of Finland, in particular, has been colored by its acknowledged history under the Swedish and Russian empires, as the victim of colonialism and never the colonizer (Lehtola 2015; Nyyssönen 2013).

Part of the Finnish narrative rests on the idea of an exceptionally culturally unified Finland. The myth of unity, one people in one state, emerged from the artificial narrative-making designed to raise national solidarity in the 19th and 20th centuries (Marjanen 2021). Holm and Londen (2010) observe that, given the existence of two national languages, the Indigenous Sámi population, the officially recognized Roma community, and many smaller minorities including Tatars and Russians, Finland has not been as homogeneous as portrayed – Nevertheless, the concept of multiculturalism only emerged in Finland with the increasing immigration in the 1990s, which has impacted the Finnish debate and policymaking. While, citing equality, Finnish policies have expressed support and tolerance of multiculturalism, concerns have been raised about the depth and inclusiveness of the meanings attached to the Finnish conceptualization of the phenomenon (Holm and Londen 2010; Hummelstedt-Djedou, Zilliacus, and Holm 2018).

Although little theorized in Finnish literature, the Finnish mainstream knowledge gap about the Sámi is raising concerns. Stakeholders have observed the gap to underlie the increasingly hostile and indifferent measures towards the Sámi and means to address it have been outlined nationally and internationally – including recommendations to integrate more Sámi knowledge into nationwide education (ECRI 2019; Juuso 2018). The knowledge gap and the limitations on the Finnish concept of multiculturalism may
have interconnections: Internationally, ignorance has been defined as not only a lack of true beliefs, but also the ‘presence of false beliefs’ (Mills 2008, 282), including sentiments of ‘innocence’ and (national) identity that are hard to disrupt (Dion 2007; Rice et al. 2022). Complementing our study with these international conceptualizations, we recognize that each Indigenous people and the systems that concern them are unique. Still, given the knowledge gap’s connection to transnational processes of oppression (see Godlewska et al. 2020) and internationally observed similarities in its manifestations (see Cook 2018; Miettunen 2020), we reason that engaging in a dialogue with knowledge from different contexts can strengthen the conceptualization of the knowledge gap in both this and future works.

The knowledge gap has become a visible issue in Finland thanks to the ongoing Finnish Truth and Reconciliation process and efforts to reform the Sámi Parliament Act in Finnish legislation. A contentious proposed reform fell through in the Finnish legislature in February 2023 and drew international media attention critiquing Finnish unawareness of Indigenous matters (Mac Dougall 2022). The Finnish Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established in October 2021 to prepare and promote reconciliation between the Sámi and the Finnish state, has also encountered challenges, as lack of resources and confidence in the TRC’s work led to a temporary suspension of its work in 2022. International truth and reconciliation processes have emphasized the role of education in successful reconciliation and reformation of Indigenous–majority relations (Shahjahan et al. 2022). Considering that the Finnish TRC’s declared core objectives are to raise awareness about the Sámi and their (ongoing) treatment (Prime Minister’s Office 2021), education is likely to play a significant part in reconciliation in Finland, too.

**Sámi Education and Finnish Teacher Education**

Education has been among the most prominent and universal tools and targets of colonization (Smith 2012). Although national borders have divided the Sámi among four countries (Finland, Sweden, Norway, Russia) and differing social systems, colonial influences unite the context of education of all Sámi: as Keskitalo, Määttä, and Uusiautti (2013) discuss, to understand the past, present, and future of Sámi education one must recognize its colonial and assimilative underpinnings. However, while a need for decolonial critique persists, educational contexts are slowly changing and aiming to become more responsive to diverse concerns (Keskitalo and Olsen 2021). Increased understanding of nuances is therefore required, as education and curriculum are simultaneously connected to colonization and decolonization (Keskitalo and Olsen 2021; Shahjahan et al. 2022).

