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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Feminist ethnography as 'Troublemaker' in educational research: analysing barriers of social justice

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this article is on the history and current trends of feminist ethnography in Finland. It highlights the impact of feminist ethnography in Finnish educational research and illustrates how feminist ethnography has succeeded in asking novel questions and developing methodologies by drawing on multiple feminist theories. The article is based on a review of studies, selected to represent the multiplicity of themes, theoretical approaches and methodological epiphanies, as well as earlier analyses and memories of researchers who launched feminist educational ethnography in Finland. Drawing predominantly from the British feminist educational ethnography, in Finland feminist ethnography in education took its first steps in the 1990s and achieved a stable position in the early 2000s. Feminist ethnography has contributed to a debate on social justice by highlighting the hidden modes of discrimination and exclusion in educational institutions, thus 'troubling' the national self-image as a forerunner of equality and social justice.

Introduction

In this article, we analyse how feminist ethnography has contributed to the scholarly debates on social justice by 'troubling' educational cultures in one of the Nordic welfare states, Finland. Several scholars have used the concept to 'trouble' (i.e. Butler 1990; Kumashiro 2002) as an analytical tool. In her book *School Trouble,* Deborah Youdell (2011) encouraged researchers and educators to act as troublemakers; to contest the normative ideas and assumptions, the 'business as usual' of education, and we have taken up this invitation. Examples of 'troubling' educational cultures and practices discussed in this paper include the notions of gender, sexuality, social class, race, ethnicity, nationality and disability.

In international comparisons, education in Finland has achieved both a high standard and a high degree of educational equality; in consequence, Finland's educational structure and practices have generated international admiration. However, educational inequalities related to economic, social, and cultural dimensions still exist; young people of working class, ethnic minority or special education background tend to end up on culturally less valued educational routes more often than white middle-class able-bodied youth (e.g. FINEEC 2019). By the term 'Finnish exceptionalism' Anna Rastas (2012) denotes the collective national self-image as a forerunner in equality and democracy that obstructs efforts to address issues of racism in education. Along the same line, we follow the argument that similar exceptionalism operates when gender, class or any other dimensions of social categories are concerned. We argue that the idea of Finnish exceptionalism, which obscures the view to social and cultural processes of inclusion and exclusion, is the very reason why critical, feminist ethnographic approach is needed in educational research.

In this article, our aim is to highlight how feminist ethnography has contributed to Finnish research on social justice in education. We are a group of feminist ethnographers, representing three academic generations. We have collaborated for decades in various projects, networks, and teaching tasks in the field of feminist ethnography in Finland and internationally. When writing this article, we have returned to reflect on our collective history and what we have carried with us in our further scholarly work, and what the next generation of scholars have developed further. We start by elaborating relations between ethnography and feminist theories and continue by describing how feminist ethnography came to address educational research in Finland. Then, we open up theoretic-methodological discussions, examining how feminist ethnography has been utilised in analysing the social and cultural processes of inclusions and exclusions in education, over the years. We explore these discussions through feminist ethnographies, which in their own time have troubled taken-for-granted views framing everyday life in educational institutions. We do not provide a systematic review (Mazenod 2017), nor a meta-ethnography (Kakos and Fritsche 2019), but instead we introduce the analysis of selected studies that illustrate various ways to put theories to work and actuate methodological multiplicity. We introduce four content and methodology-specific themes, where Finnish exceptionalism in education has been challenged by feminist ethnography. Most of the research examples are based on our own studies. However, in order to provide insight on the recent theoretical and methodological trends in Finnish feminist ethnography on education, we have broadened the examination to studies where we have seen potential for promoting social justice in education and society more widely.

The four themes introduce the use of feminist ethnography for: (1) troubling gender at school; (2) troubling social class at school and education in a classless society; (3) troubling the nation, the myth of a tolerant youth, and colonial knowledge in education; and (4) troubling the success story of Finnish special-needs education. In the concluding section, we reflect on the impact of feminist ethnography on Finnish educational research.

