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# Language, citizenship and schooling: A minority teacher's perspective

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## Abstract

In an age in which a shift towards increased authoritarianism and populism means that citizenship is defined in increasingly exclusive ways, migrant teachers' perspectives are vital in informing inclusive educational decision making, policies and practices. We draw on the life history tradition to present the perspectives of one minority teacher, living and working in Norway. Elif, a Turkish-Norwegian, reflects on her motivations in pursuing teaching as a career. As a multilingual minority teacher, she considers the relationships between language use, citizenship and belonging. For Elif, having Turkish roots and living in Norway presents certain advantages, possibilities and challenges, both in school and society. She suggests that her intercultural experiences and multilingual skills provide her with insights that enable special relationships with minority students, whose language skills and identities she seeks to activate and demystify. She identifies tensions between the Norwegian ideal of equality, her experiences of being minoritized by her professional peers and the mechanisms of exclusion operating among teachers to the detriment of minority students. Minority teachers' insights inform education for social justice. Including their stories avoids distorting knowledge critical to inclusive citizenship and inclusive processes of teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** language learning, citizenship, identities, belonging, multicultural education

## Introduction

During the run-up to the 2017 Norwegian general election, the public broadcaster NRK (*Norsk Rikskringkasting*) showed a television series 'Faten makes her choice' (*Faten tar valget*), in which 22-year-old Iraqi-Norwegian activist Faten Mahdi Al-Hussaini critically examines the policy positions of the various political parties and tries to figure out how she will vote. In one episode, Al-Hussaini interviews Siv Jensen, the leader of the right-wing populist Progress Party (*Fremskrittspartiet* or *FrP*) and then Finance Minister (the second most important member of the government after the prime minister) (NRK, 2017). Al-Hussaini, who wears the hijab, asks Jensen whether she considers Al-Hussaini to be Norwegian. Jensen avoids directly answering the question, instead stating that nationality determines whether an individual is Norwegian. Al-Hussaini then questions whether her values play a role in Jensen identifying her as Norwegian, to which Jensen responds that they do. Al-Hussaini persists with her original question: 'So, do you consider me Norwegian?' Jensen responds: 'Well, I hear you are Norwegian ... Being Norwegian also has to do with belonging and not putting yourself on the edge of society.'

Al-Hussaini's interview with Siv Jensen was widely discussed in the run-up to the election, and we joined in the debate, writing an article in the Norwegian press (Burner and Osler, 2017). We wondered whether Faten Mahdi Al-Hussaini should have brought her passport with her, whether her recognition as Norwegian required that her looks be more in line with those of Siv Jensen (White, blonde) or, indeed, whether Jensen believes she can read Al-Hussaini's values without knowing her. We argued that exclusion is not primarily about individuals placing themselves outside the mainstream. Instead, we claimed that it is the rhetoric of Jensen and others within her party that is exclusive of Al-Hussaini and other members of minority groups.

## **A sense of belonging**

We contend that a sense of belonging is influenced by a range of factors, notably inclusive policies and rhetoric, psychological and social security and, importantly, the absence of discrimination (Burner and Osler, 2017; Osler and Starkey, 2005). The conversation between Al-Hussaini and Jensen referred to above is illustrative of the sociopolitical context across Europe (Guibernau, 2013), with a growing attachment to political parties that define citizenship in exclusive ways. As Castles (2004) has observed, migration is now linked to concerns about national identity, rather than being seen as an economic issue. Globalization and migrants are both frequently presented as threats, and intolerance and racism have found spaces to flourish within sectors of the population (Osler, 2020; Osler and Starkey, 2018). Processes of exclusion, intolerance and racism combine to minoritize certain groups within Europe today. They may intersect with other factors, such as gender, religion, immigration status or language use. Following Shields et al. (2005), we use the term 'minoritized' in this article to refer to those who, while not necessarily the numerical minority, are treated as if their position and perspectives are of less worth.

We contend that this context impacts on the work of all educators, but that it has specific implications for teachers from minority backgrounds. In this article, we explore some of these implications by giving voice to one such teacher, Elif (a pseudonym), a Turkish-Norwegian. We also consider the added value that such educators offer schools. We discuss some key issues for educators concerning language and citizenship in education, in the context of increasing political polarization across Europe and beyond regarding citizenship, migration and inclusion within the political community of the nation (Guibernau, 2013).