Drawing on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Ngai, Baek, and Paulgaard (2015) point out that the concept of Indigenous education is twofold: It means educating Indigenous peoples within the framework of their own language and culture, as well as educating *everyone* about Indigenous matters. Including Indigenous perspectives into common education (‘mainstreaming’) requires a dialogical process that is undertaken critically and with time, to avoid harmful reinforcement of Sámi marginalization or majority–minority dichotomy (see, e.g. Somby and Olsen 2022). In Finland, the blurred boundary between Sámi education
and mainstream education makes negotiations about mainstreaming particularly timely. A growing majority of the Sámi in Finland live outside the traditional Sámi homeland and, unlike in Norway and Sweden, the Finnish school system has no parallel Sámi curriculum (Keskitalo and Olsen 2021).

Both in Sámi nations and elsewhere, teachers’ importance for Indigenous education has been identified. Teachers are granted with unmatched power to define the cultural space of classrooms, and their starting points guide whether (and how) certain educational knowledges, materials, and values are delivered (see Higgins, Madden, and Korteweg 2015; Miettunen 2020). Teachers’ professionalism and autonomy are emphasized in Finland, where the entire curriculum system is built around the image of the teacher as a highly educated professional and active interpreter of the curriculum (Autio 2017). Finnish TE is internationally renowned as an exemplary and equal system that underpins Finland’s educational success, and scholarship has often addressed the perspective of learning from the ‘exceptionalism’ of the Finnish model (Autio 2017). However, more critical studies have questioned the genuine equality of Finnish TE, noting how its narrow ideas of culture and immersion in its own reputation compromise its genuine dedication to social issues (e.g. Brunila and Kallioniemi 2018; Holm and Londen 2010; Kasa, Brunila, and Toivanen 2023).

Meanwhile, decolonial research on Finnish TE is rare. Training paths and non-degree studies for teachers specializing in teaching of and in Sámi languages have been studied and organized to address the need for qualified Sámi education teachers (Francett-Hermes 2023; OKM 2021). These Sámi TE initiatives have been mainly organized as short-term projects, a typical answer to TE development recommendations in Finland (see Brunila and Kallioniemi 2018), but one which contrasts investments in promoting decolonial/Sámi issues throughout the TE system. In Norway, for example, national regulations oblige all TE institutions to provide knowledge about Sámi societies and histories (Somby and Olsen 2022). No such centralized system exists to manage Finnish TE as Finnish universities enjoy, and vigorously defend, their autonomy, thus retaining freedom of external control over their curricular content apart from the scope of studies required for legal teacher qualification. University autonomy has been undeniably important for the independence of knowledge creation in Finland, but it leaves recognition of social issues up to the incentive of individual universities – or mere individual educators (Kasa et al. 2021).

Methodology

Starting Points and Research Questions

While research on knowledge can be connected to other established intellectual traditions, research on the knowledge gap sits particularly well with critical/decolonial/feminist studies (Godlewska et al. 2020). As Woodside-Jiron (2011) states, when researching policy documents such as curricula it is vital to extend the analysis to explanations of power: The curriculum not only distributes certain ideas but mandates them across a societally influential forum. These notions pointed us toward critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2001), a methodological and theoretical set used in
a growing body of critical Indigenous studies and methodologies (e.g. Hogarth 2017; Parkinson and Jones 2019).

For non-Indigenous researchers, like us, seeking roles and methodologies to ethically incorporate in research in Indigenous contexts, CDA involves certain guidelines that support approaching the field appropriately (McCartan, Brimblecombe, and Adams 2022). CDA considers questions of power and its intertwineements in curriculum texts (Fairclough 2001) but also entails critically addressing our own positionality and advocating for social change (McCartan, Brimblecombe, and Adams 2022). Having sought the informed consent of the Finnish Sámi Parliament to conduct this research, we aim to produce knowledge that may benefit and be relevant to Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous communities alike. The research questions guiding this study are:

(1) What kind of openings for or limitations on building Sámi knowledge are expressed in the Finnish TE curricula?
(2) How are these discursively produced?