Feminist ethnography studying social justice in education in Finland: on its history and current conditions

Ethnographic research on children and youth has a relatively long and multidisciplinary tradition in Finland, and by the 1990s it had achieved a somewhat stable position in

sociology, youth studies, and gender studies. In the 1980s, however, educational research still largely focused on teaching and learning processes, drawing predominantly on theories and methodologies of learning and developmental psychology. Emerging sociology of education largely drew on quantitative or interview studies (see Antikainen, Rinne, and Koski 2000/2021). Establishment of ethnographic research in the field of education and training can be traced back to the 1990s, and we argue that feminist scholars played a crucial role in launching ethnography as a plausible research approach in education. This did not happen without a struggle, but it is reasonable to claim that ethnography has solidified its position in the field of educational research during the last thirty years (Mietola et al. 2016; Lahelma, Tolonen, and Lappalainen 2022). Some rough calculations can be presented to confirm this. Between 1999 and 2019, 44 ethnographic PhD studies were conducted together in the fields of education, sociology of education and youth studies, 31 of them during 2010−2019. The vast majority, that is, 27 of all, were strongly informed by feminist theorisation. During the same period, more than 30 articles by Finnish authors drawing from feminist ethnography were published in the journals *Gender and Education*, *Ethnography and Education* and *Nordic Studies in Education* (see Mietola et al. 2016; Lahelma, Öhrn, and Weiner 2021).

Within this time frame, feminist ethnography has developed into a research approach with its own identifiable characteristics (Skeggs 2001). The starting points are in feminist theorisations that draw from perspectives of different marginal groups being raised in the context of cultural radicalisation of the 1960s and 70s. Women's, racialised persons', gender minority, disability and queer rights movements, and post-colonialism took steps from 'otherness' towards criticising hierarchical social orders, in which the 'first', powerful perspective is that of the white, Western, male, heterosexual, middle-class, healthy, and capable adult. Feminist theories also reject the unambiguous order and idea of universal truths based on objective knowledge, emphasising that truths are always partial, situational, and open to re-interpretation (e.g. Haraway 1988; Harding 2016). These principles have allowed for a more subtle analysis of discriminatory and unfair practices in social relations. For us, feminist theories and methodologies form an essential part of ethnography and work for analysing differences and hidden injustices in educational policies and practices, and this is the perspective from which we are writing now. The main argument of our examination is that feminist ethnography has had a key role within the Finnish academic debate concerning social justice of education. Particularly, it has challenged once dominant understandings of what counts as social justice and revealed the complexities involved in thinking about and making social justice happen.

In order to lay the starting points for our discussion in relation to how we approach social justice – and the possibilities opening up from feminist ethnography in examining this – we deploy Sharon Gewirtz's (2006) argument for a contextualised approach to understanding social justice. Rather than providing a strict definition of social justice, a set of criteria or policies for social justice, Gewirtz draws attention to the contexts where realisation of justice takes place and how in these contexts 'justice concerns are always […] likely to be mediated by other kinds of concerns that motivate actors' (3). On the one hand, social justice concerns may compete or conflict with other norms related to the functioning of the institution. On the other hand, agents within these institutions have limited control over the dominant discourses, policies or economic constraints that set boundaries for action. On top of this, social justice itself is a complex

and multidimensional entity, meaning that 'pursuing certain dimensions of social justice will inevitably mean neglecting, or sacrificing others' (3). We as ethnographers in education consider that feminist ethnography allows one to recognise the kinds of complexities, tensions and even conflicts present in educational contexts; not only this, but such complexities actually force one to analyse social justice in the contextualised manner proposed by Gewirtz (2006).

Ethnographic fieldwork has forced us to consider the multi-layered nature of social justice by pointing out that social justice is not only about redistributive justice (i.e. equal access to education and learning). In addition, for example, social justice is also about the justice of recognition (i.e. who can experience belonging in schools). It has also given us an opportunity to engage with the tensions raised between different interpretations of social justice. We have followed processes where the different approaches have been put into dialogue as professionals have negotiated sometimes difficult decisions concerning educational practices. In addition, ethnographic fieldwork has given us opportunities to become first-hand witnesses to the balancing act of promoting socially just practices as the professionals working in educational institutions negotiate their own values, targets and priorities within the frame of set policies, resources and historically formed cultures.

