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Special issue on

Language Education for Social Justice

Guest editors

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Editorial

This special issue echoes the theme of the *Language Education for Social Justice* conference that was hosted by the Language Campus (https://kielikampus.jyu.fi/en) of the University of Jyväskylä in June 2021. This online event brought together teachers, teacher educators, researchers, and policy makers from a variety of national and international contexts to look at language and/in education through a lens of social justice. In the call for submissions for the conference as well as for this issue, we asked for contributions to address questions such as:

- How can language education be a space where students and teachers learn together to see and challenge existing patterns of privilege and injustice?
- What is needed to support teachers in promoting linguistic and cultural equity and equip them to support each other in developing respective pedagogies?
- How can research look at and beyond language in education with the goal of being a catalyst for critical thinking, democracy, equity, and peace?
- How can language education and research support, respect, and better understand each other with the goal of making language education more equitable and accessible for all learners?
- How can both education and research turn a critical eye on themselves to recognize their complicity in perpetuating injustices – and learn to do better?

The event was not only very well attended (over 220 delegates), but was also well received, and the feedback that reached us was pointing to the relevance of the topic, the importance of exchange and networks around these topics, and the palpable sense of community during the three days. As the first outcome of the conference, one special issue on social justice for language education was published (Qin & Liontou, 2021) in the electronic journal *Kieli, koulutus ja yhteiskunta* (Language, Education and Society), which is housed by the Finnish Network of Language Education Policies (*Kieliverkosto*) and geared primarily to practitioners.

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The special issue at hand in *Apples – Journal of Applied Language Studies* follows along the same thematic lines with a slightly different focus and audience.

This collection aims to do two things: First, it honors some of the important work that was presented and discussed at the conference. Although this is just a small part of the large number of excellent presentations and workshops that were offered during the event, we hope this issue will give readers a taste of the diversity of contributions as well as validate the conference as a whole and all its contributors. Second, with this issue, we hope to continue and extend the conversation. In a spirit of constant learning and evolving, we encourage our authors, readers, and ourselves to keep engaging with social justice themes and carry the discussions forward into our classrooms, workplaces, and communities.

The multiple meanings of equity and social justice

Many terms have been used to capture notions of making education or society more equitable, fair, or just. They all come from different contexts and schools of thought, and translating them back and forth between Finnish, English (the main working languages of the conference and of this journal), and other languages is challenging but also adds interesting nuances and complexities. As Li and Dervin (2018) point out, social justice and the related terms, such as equality, equity and inclusion, are polysemic and often carry local connotations. This may complicate discussion about social justice, and requires sensitivity to the varied meanings of the terms we use.

The polysemic nature of the terms related to equity or social justice in education is evident in the Finnish context and its long tradition of debating and negotiating educational equality/equity (in Finnish, *koulutuksen* tasa-arvo). Given that the meaning of equality or equity in education is in constant flux, it is crucial to consider who is included in discussions on and reforms for socially just education and who remains on the margins (Ouakrim-Soivio et al., 2018). This is reflected, for instance, in Finnish legislative documents, which, in the 1980s, focused mainly on (binary) gender equality: The Act on Equality between women and men (1986/609) was introduced in 1986, and in the context of education, the 1983 Act on comprehensive school (476/1983, 2§) explicitly stated gender equality as one of the goals of education. Additionally, the educational reform in the 1970s built the comprehensive school system on the idea of social equality: Education and health care at school were free for all students and students were assigned to neighborhood schools, thus guaranteeing an authentic representation of the population in the schools. Later, in 1999, it was also stipulated in the constitution (731/1999, 16§) that everyone has the right to free basic education and other education regardless of their economic situation, that is, "without being prevented by economic hardship".