**Research Data**

The research data involves the written curricula of nine Finnish class teacher (primary school teacher) education programs organized under eight Finnish universities: the Universities of Helsinki, Turku, Tampere, Jyväskylä, Eastern Finland, Oulu, Lapland, and Åbo Akademi. University of Turku has two TE programs with partly differing curricula. The curricula are public documents, freely accessible on university websites and/or electronic systems. We examined multiple levels of the curriculum: program level (in Finland, teacher qualification requires a master’s degree, with a program scope of 300 credits); study module level (course entities, e.g. 60 credits for subject studies); and course level (smallest units of study, commonly 2–5 credits). The data consists of four curricular elements: (1) general program descriptions; (2) programs’ cross-curricular objectives; (3) contents and objectives of the modules and courses; and (4) the titles, tables of contents, and/or abstracts of the disclosed course readings. The analysis was supported by the program structures, which communicated the courses required or recommended by the universities and their relative hierarchy. They revealed what knowledge was positioned as mandatory, with the aim of reaching all teacher students, and what was optional or excluded altogether.

Data was collected in January 2022. The elements were retrieved from each institution’s curriculum for the spring semester 2022 and copied into Microsoft Word documents (368 pages in total, font size 11, Calibri, spacing varies). The analysis focused primarily on the descriptions, objectives, and organization of the TE programs and their mandatory courses. While optional studies were not included as systematically due to their wide range, we attempted to identify relevant optional studies by examining pathways suggested by the program structure and conducting a keyword search (e.g. Sámi, Indigenous, multicultural, and colonialism in Finnish, Swedish, and English).

The language of the Finnish TE curricula is generic, condensed, and abstract. Although the documents guide real activities and norms, the passive voice obscures subjectivities and means of achieving the disclosed outcomes (see Fairclough 2003). Such vagueness may stem from that when designing curricula in general, and the TE
curriculum in particular, many stakeholders impose conflicting pressures over which ideas should or should not be prioritized (Auto 2017). Thus, the text and its discourses are mediated in consensus-seeking negotiations (Fairclough 2003). In this study, it was meaningful to look both into the vagueness and beyond it.

**Analysis Process**

Acknowledging that there is no single right way to conduct CDA (Fairclough 2003), we applied the three-dimensional model outlined by Norman Fairclough (2001). Textual analysis served as the point of analytic entry; that is, our analysis began from the description dimension of CDA. On the first analysis round, we read the text line by line, then color-coded and annotated parts according to the discursive patterns they represented. Patterns’ significance in discourse analysis is twofold: They are formations of concept clusters, assumptions, and semantic relationships that may pinpoint recurring ideas in the text (Fairclough 2003), and windows revealing the power, ideologies, and knowledge claims of their interactive discourses (Gee 2005). In other words, the discursive pattern formed an intriguing thread at the textual level, on which we analytically pulled to gain access to the CDA dimensions of interpretation (dimension addressing the discursive practices mediating between the text and social structures) and explanation (set out to consider the socio-historical forces – the powers behind discourse) which have shaped the pattern as it appears (see Fairclough 2001).

The first author conducted the main analysis, identifying four discursive patterns displaying either limitations on or openings for building Sámi knowledge. The patterns were further refined through consultation with co-authors. After two thorough analysis rounds of the entire data, we formed a separate document for data excerpts reflecting each pattern, indicating their scope within each TE program. Next, we discuss our findings in dialogue with curriculum excerpts, identifying the TE program (TE 1–9) and the mandatory/optional curricular element from which each excerpt was drawn. Most excerpts were translated from Finnish to English by the first author to provide evidence of patterns’ ideological differences and support the transparency of our interpretations.

**Findings**

Of the four discursive patterns identified through CDA, the two most dominant reflected broader discourses that limit the construction of Sámi knowledge in Finnish TE: (1) ‘neutral’ and liberal multiculturalism and (2) the narrow narrative of Finnish unity. The other two created openings for constructing Sámi knowledge and, thus, disrupting the perfect stranger positionality: (3) critical multiculturalism and (4) (limited) spaces for Sámi matters. While every TE curriculum draws on multiple discourses as discursive patterns intertwine, coexist, and compete for space, each pattern reflects a specific socio-historical and ideological context and consequences for Sámi knowledge. Therefore, the four patterns are discussed under separate subsections.