This mediated and potentially conflicting nature of practices becomes visible to the ethnographer, for example, in those typical moments where they note the differences between how the research participants talk about their values and targets and what the actual day-to-day practice of schooling looks like. In the following, we will discuss in detail the ways in which feminist ethnography has troubled dominant approaches to social justice in education in Finland, and how, while doing this, the understanding of the complexity and multidimensionality of social justice has developed. Our examination will highlight questions of the kind raised by ethnographic studies and how these have allowed producing novel representations that have challenged the celebrated hegemonic representation of the socially just Finnish education system.

Troubling gender at school: feminist ethnography pioneering the perspectives of social justice in educational research

Starting from the 1980s, gender studies inspired research focused on personal experiences by dismantling the relation between the researcher and the subject of the research, as well as the ideal of objective research. Politics and ethics steered the research, starting from the formulation of research questions and efforts towards more equal research methods. It meant that reciprocity, honesty, accountability, responsibility and/or equality was acknowledged in the research process in order to treat participants with respect (Skeggs 2001). The hidden forms of oppression of women and girls were disclosed through listening to women's experiences and paying attention to the structures, cultures and history of the society, as well as the habits and practices that tended to remain unquestioned. Feminists brought into scientific discussions the new conceptualizations of equality, justice, differences and diversities. Hierarchies and power relations between various categories were analysed in varying ways within different traditions.

It has been argued that feminist ethnography started by supplementing the earlier research (Visweswaran 1994; Behar and Gordon 1995) by addressing questions from a

standpoint that was male-dominated. In Finland, the bias towards boys in the youth studies of the 1980s was brought up in the field of girl studies (i.e. Topo 1988; Näre and Lähteenmaa 1992). Within the mainstream educational sciences, gender was at that time typically analysed as a taken-for-granted dichotomy, often a variable in quantitative analysis, if at all. Feminist ethnographers in education paid attention to the girls in the classroom but also started to trouble the category of gender. Within Nordic feminist studies, an early understanding of girls as silent but well-achieving students was troubled in the late 1980s along with ethnographic methodologies which provided more varied understanding of girls, boys and gender (see i.e. Lahelma, Öhrn, and Weiner 2021).

In 1993, the first large ethnographic research project that drew on feminist theorisations called 'Citizenship, Difference and Marginality in Schools – with Special Reference to Gender' was launched (i.e. Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma 2000; Gordon et al. 2006). In this contextualised, cross-cultural, comparative and collective project, taken-for-granted ideas of equal education were troubled in ethnographic studies in upper secondary schools in Helsinki and London. The analytic concepts for informal and physical layers of school, that were introduced in the project, troubled the taken-for-granted understanding of the centrality of the official processes of teaching and learning as the main focus of educational research. Everyday processes and practices of schools in contributing and challenging the differences and construction of citizenship and marginalities were explored through the lenses of feminist theorisations such as R. W. Connell (1987), Judith Butler (1990), and Barry Thorne (1993), which troubled the contemporary view on girls and boys as two distinct groups, based on biological differences. The research project highlighted gender, in intersection with other categories of difference, as produced and reproduced in pedagogical practices and gendered styles in student cultures (i.e. Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma 2000; Tolonen 2001). For example, norms and ideals concerning gender and possibilities to enact agency in school were analysed by Gordon (2006) in a study of a group of girls that she named 'bold, brainy and beautiful'.

A group with tens of PhD students and other researchers gathered around the project. We claim that, in Finland, many of the theoretical and methodological innovations in current ethnographic work in educational institutions can be traced back to the extensive work conducted in and around the project (Mietola et al. 2016). The collaboration continued later on in other Nordic research projects and networks (see further in Beach, Gordon, and Lahelma 2003; Arnesen et al. 2014; Holm 2018). We now give examples of some of the further studies.

In Finland, a 'model' country for gender equality, social policies emphasise gender neutral citizenship (Anttonen 2001). However, for example physical education at schools, was typically gender segregated still in the beginning of the 2000s. A study of Berg and Lahelma (2010) focused on PE teachers' remarks on bodies and gender. The methodological framework was developed by combining feminist conceptualisations such as *gender order* (Connell 1987), *gender system* (Hirdman 1988), and *border work* (Thorne 1993) with Pierre Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) concept habitus. The study highlighted how gender-based grouping in PE reproduced a hierarchical order, benefitting male students and male teachers. By analysing two ethnographic datasets generated over two decades, they showed persistence in gendered views concerning students' and teachers' abilities and potential.