This brief look at legislative texts illustrates how educational reforms in Finland have typically been motivated by goals of gender and socioeconomic equality (e.g., Ahonen, 2012; Välimaa, 2019) and not, for instance, linguistic, cultural, or racial/ethnic justice, which is a more recent concern (Ennser-Kananen et al., in progress). It was only in 1999, when the amendments to the Constitution (731/1999, 6§) adopted a broader and more intersectional view of equality, including gender, age, origin, language, religion, conviction, opinion, health, and disability. To support the broader notion of equality in education and worklife, the Non-discrimination Act (1325/2014) was introduced in 2014. As Solheim (2010) has argued, the

importance of such explicit statements in the legislation is critical, as the students' education will be shaped by the values, principles, and rights included in the legislation and policies derived from it. For instance, as legislation determines the use of financial resources, it is necessary for effective policy making and makes it possible to hold administrative bodies accountable for distributing resources. Of course, while legislation lays a strong foundation for how equity/equality is understood, it does not always, immediately, or automatically transfer into practice.

As mentioned above, the varying understandings of equity/equality are sometimes complicated by translation and dependent on context. For instance, the terms *equality* and *equity* have different meanings in English, but in Finnish, particularly when referring to equality/equity in education, the term *koulutuksen tasa-arvo* is used to convey either one or both, depending on the speaker and the context. In English, educational *equality* refers to access and opportunities for education (which should be the same for everyone, see for instance Kyckling et al., 2019; Ennser-Kananen, et al., forthcoming), whereas educational *equity* highlights individuals' different needs, conveying the idea that everyone should receive the instruction and support they need, not (necessarily) the same as everyone else (Pulkkinen, 2014). The latter is mentioned in the current curricula as a starting point for teaching (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014). This is an important perspective because it focuses on the equity/equality of *learning outcomes* and thus turns the attention to school practices, the implication being that a student's success is not indicative of their talent and ability, but of the school practices (Husén, 1974; Pulkkinen, 2014) that enable learning. Additionally, an *inclusive* approach accentuates students' right to education together with other students, as part of the group, and encourages respective school practices (Sirkko et al., 2020; Solheim, 2010).

In short, the Finnish term *koulutuksen tasa-arvo* might refer to any of these aspects, some of them, or all of them. In evaluating the equity/equality stance of an educational policy or practice, it is thus important to gain a deep understanding of what terms mean in a given context. This is especially true in situations, when the expected labels are not used. For example, Louloudi's article in this issue shows that even though Finnish teachers may not use social justice frameworks or terminology in their teaching of critical literacy, they stress the importance of equal access and opportunities for self-expression for all students. So, although terms and frameworks of social justice oriented pedagogies may not be within teachers' repertoires, they may be practicing some aspects of equity/equality for or through education.

We chose the term "social justice" (in Finnish *sosiaalinen oikeudenmukaisuus*) for our conference and for this thematic issue because, at that time, we understood it as more consequential than equality or equity. Specifically, we felt that social justice, in contrast to other terms, would point to systemic inequities and thus to a need for social change and transformation, rather than being satisfied with cosmetic or slightly intensified attempts at addressing social inequities. In an early-stage conference planning meeting, where potential themes for the event were being discussed, this idea was not only met with excitement. Some colleagues worried that the term and topic might put off potential participants, especially teachers who would not identify with such a stance and find it "too political" or otherwise alienating.

While we found that sticking with our terminology and theme has enabled us to host a very well-attended and well-received event, we acknowledge that

neither the term nor the meaning of "social justice" is without problems. As Adam (2020) aptly points out, "(s)ocial justice frameworks and theories have been formed by institutions primarily from the Global North, particularly the USA, and designed from and for their contexts and worldviews" (p. 2). Instead, they contextualize their work in South Africa in decolonizing theories and the respective vocabulary. The idea to recognize and address the colonial histories (colonialism) and present (coloniality) in contemporary social processes and structures is also gaining ground in applied linguistics (Cushing-Leubner et al., 2021; García et al., 2021; Meighan, 2020; Motha, 2014, 2020) and also Finnish scholars have begun to reckon with Finland's colonial histories (Keskinen et al., 2016; Keskinen, 2019). As Mayblin and Turner (2020) note, the term "decolonization" is problematic as well, especially if used by white European heritage scholars. Importantly, many have warned against watering down the notion of decolonization and detaching it from land rights (Tuck & Yang, 2021). Recognizing this complexity, for our writing in general and for this special issue in particular, terminologies have to remain contested and negotiated.