In the following subsections, it is possible to trace our movements between the three analytical dimensions of the CDA. Immediately before or after an excerpt from the data, we discuss the description dimension, indicating the linguistic choice(s) that caught our
attention at the textual level. We then extend our interpretation to the relationship between the textual level and the discursive level, anchoring these interpretations in explanations of the underlying social forces in conversation with existing literature.

‘Neutral’ and Liberal Multiculturalism

In the Finnish TE curriculum, we identified various references to considering multiculturalism, which is not unexpected given the global rise of social movements emphasizing representation of and sensitivity to diversity (see Shahjahan et al. 2022). Our analysis discovered that the liberal and self-affirmingly ‘neutral’ approach to multiculturalism formed the most dominant discursive pattern in all nine TE programs. As liberal multiculturalism involves meanings that the current scholarship on multicultural and decolonial education considers inadequate for rethinking social assumptions and hegemonic othering (e.g. Hummelstedt-Djedou, Zilliacus, and Holm 2018; Marom 2017), we interpreted it as a central limitation on Sámi knowledge.

Influences of liberal, uncritical multiculturalism were found within course contents, cross-curricular statements, and program structuring. A liberal discursive pattern was identifiable where multiculturalism was presented as a ‘neutral’ umbrella term, omitting the intersections and politics inherent in the concept and, thus, forming insufficient frameworks for constructing a deeper understanding of Indigenous matters (see Orlowski 2008). This insufficient ‘neutrality’ was reflected where, for example, notions of multiculturalism/diversity were added to curriculum sections as ‘buzzwords’, highly esteemed but rarely problematized indicators of contemporary ‘good teaching’ (Chinnery 2008), as shown below:

(Student) understands themes examined in the course: multiculturalism, interaction, encounters, activity, community, intergenerationality, participation, sensuality, practicality, emotions, positivity, community art, and integrative methods between arts. (TE 7, mandatory, course objectives)

Contents that cross all subject studies include cultural and linguistic diversity, sustainable futures, gender sensitivity and equality, information and communication technologies, and the perspective of different learners and support needs. (TE 4, mandatory, study module description)

Here, the add-on nature of multiculturalism is observable in its location in a list of the many buzzwords teacher students are expected to grasp. While the lists’ impressive ensemble of concepts promotes understanding of teaching as a responsible profession, they can be interpreted to operate without attention to or space for the concepts’ social setting or context of power (see also Marom 2016). Squeezed among other educational priorities and operationalized into a teachable ‘competence’, meaning-rich concepts are drained of their transformative potential, reflecting the (neo)liberal, marketized influences on TE more than the institution’s commitment to social justice (Marom 2017).

Many curriculum sections also presented liberal declarations that Marom (2017, 169) calls ‘superficial celebration of diversity’, where the value of diversity is acknowledged, but openings for a perfect stranger to encounter new, transformative learning are absent:
Student is able to recognize and appreciate the diversity and meanings of culture in education, schooling, pedagogical activities, workplace encounters, individuals, and their behavior. (TE 4, mandatory, course objectives)

Instead of inviting the student to think critically about socio-cultural structures, the wording of this excerpt emphasizes *appreciating* and *recognizing* diversity. While recognition is a basic human need, its liberal form has considerable limitations and can itself subtly reinforce discrimination (Taylor 1994). Superficial appreciation of multiculturalism merely scrapes the surface of difference and solely cultural identity, often dissociates itself from the structural and political features of colonial dynamics, and, thus, falls short in changing the discourse of othering (Hummelstsd-Djedou, Zilliacus, and Holm 2018; Orlowski 2008). For Mills (2008), this way of knowing the world, borne of the liberal project that renders race and its consequences invisible and with no place in today’s ‘harmonious’ society, is inextricably tied to the epistemology of ignorance. This ideology controls how diversity can be considered while overlooking how educational priorities and goals continuously privilege characteristics of the mainstream population (Marom 2017).