Other examples draw from troubling the processes of bullying and harassment in schools. This topic has often been studied with a psychological approach in which the problem has been seen in individual students and their varying roles. Through the analyses of gendered and embodied aspects in informal youth cultures at schools, the topic started to be analysed as a process both collective and gendered. The analyses focused for example on the ways that boys have to deal with violence and masculine hierarchies (Tolonen 1998). In addition, closer and intensive qualitative analysis of gendered relations reflected the fine line between gender-based harassment and play-acting fight (Lahelma 2002). This shows the possibilities of critical ways that feminist ethnographers have discussed issues around gender and sexuality.

In her ethnographic study in an institution of vocational education in the technical field, Penni Pietilä troubled, for example, adults' gendered and stereotypical expectations concerning working-class boys' lack of willingness to study literacy skills (Pietilä et al. 2021). She analysed critically a workshop in which adult male leaders used gangsta rap and utilised swearing strategically, as a means of performing a working-class ethos, with the expectation of male bonding with the students.

During the last decades, the spaces of school have widened because of digitalisation. In the late 1990s, ethnographers reflected on a girl who looked out of the window, being mentally outside of the school space, beyond the reach of both the teacher and the researcher (Gordon et al. 2005), protecting her 'privacy mode'. Today, an ethnographer, permitted by a girl to follow the use of her internet visits in Tumblr photo stream during lessons, can follow how the girl travels to pictures of desiring bodies in affective spaces (Deleuze and Guattari 2003) of sexual cultures far away from the school walls, whilst trying to follow how the teacher explains the body's preparation for having children (Paakkari and Rautio 2019).

The first two decades of Finnish feminist school ethnography were dominated by materialist and post-structural theories, which are still utilised in many studies. Since then, however, the theoretical landscape has spread towards new materialism and posthumanism. Several feminist ethnographers have been inspired for example by the ideas of Karen Barad (2007) and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987). Tuija Huuki (2016) troubled traditional psychological research on bullying by looking at everyday life at preschool located in rural Northern Finland through the lenses of new materialist feminism and posthumanism. She analysed gendered and sexualised power relations in children's play by utilising the concepts of *apparatus* (Barad 2007) and *assemblage* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). She highlighted how children's play is affected by the local context and its history. In terms of social justice, the particular relevance of her study was in showing that with tiny interventions in children's play, an educator can release the existing capacities of children to transform gendered power relations and make space for more equal gender relations.

Feminist ethnographers have problematised and furthered the exploration of gender equality and displayed the pitfalls that official educational conceptualisations of gender fall into. Even if numbers and statistics still produce gender as dichotomy (see i.e. Lahelma, Lappalainen and Kurki, 2020), we propose that feminist ethnography has had its impact on formal gender discourses. Ethnographic research has for decades helped to analyse gender as habits, repetitions, and possibilities for change, and troubled the constructions of femininities and masculinities in the practices and processes of education. Even if gender was the most important category to analyse in the early feminist studies,

many researchers were interested in other categories of difference, such as social class, ethnicity and disability already in early ethnographic studies, in intersection with gender.

Troubling social class at school and education in a classless society

From the 1990s on, in the fields of social and educational research, the concept of social class was long seen as a 'dinosaur of the past' (see Adkins and Skeggs 2004; Skeggs 2004; Tolonen 2008). Additionally, in public discourse, Nordic exceptionalism supports the idea that social classes do not exist. This idea might have also been supported by individuals' personal experiences, in which the sense of belonging to a certain class may have blurred (cf. Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst 2001).

Feminist research started to question these assumptions. Important for Finnish feminist ethnographers in education was the work of Beverley Skeggs and others in the book *Feminism after Bourdieu* (see Skeggs 2004; Adkins and Skeggs 2004). For Skeggs (2004), social class is understood as a process taking place in the fields of everyday life. Class subjectivities are 'inscribed' through cultural evaluations, and not just in discourse but also in people's bodies through their habits and behaviour (cf. Skeggs 2004, 2–15; Adkins and Skeggs 2004). Furthermore, for Skeggs, 'the value of the self' is learned, and for the middle and upper classes the value is more self-evident than for the working class.