## **Identities and their impact on citizenship and language learning**

In this article, we portray Elif, a Turkish-Norwegian teacher working in Norway, examining aspects of her identities and their impact on her understanding of citizenship and language learning. Following Varghese et al. (2009: 22), we contend that:

In order to understand language teaching and learning we need to understand teachers; and in order to understand teachers, we need to have a clearer sense of who they are: the professional, cultural, political, and individual identities which they claim or which are assigned to them.

In presenting Elif's perspectives, we acknowledge, as do Varghese et al. (2009), that the teacher's whole self is at play in the classroom, influencing professional decision making and classroom practices. When a teacher enters the classroom, they embody a range of identities, both self-ascribed and assumed, to which their colleagues and students

attach meanings. Some students may be less willing to accept language teachers from visible minorities as authentic or as 'real' teachers, assuming that such teachers may not have the competence of native speakers. This was the case, for example, in Amin's (1997) study of English as a second language (ESL) teachers in Canada.

Research suggests that individuals frequently hold multiple and dynamic identities (Mitchell and Parker, 2008; Ong, 1999; Osler and Starkey, 2005), constructed through belonging or exclusion, through choice or imposed by others (Guibernau, 2013). It is therefore oversimplistic to assume that identity is about being Norwegian or not. An individual may self-identify or be identified as Norwegian in one context, Turkish in another, and Turkish-Norwegian in a third. In yet another context, other identities (for example, in relation to gender, sexuality or even a pastime or interest, such as chess or cinema) may be significant. Drawing on theories of cosmopolitan democracy, Osler and Starkey (2003, 2018) advocate 'education for cosmopolitan citizenship', whereby all students are encouraged to respect diversity, including linguistic diversity, at different scales, in the classroom, the local community, the nation and globally. Education for cosmopolitan citizenship enables individuals to assert their diverse cultural and/or religious affiliations and to participate fully in their community and country of residence, whether or not they hold citizenship status of the country of residence. Within this conception, diversity is not a threat to the nation or to democracy but an essential facet of any democratic society (Osler, 2011; Parker, 2003). Migration is not something to be feared, but part of human history, and diversity is recognized as the normal state of affairs within an inclusive nation (Nyléhn and Biseth, 2015; Osler and Starkey, 2005; Suárez-Orozco, 2020; Westrheim and Hagatun, 2015).

Returning to the example presented at the start of this article, an acknowledgement of cosmopolitan citizenship by Progress Party leader Siv Jensen would mean that she would recognize many ways of being Norwegian. An individual may wear the hijab or not, may be blonde or not, may speak Norwegian with a regional accent, a foreign accent or not. The challenge is to enable all such people to feel a sense of belonging within the nation. As defined by Guibernau (2013: 18): 'Identity refers to the set of attributes that make each person unique, and these attributes are, in turn, the outcome of a complex mesh of exchanges and relationships involving a range of people, situations, values, ideologies and objectives.'

Public discourse in Norway concerning citizenship and belonging has become more polarized in recent years, notably since the 2013 general election that brought to power a coalition government that included the populist right-wing Progress Party for the first time since its establishment in 1973. The tendency to align the term 'diversity' with the visible characteristics of 'foreignness', for example, the hijab, a non-traditional name or dark skin tone, is not peculiar to Norway, and it can be increasingly seen in countries across Europe (Guibernau, 2013). The term *etnisk norsk* (ethnic Norwegian) is commonly used as a pseudonym for 'White Norwegian' in a context in which debate about race and ethnicity is generally discouraged, not just in society but in the social sciences (Bangstad, 2015), and specifically in the field of educational studies (Osler and Lindquist, 2018). In this climate, citizenship is increasingly defined as an exclusive category (Guibernau, 2013), in similar ways to those deployed by Progress Party leader Siv Jensen in her conversation with Faten Mahdi Al-Hussaini.

In response to recent demographic changes, education policymakers have given additional weight and emphasis to national identity in the school curriculum. In the face of diversity and growing global complexity, Norwegian education policy reasserts the importance of singular national identity as a means by which loyalty to the nation is realized. National identity is understood as founded in a common history, language and

culture (Osler, 2017: 150). In the following, we explore how education policy, in relation to language, citizenship and belonging, is understood by Elif. The aim is to present a viewpoint rarely explored in education research literature, in Norway or elsewhere – that of minoritized educators – and to see what light one such perspective might throw on language policy and practices. As explained in the next section, language is a particularly important category in Norwegian education.