The TE programs’ internal structuring similarly reflected the deep influence of the liberal discourse. Although openings to address Sámi matters and more critical multiculturalism were identified, they lay largely in their own, often optional courses outside the core of the curriculum. This arrangement exemplifies the parallelism of liberal discourse and the objective of maintaining hegemony and existing power relations, for which liberal multiculturalism has been especially criticized (e.g. Hummelstend-Djedou, Zilliacus, and Holm 2018; Marom 2017; Parkinson and Jones 2019). Signaling liberal willingness to include some Indigenous content cannot be considered satisfactory from the perspective of the twofold perfect stranger position if it is done without rethinking the curriculum canon or decentering the majority subjectivity (see Higgins, Madden, and Korteweg 2015). Adding courses for critical/Indigenous matters to an already established curriculum, where such courses compete with promoted optional studies, enables the perfect stranger to maintain their distance. Moreover, even if the courses were selected, their perspectives risk being viewed as minor and insignificant as they clash with the narrative surrounding future teachers elsewhere (Ladson-Billings 2011). As Naidoo (2005, 34) puts it: ‘Oppositional discourses are often boxed off in this way and confined to places where they can be acknowledged (grudgingly or otherwise) but not cause us to rethink the building-blocks and foundations of the rest of our knowledge’.

**Narrow Narrative of Finnish Unity**

Our findings revealed that the myth of Finnish cultural unity and homogeneity, briefly discussed earlier, is still faithfully reproduced in Finnish TE. It forms the second major discursive pattern limiting Sámi knowledge and was found operative in all TE programs. The unity narrative was reflected largely as assumptions embedded into the used conceptualizations. For example, the contexts and/or course materials in several TE courses and modules addressing diversity indicated that the concept of multicultural education was used almost synonymously with *immigrant* education. In line with findings of Holm and Londen
(2010) from over a decade ago, this demonstrates that TE continues to construct multicultural education as something for/about immigrant students and frames Finnish multiculturalism as a ‘new’ phenomenon of the last few decades. This narrative not only disregards the long-standing cultural diversity but implies that multiculturalism is a concept relevant only for certain minority groups, naturalizing ‘Finnishness’ outside of it.

The idea of unity was also reflected in assumptions about Finnish-speaking subjectivities. In seven of the nine TE programs, courses on teaching the Finnish language used the term *Mother tongue and literature*, over the more inclusive *Finnish language and literature*. The myth of ‘monolingualism’ that prevailed before the ‘recently’ emerged cultural diversity was also reproduced in explicit statements:

In the past, Finns were monolingual. Of course, other languages were learned in school – but almost all people considered themselves monolingual. (TE 5, mandatory, course reading)

These narrow conceptualizations that acknowledge, at best, immigrants, refugees, and the Swedish-speaking population, leave the presence and identities of pre-immigration minorities such as the Sámi and the Roma unlocated and invisible. Aikio (2006) observes that following this incapability to address the long-standing relations with and Indigenous status of the Sámi, the Finnish unity discourse has created particular forms of Sámi discrimination. Dominant national stories that delegitimize alternative explanations severely limit opportunities to acknowledge the lived realities of Sámi generations (see Nyssönen 2013), including the systematic processes to assimilate the Sámi into the Finnish mainstream, decades of Sámi resistance, and invasive race-biological studies that sought to construct Finnish ‘superiority’ over the Sámi (see Ranta and Kanninen 2019; Keskitalo and Olsen 2021). Thus, the unity narrative and its reinforcement in education produce a partial (or even untrue) version of history that portrays Finns as the ‘indigenous’ population and the Sámi on the margins of Finnishness, repeating the legacy of assimilation. This is exemplified in the following excerpt:

The course consists of lectures that deal with the following themes: Finland as a cultural area and historical processes of folk culture; ethnic minorities in Finland (esp. the Sámi); Finnish folklore, material culture, and religion; national movement and the epic Kalevala; Finnish feasts and calendar customs; symbols of Finnishness and representations of Finns and Finnishness in the present-day world, internet, and popular culture. (TE 5, optional, course description)