The articles and themes in this issue

As editors, one of our goals for this special issue was to include contributions with a strong focus on social justice in/for language education that would point to systemic problems and the need for social (rather than individual) change. We were particularly interested in pieces that were able to describe a particular issue as contextual and shaped by local circumstances, while at the same time highlighting its relevance for scholars, practitioners, policy makers, and communities outside of that context.

A look in the mirror is a necessary part of writing about social justice. In putting together this special issue, we were hoping to be able to represent a larger variety of geographical, linguistic, and cultural contexts. Throughout the process, we found that working towards this goal was limited by academic and institutional structures that we did not (or could not) challenge (enough) for a variety of reasons. We are left with important questions to reflect on, including: How is our work Eurocentric not only in its epistemologies, but also in its organization and reach? How can we be more proactive, as conference organizers, editors, and colleagues, in reaching beyond our familiar horizons? However, the necessity of rethinking our global positioning and relations should not diminish the importance and value of the work represented here. We are proud and excited to present the articles in this issue, which span a diversity of contexts on the educational continuum. After an overview of 15 countries (Alisaari & Kilpi-Jakonen), the contexts discussed in the articles are dispersed on the educational continuum, starting from the primary education (Cordova Hernandez & Valtierra Zamudio; Louloudi; Quehl), proceeding through lower secondary education (Kinossalo et al.) to the higher education (Riitaoja et al.) and adult education (Duggan & Holmström). Below, short descriptions of the articles are presented.

Using large-scale data from 15 countries, **Jenni Alisaari and Elina Kilpi-Jakonen** investigate learning of intercultural competences and languages at school and their influence on global competences and immigrant-origin peers' sense of belonging. Based on their results, authors critically discuss if and how world language education is associated with school culture that embraces diversity and supports immigrant students' sense of belonging.

In their article, **Lorena Córdova-Hernández and Jorge Valtierra Zamudio** pose difficult and necessary questions such as: What are the implications of a crisis like the COVID pandemic for Indigenous communities and their languages? What inequities does a global pandemic exacerbate? Against the backdrop that schools and curricula have been major tools of colonization and linguistic marginalization, they invite us to consider what some (unexpected?) opportunities of (temporary) school closures could be. Overall, their chapter can be read as a call to identify "lessons learned" from a crisis like the pandemic to inform a renewed push towards language education for social justice.

Eleni Louloudi investigates Finnish and Canadian teachers' understandings of Critical Literacies. Critical literacies are strongly connected to issues of social justice and seen also as means for questioning and deconstructing oppressive societal norms and reconstructing a more socially just world. Her study shows that while teachers in both Finland and Canada see critical literacies as an essential part of education, they have quite different approaches to teaching critical literacies. While Canadian teachers saw critical literacies as connected to social justice education, Finnish teachers highlighted ideas of information management and multiliteracies, reflecting different approaches to educational equity in their countries.

Thomas Quehl's ethnographic study investigates possibilities for multilingual pedagogies for social justice in superdiverse primary school context in England. Based on the results, requirements for and elements in multilingual pedagogies include participation and recognition of plurilingual speakers, normalizing multilingualism in the school institution, as well as deconstructing the idea of national languages. As Quehl points out, these dimensions need to be conceptualized within a wider framework of hierarchies, discourses, and institutional practices in societies characterized by racism and transnational migration.