## Context of the study

Norway has a population of 5.4 million and is one of three Scandinavian countries, alongside Sweden and Denmark. These countries have strong linguistic, cultural and historical bonds. Norway was under Danish rule until the early nineteenth century (1380–1814) and subsequently partially under Swedish rule for nearly a century (1814–1905). The three national languages are mutually intelligible, both written and orally. A legal category in the Scandinavian educational policy framework is ‘people with a minority language background’ (Meld. St. 6, 2012–13). In Norway, these are people who speak any other language(s) than the official national languages of Norwegian and Sami at home. (There are a number of Sami languages, spoken by the indigenous Sami people of northern Europe in four countries: Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia.) Thus, language plays an important role in defining the sense of belonging in Norway. Children and young people designated as having a minority language background have special legal rights to language support, either Norwegian as a second language, bilingual language support or mother tongue language support.

As of 2020, 14.7 per cent of the population are migrants to Norway, and a further 3.5 per cent are Norwegian-born with immigrant parents (Statistics Norway, 2020). Religious affinities are not registered, but membership of any religious community is. There are 669,433 people registered as belonging to other religious communities than the official Church of Norway, of which more than one in four (175,504 people) belong to the Muslim congregation (Statistics Norway, 2019). A recent survey suggests that up to 15 per cent of minority students in schools experience negative discrimination on a weekly basis due to their ethnicity (Norwegian Centre Against Racism, 2017), and ethnographic research confirms that they frequently feel ‘othered’ by the majority, due to their minority status (Chinga-Ramirez, 2017).

## Methodology

The present study draws on the life history tradition of sociology developed in Chicago in the 1920s and subsequently adopted for educational research from the 1980s, focusing on the life histories of educators (Ball and Goodson, 1985). The life history tradition has subsequently been applied to examine the experiences and perspectives of women teachers (see, for example, Casey, 1990, 1993; Middleton, 1993; Munro, 1998; Smith, 2012) and, less frequently, the experiences of minoritized and student teachers (Goodson, 2013; Osler, 1997, 2017). The experiences of minoritized teachers remain notably under-researched.

Elif, the teacher in this study, was invited to talk about her life history, particularly her professional experiences as a teacher. She was purposefully selected, being active in debates and showing reflective articulations on the topics of citizenship and belonging. Data were collected through an in-depth interview, which lasted approximately two hours. Although Elif knew we were conducting research, we tried to conduct the interview in a comfortable and relaxed environment. We offered coffee

and cake at the end of a long working day. Similar to Casey (1993) in her interviews with women teachers, we invited Elif to tell us the story of her life. As pointed out by Guibernau (2013: 18):

Telling our 'life story' involves consciously emphasizing certain aspects and events while neglecting, reinterpreting or even deleting others in an attempt to launch a specific self-image. Narrating our life story demands a certain degree of opening up to the other by disclosing some traits, experiences or views considered intimate, and it may even assume sharing some secrets. It also provides the individual with a unique opportunity of redefining and reinterpreting his or her own life and therefore transforming his or her own self-image.

The conversation with Elif was guided by the following open questions:

1. How did you become a teacher?
2. What are your own experiences of schooling?
3. What do you hope to achieve as a teacher?
4. How do your wider life experiences impact on your understanding of teaching?
5. What do you see as the moral and ethical responsibilities of a teacher?

The questions and a project outline were submitted to the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), who gave ethical approval for the study. The interview session included some exchange of views. As researchers, we provided information about our own transnational backgrounds and experiences, establishing trust and adding to the relaxed and professional environment. We are both people of colour, with migrant parents, and are currently working in a country other than the one in which we were born. We believe our positionality played a role in contributing to a relaxed atmosphere and establishing high levels of trust, which may have been different had the researchers been White Norwegians. The interview was conducted in both English and Norwegian. We encouraged Elif to code-switch whenever she wanted. She spoke mostly in English, some Norwegian and occasionally a few words in Turkish to make herself understood.