Here, the Sámi are referred to as ‘one of the ethnic minorities in Finland’, rather than being recognized as an Indigenous people with their own social institutions and a right to self-determination. Furthermore, the course title, ‘Finnish folk culture’, and the setting of the other contents discursively represent Sáminess as an element of Finnish culture. This demonstrates how the unity discourse acts as an assimilative instrument and that, while openings to learn about the Sámi are needed and this course, too, may address important issues, not all contexts are equally appropriate for building Sámi knowledge sustainably.

Promoted through education, the unity narrative creates barriers to processing Sámi knowledge and, thus, to disrupting the perfect stranger position. Against the backdrop of the overriding national narrative, Indigenous counter-narratives are easier to discard than one’s prevailing beliefs (see Dion 2007; Rice et al. 2022). It is a model example of a cycle of denial at the heart of strategic ignorance (Cook 2018).
**Critical Multiculturalism**

While we identified the liberal approach to multiculturalism as the dominant and centrally limiting pattern concerning Sámi knowledge, Finnish TE curricula also drew on other, more critical meanings of multiculturalism. A critical multiculturalist framework, a ‘radical version of multiculturalism’ that shares ground with critical race theory and critical pedagogy, enables us to move beyond the superficial and tokenistic aspects of liberal multiculturalism and create dialogue beyond ‘appreciation’ of diversity (Marom 2017). As such, we regard it as a key opening for Sámi knowledge. The critical multiculturalism pattern appeared, although less prominently than liberal multiculturalism, in all TE programs. Consider the following examples:

Student is able to problematize discrimination, inequality, and injustices in education, reflect on how values and attitudes emerge and how each person’s own cultural background influences their thinking and actions, and become acquainted with the basic principles of critical multicultural education. (TE 3, mandatory, course objectives)

Student is able to analyze their own view of the world and people, prejudices, and stereotypes and the impact these have on pedagogical thinking and practice. (TE 2, mandatory, course objectives)

These excerpts’ wording demonstrates a commitment to a critical orientation, explicitly acknowledging injustices and promoting critical reflection on how teacher students themselves are influenced by cultural discourses. Stephen May (1999) distinguishes the purposes of critical multiculturalism in education as follows: Firstly, it prioritizes addressing power relations that universalize the worldview of one group; and, secondly, it encourages students to recognize multiple perspectives and examine the influence of culture, especially their own, which is taken particularly for granted. This demonstrates the discursive difference between the critical pattern and liberal multiculturalism, which, in its claim to neutrality, appears to disassociate itself from questions of power and self-reflection. Considering the twofold structure of the perfect stranger, opportunities to shift the attention away from the ‘other’ and critically comprehend oneself as a cultural being – as a beneficiary and (re)producer of certain colonial structures – is at least as important as learning about Indigenous people (Dion 2007; Higgins, Madden, and Korteweg 2015). It may even be a prerequisite for it, as Rice et al. (2022) describe the dynamic of ongoing ignorance: ‘No amount of evidence alone will remedy historical erasure or reconcile relationships with Indigenous peoples until settlers become aware of and challenge their culpability for colonial conditions’ (18).

Albeit both opening patterns were found to be less prevalent than limiting ones, the pattern of critical multiculturalism was less often confined to optional spaces than the second opening pattern, which explicitly prioritized Sámi matters. Thus, a higher proportion of teacher students is likely to have access to some of the potential openings which can support the construction of Sámi knowledge. However, and importantly, the statements forming the pattern of critical multiculturalism do not alone secure teaching of Sámi issues. TE that genuinely aims to stand against the perfect stranger position and the structural knowledge gap should invest in both critical multicultural discussions and teaching about Sámi matters.
(Limited) Spaces for Sámi Matters