Maiju Kinossalo, Henna Jousmäki, and Minna Intke-Hernandez used interviews with teachers and social workers in linguistically and culturally diverse educational contexts in Finland to discuss questions like: What kind of language education supports students' identity building processes and sense of belonging? How are we welcoming migrant students and truly seeing their identities and stories as assets? Their article importantly challenges the common assumption that language learning is the key to and thus precedes integration and calls us to work towards a language education that sees the learner as a whole person, with their histories, their socio-cultural identities, their past, present, and future selves and memberships communities and thus develop pedagogies and practices of belonging.

Anna-Leena Riitaoja, Aija Virtanen, Nina Reiman, Tuija Lehtonen, Maija Yli-Jokipii, Taija Udd and Leena Peniche Ferreira investigate the opportunities of highly educated migrants to access university education in Finland, focusing on the constraining structures and practices within the Finnish universities. The results show that in Finnish universities, sameness is considered equality, the impression on migrants tends to be deficiency-oriented, and understanding of language learning is simplified. To support the equal opportunities of migrants to higher education, changes in ideological, structural and practical levels are required.

Nora Duggan and Ingela Holmström bring the discussion back to a fundamental consideration: What is language? Their ethnographic study with deaf migrants in Swedish community colleges invites us to consider what it would mean to dismantle a Eurocentric view of language and build education around the

communicative practices of marginalized groups. As the authors point out, critical self-reflection of teachers, teacher educators, and curriculum writers is important, as is the joint effort of building equitable structures of education and communication.

As editors, we do not see ourselves as merely collecting, assessing, and compiling scholarly writing. We approached this process very much as a learning experience and share, in lieu of a conclusion, some of the most important lessons our contributors have taught us. We are thankful for these insights:

- *Multi-level change*: In order for change to be effective and sustainable, it cannot be limited to one-time or one-means approaches. Real and sustainable social transformation is needed on several levels, from personal attitudes, to classroom interaction, to structures and practices of institutions, to national policy and international relations. For instance, Riitaoja et al.'s piece illustrates the multiple challenges "migrants at the doorsteps of universities'' face, which call for multi-level solutions and challenge us to rethink simplistic understandings of inclusion or integration. Kinossalo et al. dismantle two of these simplistic yet pervasive ideas, namely the one of language as precondition to integration (see also Intke-Hernandez, 2020) and the one of the first languages as serving mainly the purpose of supporting additional language learning. Such work calls on our social responsibility to work towards change with a sensitivity and tolerance for complexity and a refusal to simplify.
- *The centrality of history*: Learning and teaching about the roots of social processes that are at play in contemporary educational context, such as migration policies, education policies, language policies and ideologies, is critical: Only if we understand these histories can we respond to them adequately. Among others, Córdova-Hernández and Valtierra Zamudio give a helpful example of how colonial histories reach into the present. To stay with this line of thinking, useful questions to keep asking may include: How did educational and linguistic norms and standards as we know them today gain and maintain their status? What alternative ways of understanding language, education, and belonging are there? Why did they not come to be the accepted mainstream?
- *Deconstructing normalcy:* We see it as part of our responsibility as language education scholars to challenge the spoken and unspoken norms and rules that have caused and continue to cause harm to historically marginalized groups. This includes revisiting concepts that we have been taking for granted for too long. Duggan and Homström lead by example when they ask "What is language?". Similarly, it remains important to take a critical look at what counts as appropriate language (Flores & Rosa, 2015), what constitutes a good education, and what is considered a legitimate way of being in the world. None of these are sociopolitically innocent categories, and given their intertwinedness with systems of oppression like racism, sexism, ableism, classism, we accept or promote them as neutral standpoints.

Although with the publication of this special issue, a process ends for us and our contributors, we feel strongly that language education for social justice is not only an ongoing discussion but a necessarily incomplete and continuous process. We call on ourselves, our readers, our colleagues and collaborators, to keep spaces for this discussion and work open and alive, or, in other words, to refuse a "conclusion".

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