We realize that certain features of Elif's career presented in our study mean that we cannot offer her complete anonymity as a research subject. She may be recognized by other Norwegian educators and researchers. Elif was relaxed about this possibility and adamant that there was nothing in our conversation that she wished to hide, or anything that she required us to change, beyond using a pseudonym.

The interview was transcribed. For the purposes of this article, the transcript was coded using the constant-comparative method of analysis (Corbin and Strauss, 2007), where the researchers are open to any themes grounded in the data. There were five salient themes as we analysed the data through open and axial coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2007). For this article, we discuss the category language teaching and learning in relation to Elif's understanding of citizenship and belonging. The category consisted of three subcategories: Elif's identity as a language learner, Elif's identity as a language teacher and Elif's identity as an activist teacher.

## Findings and discussion

### Elif's background: a Turkish-Norwegian teacher

Elif was five years old when her family migrated from Turkey to Norway. She came with her mother. Her father had previously lived in Norway, being one of the first Turkish

workers to arrive in the 1970s. She describes her family as 'poor' and 'nomadic', meaning nomad shepherds in a rural district. Elif does not have any other family than her parents and siblings in Norway. The Turkish community in the city where she lives is obviously very transparent, since she observes that 'the other Turkish people are related to each other'. When asked what languages she knows, she mentions Norwegian, Turkish, English, some German (learned in high school) and reading skills in Arabic (for reading the Qur'an).

Elif stressed the importance of her parents' commitment to, and interest in, schooling, which enabled her to appreciate the value of education:

My parents told [me about] the school: 'we don't know Norwegian, they don't understand us, but you have to go there'; they never came to school meetings or celebrations ... nothing.

Despite her parents' lack of skills in Norwegian, and their physical absence from school meetings, they stressed that Elif must go to school because they understood how important education is to succeed in Norway, particularly in the case of someone who is considered a foreigner by the majority. When we discuss why she became a teacher, Elif explains that she has teachers in her family. Also, she claims her good relationship with her own teachers strongly influenced her choice of career.

### **Understanding language learning and teaching, citizenship and belonging**

In this section, we discuss Elif as a language learner, as a language teacher and as an activist teacher. We link these themes to Elif's sense of belonging and relate the latter two subcategories on her teaching career to discussions of citizenship.

#### *Elif's identity as a language learner*

Elif teaches students across all subjects in primary school, having specialized in Norwegian and in English as a foreign language (EFL) in her initial pre-service teacher education. However, throughout much of her childhood, she appears to have lacked confidence in her learning of Norwegian as a second language:

[I] didn't know Norwegian before high school; I was sure of that – that I can't write and express myself.

Yet we also know from the interview that at a very early age, Elif became competent in reading Norwegian, since she regularly read newspapers aloud to her father, who could not read in either Norwegian or Turkish:

One day I thought he [her father] was reading a Turkish newspaper, but the newspaper was upside down; I understood that he couldn't read. When I learnt to read, he used me as his reader; that made me love school and understand that this was an important thing to do.

Today, Elif is a published children's author, and she describes her language development and increased confidence:

I've now experienced that I can express myself in different ways; like, I've always written stuff, but I haven't shown that to people, because I thought I was not good at that.

Elif's experiences of language learning confirm research findings that suggest that teachers may not appreciate, or may fail to draw on, newly arrived students' language

backgrounds (Blackledge and Creese, 2010; Burner and Carlsen, 2019; Krulatz and Iversen, 2020). While Elif did not blame her teachers for her own lack of confidence, when she talked about her son's experiences of language learning and language use, she expressed concern for his somewhat sudden rejection of his mother tongue, Turkish, from the age of 4:

I was conscious that my son has his own mother tongue before I spoke Norwegian with him. He rejected to speak Norwegian for three weeks and spoke Turkish well. When he got to kindergarten, the first year, he still rejected to speak Norwegian. He was almost 4 years and said to me 'stop speaking Norwegian, I don't understand you'; I knew he understood; but at one point, he stopped speaking Turkish, rejected to speak Turkish, didn't even say 'mum' in Turkish and spoke fabulous Norwegian.