Openings where consideration of the Sámi people was articulated as an explicit objective were identifiable in some TE programs. Sámi perspectives were almost exclusively set in their own studies, with the Sámi focus often disclosed in the study title (e.g. ‘Sámi Pedagogy’). While a separated placement is not ideal, the objectives of the curriculum sections prioritizing Sámi matters suggest that they were designed to introduce Sámi knowledge to teacher students relatively comprehensively. The sections reflecting this opening pattern expressed attention to the diversity and dynamic circumstances of the Sámi and affirmed the significance of integrating Sámi topics into education:

(At the end of the course, the student) recognizes the key features and diversity of Sámi culture and can reason the importance of Sámi content in teaching and education. (TE 8, mandatory, course objectives)

Sámi culture is a multidisciplinary field of teaching and research based on Sámi history and traditional culture. The Sámi are in a minority position in their home countries, and Sámi communities are undergoing intense economic, cultural and linguistic change. The subject provides a basic knowledge of the traditional culture of the Sámi people but also sees them as modern, international, and active agents. Sámi culture is also examined from the perspective of the Indigenous peoples of the world, especially of the North. (TE 7, optional, study module description)

Themes prioritized in these examples are relevant to deconstructing the perfect stranger position, and their presence gives hope that calls to indigenize perspectives have been noted in Finnish TE. Universities making spaces for Sámi representation reflects a slow discursive shift integrally linked to the intergenerational Sámi activism that is largely behind the successful revitalization of Sámi position in the Nordics (Keskitalo and Olsen 2021). The same shift has been observed in the evolution of Finnish primary education curricula (Aikio-Puoskari 2016). However, not all TE universities demonstrated readiness for such a shift. Only one of the analyzed TE programs prioritized Sámi matters in a mandatory course, ensuring that all students are introduced to them. Five of nine TE programs did not disclose acknowledging the Sámi in any sections of their curriculum and elsewhere, apart from the one mandatory course, Sámi perspectives were assigned to optional spaces, leaving encounters with it dependent on individuals’ choices. As discussed in the context of the liberal multiculturalism pattern, compartmentalizing decolonial issues this way and isolating them from their context intertwining with ‘Finnish matters’ leaves future teachers’ engagement with them vulnerable to many challenges.

Alongside the dominant discourses, TE universities’ commitment to Sámi knowledge seems to be affected by the (ignorance-driven) perception of Sáminess as a mere local phenomenon of northernmost Finland. The programs containing most openings for Sámi matters are run by the Universities of Lapland and Oulu, the two northernmost TE universities geographically closest to the traditional Sámi homeland. Thus, in addition to spaces for Sámi knowledge being limited within a curriculum, aspiring teachers enrolled in different programs are offered unequal opportunities to disrupt their perfect stranger position. This is the case even though every teacher working in a Sámi nation should be able to safeguard the educational rights of the Sámi and raise all students’ awareness of Sámi matters, regardless of where the school is located.
Conclusions and Looking Forward

The CDA process revealed that the Finnish TE curricula affirm multiple mutually tensile discourses forming openings for or limitations on building Sámi knowledge among future teachers. Throughout this article, we have discussed Sámi knowledge as a twofold concept: it is awareness about the Indigenous people and their circumstances, but also entails critical reflection on the implications of one’s own (socio-cultural) positionality (see Dion 2007). Of the four discursive patterns we identified, the most dominant ones – ‘neutral’ and liberal multiculturalism and the narrow narrative of Finnish unity – reproduce ideologies that limit engagement with Sámi knowledge. The dominant discourses were not uncontested, as the patterns of critical multiculturalism and (limited) spaces for Sámi matters presented small openings for both layers of the twofold Sámi knowledge needed to overcome the perfect stranger position. In Table 1, we summarize the characteristics and prevalence statuses of the identified discursive patterns.