This suggests that education processes and underpinning language policies have a continuing impact on children's use of languages, identities and sense of belonging (Chinga-Ramirez, 2017). In a systematic review of teacher-child interactions with multilingual young children, the authors found several studies that suggest that multilingual children are exposed to unequal learning opportunities compared with their monolingual peers (Langeloo et al., 2019). Elif indicated that her own negative childhood feelings about language learning, together with her son's decision to stop using Turkish at such a young age, both motivate her to be a language teacher who recognizes and celebrates multilingualism and promotes inclusive citizenship and multiple belonging. This stands in contrast to the political climate illustrated by the Progress Party leader and former finance minister's view discussed in the opening section of this article, where 'foreign accent'-free Norwegian is both an identifier and likely prerequisite for recognition as 'Norwegian'. A recent national survey confirms that language ranks very high in Norway (95 per cent) as a factor for successful integration (Integreringsbarometeret, 2020). However, no matter how integrated Elif is, with excellent skills in Norwegian and her mother tongue, Turkish, and her employment as a teacher, she questions her sense of belonging in Norway and also in Turkey:

I've never been Turkish enough; I've never felt I have roots, like 'I'm Turkish!... I've visited my birthplace three times in my life, so I am kind of maybe searching for some roots; it's not that important to me, but you always seek where you come from, 'where do I belong?'

Studies indicate that stressing Norwegian language in education policy may overlook other factors that operate to exclude people (Chinga-Ramirez, 2017), for example, everyday and educational policy discourses about Norwegian values (Osler and Lybæk, 2014) and the subtle workings of race and racism within education policy (Fylkesnes, 2018; Osler and Lindquist, 2018).

In sum, Elif did not only have varying language learning experiences, but also she sees her son experiencing similar challenges and rejecting his mother tongue. A research-based approach to language learning is needed, where children's whole language repertoire is drawn upon when learning a new language (Cummins, 2016).

#### *Elif's identity as a language teacher*

Elif powerfully and poignantly expresses her motivation as a teacher, and her own ambiguous position within Norwegian society:

I've always had the fantasy to reach minority students, being a part of society but kind of not being too.

Here, Elif's personal mission to reach out to minoritized students chimes with that of the teachers in Osler's (1997) life history study of UK Black and South Asian teachers, many of whom referred to the deficiencies of their own schooling, and the desire to do better for other young students who suffer disadvantage, as being important factors in the decision to take up teaching. These teachers did not consciously set out to be role models, but to serve any group (for example, Asian girls, Black boys, refugee students) that they perceived to be vulnerable to negative societal or teacher stereotypes. Elif told us that she did not set out to be a role model for students with minority backgrounds, but that 'they found me'. Like the teachers in Osler's (1997) study, she believes that she can make sense of their experiences because of her own minority background and experiences as a child. Speaking in the second person and addressing students, Elif states:

I understand you [students with minority backgrounds] because I was like this when I was a child.

Elif's observation that she is part of Norwegian society and simultaneously outside it suggests that Elif, and others in Norway from visible minority backgrounds, may be under pressure to choose one identity over another. This in turn influences an individual's sense of belonging (Guibernau, 2013). We elected to refer to Elif as being Turkish-Norwegian, and Faten Mahdi Al-Hussaini as an Iraqi-Norwegian using a hyphenated identities, terms not widely used in Norway. We chose these terms to draw attention to the concept of multiple belonging. Education itself can be understood as a process of acquiring and extending an individual's range of identities. In reflecting on the concept of citizenship, identity and belonging, Osler and Starkey (2003) argue that an individual does not necessarily have to accept either/or but can elect to be both/and.

Elif reflects on the challenges she sometimes faces in reaching out to her peers (friends, colleagues), noting:

Sometimes I feel I've difficulties reaching people at my own age, but I'm so good with these small ones and teenagers. (Emphasis in interview)

She is critical of the education system, of policies and of personnel working within it, claiming that students with minority backgrounds are regarded as *avvik* – meaning 'abnormal' or 'a deviation from the norm'. This, for Elif, triggers a passionate and emotional response: 'It makes my heart cry every day'. As a multilingual educator working alongside White Norwegian colleagues in a school with a diverse and multilingual student intake, Elif seeks to remedy the situation by being aware of and presenting language diversity as normal. She says:

In my class we say 'good morning' in every language every morning. It's one way of demystifying funny speech sounds, and also to tell them that they have a teacher from another country; [but] *I'm still Norwegian*. (Our emphasis)

Interestingly, here her discourse is indicative both of a multilingual pedagogy (García and Flores, 2015) and of inclusive (both/and) citizenship (Osler and Starkey, 2003). She feels the need to stress to children that she is both Turkish *and* Norwegian. Effectively, in articulating a both/and identity, she is asserting that multiple belonging is also open to them.

In Norway, language policies have changed rapidly since the 1980s, from originally appreciating and providing first language support to newly arrived minority students in their early years of schooling, towards policies that demonstrate less

appreciation and fewer practices of first language support (Lindquist, 2015). In the past ten years, introductory classes for newly arrived students have become common, where they are placed in special classes or schools for around a year or more for all subjects. The value and quality of these classes have been called into question because of the social segregation of students and teachers' lack of competence in multilingual pedagogies (Burner and Carlsen, 2019). Elif observes:

Unfortunately, many teachers want the minority children who don't speak Norwegian out of the class. Then they can handle 15 students. Unfortunately, many teachers want that someone comes and picks them up. Also special needs children.

Here, she compares certain Norwegian teachers' negative attitudes towards minority students with similar attitudes and behaviour towards students with special needs. She suggests that her colleagues believe that such students impede ordinary class teaching and routines, and consequently that they would rather not have them in mainstream classes.

In sum, in her adulthood, Elif insists that she is a Norwegian, but at the same time she believes that her minority background is invaluable in reaching out to minority students in a school system that she believes holds them back.

#### *Elif's identity as an activist teacher*

One notable aspect of Elif's account of her professional role is her strong commitment to changing education for the better. She aims to enlighten her colleagues and, if possible, influence the wider school system. In this respect, she may be likened to many of the teachers in Casey's (1993) study of women teachers. Casey collected life histories from three groups of US teachers committed to change: Catholic nuns, secular Jewish women and Black women. In each case, it is clear that their voices might inform policymaking and deserve greater attention. Elif suggests that changing children is not difficult, compared to enabling change among adults. Interestingly, she states:

If I reached two teachers that didn't like me, I'd done something that could change, because influencing children is not so difficult, but changing adults ...

We understand from the full conversation that Elif attaches greater importance to enabling change among her colleagues than being liked or being popular. Her use of 'teachers that didn't like me' is ambiguous here, but in the interview as a whole, she talks about women 'friends' who overlook or deny her minority background as people who fail to fully accept her for who she is:

I meet teachers saying 'this is how we should do it; this is Norway'; I also understand that this is Norway; I act like a Norwegian – maybe much more than a Norwegian.

Osler's (1997) study of minoritized teachers included some individuals whose job it was to introduce curriculum change and reform at school level, working collaboratively with their colleagues to enable greater equity for minoritized students. Although these teachers expressed great commitment to their work, some expressed concern, like Elif, that some mainstream colleagues failed to recognize their responsibility to *all* students, either failing to acknowledge the particular needs of students from minority ethnic backgrounds or seeing them as someone else's responsibility.

In Elif's case, concern for change does not limit itself to colleagues, but extends to the school system in Norway, and particularly to the needs of developing bilingual students:

What concerns me is if the school system starts getting the wrong focus. The children [with minority backgrounds] don't get the amount of instruction they need, and they drop out. The system has to take care of that.

This relates to changing language policies in Norway, where the support and instruction of children with minority backgrounds is now officially recognized to be of varying quality (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2016). Furthermore, statistics reveal a disproportionate number of students speaking languages other than Norwegian or Sami at home failing to complete upper secondary school (Meld. St. 6, 2012–13).

Elif lives in a city with a high level of diversity: one-third of the population has a minority language background. However, there are very few teachers with a minority language background in the teacher workforce. There are no official data on numbers of teachers with a minority language background in Norway. From our experience, there are more classroom assistants than qualified teachers with such a background. Elif remarks on this:

They write in job ads that they want minorities to apply, but where are all these minority teachers?

Elif implies that the education authorities feel that they have fulfilled their duty by placing this kind of advertisement, but that there is not a coordinated and sustained effort between school leaders, education authorities and universities to encourage the recruitment and retention of minorities into teaching, which would necessarily include support and encouragement of individuals already employed to work within communities, and provision of routes into teaching for those currently working as classroom assistants.