Table 1. Characteristics and prevalence of the discursive patterns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>'Neutral' and liberal multiculturalism (limiting)</th>
<th>Narrow narrative of Finnish unity (limiting)</th>
<th>Critical multiculturalism (opening)</th>
<th>Spaces for Sámi matters (opening)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patterned in apolitical notions of multiculturalism/diversity, reducing multicultural education to a buzzword or ‘celebrating’ multiculturalism while maintaining silence about cultural power and privilege</td>
<td>Patterned in assumptions about Finnish historical monoculturalism/monolingualism, marginalizing Sámi presence by paralleling multiculturalism with ‘new’ immigration</td>
<td>Patterned in notions acknowledging processes of power/inequality within multiculturalism, encouraging students to critically examine the implications of (their own) culture and position</td>
<td>Patterned in references to the Sámi, creating accountabilities for raising Sámi themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant* in 9/9 TE programs</td>
<td>Operative** in 9/9 TE programs</td>
<td>Operative in 4/9, Marginal*** in 5/9 TE programs</td>
<td>Operative in 1/9, Marginal in 3/9, Absent**** in 5/9 TE programs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Pattern identified in more than ten individual curriculum sections and interpreted as shaping the cross-curriculum structure of the TE program.
**Pattern identified in five or more sections, some of which were mandatory studies, and/or found underlying the cross-curricular conceptualization/contextualization.
***Pattern identified in fewer than five sections and/or found solely in optional studies.
****Pattern not identified in any curriculum sections.

While the presence of the opening patterns suggests a rise of decolonial influences, their transformative power remains questionable across all TE programs. The limited spaces and volume of the openings compromise their potential for disrupting the ignorance-bound beliefs and discourses that appear privileged in the curriculum canon and society at large. We therefore conclude that Finnish TE programs are, overall, involved in sustaining the perfect stranger position of future teachers.

We are conscious that our positionality as non-Sámi researchers operating within a Finnish TE university influences our interpretations and the discourses available to us. Due to the subjective nature of CDA, other researchers could identify different discourses and ideologies from the curriculum material. Furthermore, it bodes well to note that the knowledge ultimately taught and learned in Finnish TE is not entirely deducible from the written curriculum. Teacher educators’ and teacher students’ perceptions of Sámi knowledge are an important focus for future studies. Still, the guidelines created by the curriculum have a strong influence on what is chosen to teach – particularly on this
While proper teacher preparation is essential for decolonizing education (Poitras Pratt and Hanson 2022), and there is a growing consensus that it is not sustainable to assume that teachers will undertake equality/human rights issues if such issues are bypassed on the institutional level (e.g. Kasa et al. 2021), our findings indicate that the currently unclear support from the TE leaves confronting the knowledge gap in the Finnish education system largely on the shoulders of individual graduating teachers. Developing a more responsible TE curriculum is a necessary but not an uncomplicated process. Education systems are slow to change, and the questions of ‘who’ and ‘how’ must be discussed when it comes to Sámi knowledge. For example, we, as non-Sámi researchers, are not in a position to define here what Sámi topics should be incorporated into mainstream TE. Rather, decolonizing the academy would entail giving back power to the Sámi, power to participate in influencing the curriculum at all levels (Kuokkanen 2007). Furthermore, underlying ideas of the dominant discourses should be critically reassessed and their vague messages replaced to make TE curricula more genuinely cognizant of Indigenous peoples. Many teachers are already overwhelmed by the abstract mandates to teach about diversity appropriately, and liberal statements may even accelerate the claim of the perfect stranger position as distancing feels ‘safer’ than introducing potentially controversial knowledges (Dion 2007). Instead of settling for disconnected value disclaimers, each TE university should be held accountable for acknowledging (its own) colonial structures and interrogating its ‘ideology of know-nothingism’ (Kuokkanen 2007, 150) which perpetuates the legacy of ignorance, domination, and exclusion.

Note

1. The Sámi are the only recognized Indigenous people in the European Union. The Sámi territories cover areas of four Northern European countries, Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Russia. The total number of Sámi is estimated at 75,000–100,000, of whom approximately 10,000 live in Finland. Today, more than 60% of the Sámi in Finland live outside the traditional Sámi homeland, which brings new challenges regarding education, services, and support of Sámi languages, three of which are spoken in Finland (Sámediggi 2023).

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