In sum, Elif, like any teacher with a migrant, transnational or other visible minority background, faces personal and professional choices when she observes injustices and inequalities among minoritized students. She can opt to do little, 'keep her head down' and attempt to blend in with the mainstream. This choice does not necessarily guarantee full acceptance, but it may make a teacher's day-to-day professional life manageable. Alternatively, she can take on an activist role, forging a difficult path in a society which generally values and respects both conformity and consensus. Elif's sense of social justice, and her educational and life experiences, including her role as a mother, lead her to the latter. In this respect, she finds a degree of commonality with another migrant teacher, Veronica, a woman of Ghanaian heritage living and working in London, who originally placed a high degree of trust in her fellow teachers' professionalism, assuming it would result in equitable treatment for students from minority backgrounds. Her life history reveals that it was her experience as a mother, and her eventual willingness to learn from the experiences of her own sons, that led her to stand up for justice (Osler, 2017).

## Concluding remarks

This article has revealed aspects of Elif's life journey and considered how her minority background has influenced her encounter with the Norwegian school system. This

encounter has, in turn, helped shape her vision for her students' development, both as language learners and as citizens. We do not claim that Elif is typical of all teachers with minority backgrounds, but we believe that life stories such as the one presented here shed light on migrant or minority teachers whose experiences and contributions remain under-researched in the Nordic region and across Europe. In the Nordic context, where the ideology of equality (Chinga-Ramirez, 2017) may prevent both individuals and organizations from fully naming and recognizing racial injustice and structural inequalities (Bangstad, 2015; Gullestad, 2004; Osler and Lindquist, 2018), these life histories may be particularly enlightening. In addition, as illustrated by the representative episode in the opening paragraph of this article, there has been an increased focus on national values in the political discourse in Norway, across Europe and beyond (Guibernau, 2013; Osler, 2020; Reid et al., 2009). Thus, discussing the impact of exclusive identities and belonging on education in the Norwegian and wider Nordic context is particularly difficult, since to many it appears counterintuitive.

We conclude with four key implications arising from the findings in this article. First, teachers with minority backgrounds need to be recognized as a resource which might inform educational policy and practice. Elif shows how such teachers can use their minority backgrounds to enhance minority students' language learning and sense of belonging. Elif's 'fantasy', and that of other teachers from minority backgrounds, to reach out to minority students, needs to be acknowledged and supported by their leaders and colleagues. Their personal and professional experiences might not only inform education processes, but also, following Varghese et al. (2009), enable the education community, and the teaching profession in particular, to better understand ourselves and the processes of (language) teaching and learning. Such teachers' motivation and engagement may invigorate the profession and support other teachers in recognizing themselves as change agents.

Second, and importantly, the language learning classroom offers a space to challenge the dominant but problematic aphorisms, 'we are all the same' and 'we don't see difference'. Following from this, multilingualism needs to be used as a resource in every classroom.

Third, Elif's testimony concerning teachers who prefer not to have children with minority backgrounds in their classes is something we have already heard about anecdotally, but it is an uncomfortable assertion, and, no doubt for this reason, it remains under-researched. It requires the attention of researchers, school leaders and teacher unions if it is to be properly understood and addressed.

Finally, and critically, Elif's life history points to the need for further research on how minority teachers' backgrounds shape and influence everyday language and citizenship teaching, particularly in relation to minority students.

## Notes on the contributors

**Tony Burner** is a professor at the University of South-Eastern Norway, Faculty of Humanities, Sports and Educational Sciences. He has written several articles and book chapters on diversity and multilingualism, among others, 'A critical analysis of an innovative approach: A case of diversity in Norwegian education' (with Heidi Biseth, 2016, *SAGE Open*) and 'Teacher qualifications, perceptions and practices concerning multilingualism at a school for newly arrived students in Norway' (with Christian Carlsen, 2019, *International Journal of Multilingualism*).

**Audrey Osler** has written extensively on human rights and racial justice in education and on teachers' life narratives. Her most recent book is *Human Rights and Schooling: An ethical framework for teaching for social justice* (2016, Teachers College Press). She is currently working on a new book, *Where Are You From? No, Where Are You Really From?*, which examines empire and migration, drawing on historical narrative and memoir, to be published by Virago Press in 2022.

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