One major characteristic of class-related feminist research is also the focus on intersectionality: the exploration of the various categories of difference intersecting with each other (Crenshaw 1989; Brah and Phoenix 2004; Hill Collins and Bilge 2016). This means that though feminist ethnography utilises theorisations on gender, the focus is inevitably wider (Skeggs 2001, 429). Internationally, the crucial opening was made by feminist reflexive analysis on social class, influenced by Pierre Bourdieu with an added feminist flavour (cf. Adkins and Skeggs 2004). It understood social class as lived and experienced class, combined with intersecting differences. Thinking this way class is not considered rigidly as a theoretical structure but as an embodied process that changes and becomes intertwined with gender and other differences that become active in practices and social relations (Skeggs 2001, 2004). In the Finnish educational research, these ideas had a huge impact: gender was no longer seen as the primary determinant of feminist ethnography but other categorizations such as class, race and ethnicity as well as locality (referring to urban neighbourhoods or rural regions, where young people grow up) came to be seen as intersecting with gender in everyday practices in education (i.e. Käyhkö 2006; Tolonen 2008; Berg 2012).

In Finland, where there is a tendency to neutralise the social differences and cherish Finnish exceptionalism (Rastas 2012), ethnographers using feminist theories have been pioneers while theorising in fields such as social-class studies, post-colonial studies and disability studies. Feminist theorisation has had an important effect on realising the 'multi-dimensional nature of justice' as well as 'tensions between different dimensions of justice', meaning that there are gendered, classed and racialised differences which need to be examined in the analyses of education and schooling (cf. Gewirtz 2006; Tolonen 2008; Rastas 2007; Mietola 2014).

To give an example of this kind analysis, there are several ethnographic pieces of work which highlight the importance of gender, class and other differences. For example, Mari Käyhkö's work (2006) on working-class girls' educational paths in vocational education

highlights the gendered rationale of the girls choosing their education as cleaners as being sensible to them, even if they were ending in low-paid cleaning professions (cf. Willis 1978; Griffin 1986). The class experience in the everyday practices of their education, as well as gendered class identity are an important basis of analysis in her work. The girls in question based their value of the self and ideas of a good life on different grounds than those of middle-class values. Their sense of a good life was not a well-planned and dynamic career: the girls in question valued a short education, practical work, and they dreamed of having a family at an early age.

In Tarja Tolonen's work (2005), and in the work of Berg, Anttila, and Härmä (2018) on the processes of educational choice-making, social class, gender and locality played an important role in the ways young people saw and situated themselves in the social and physical maps. They had to make sense of their life at an early stage and make decisions about whether they would stay or leave their home town behind and have more possibilities in their educational choices. Many young people with working-class backgrounds valued their social relations in their hometown over careers elsewhere. Tolonen (2008), Käyhkö (2006) and Berg, Anttila, and Härmä (2018) see the concept of lived class as a valuable tool for describing young people's and young adults' everyday lives, allowing researchers to make sense of young people's everyday choices, and their lived social and gendered relations both in educational institutions and in heading for the labour market (see also Tolonen and Aapola-Kari 2022). This is a more sensitive way to understand young people's classed and gendered experiences, in comparison to a more traditional understanding of class as a theoretical background category determining their futures. These studies highlight how social class is intertwined with gender, and is reborn, questioned, and reformed in local relations.

Thus, questioning the 'old paradigm' of class as only a background variable, as well as thoughts of social class as a 'dinosaur of the past' highlight a new kind of feminist understanding of social class, through their combined understanding of ethnographic field and theory. This understanding 'troubles' the alleged understanding of school as a neutral 'or monocultural' space for learning and highlights how social justice may be examined in a different light. School is not monocultural in the light of social class, gender, locality or ethnicity, to which we turn next.

Troubling nation-making, the myth of a tolerant youth, and colonial knowledge in education

Whereas the first feminist ethnographic studies in education were especially focused on troubling normative views on gender, feminist ethnographers soon broadened their scope and turned their gaze towards the multiple social and cultural processes in education, in which existing (often unequal) power relations were reproduced. One of the issues was multicultural education.

Finland is a country where cherishing the image of a monocultural society was possible until 1990. Before then, Finland was mainly a country of immigration and migration policy was relatively strict and exclusive (Lepola 2000). Moreover, Finland was (and still is) a predominantly white country where minority ethnicities were integrated into the hegemonic culture and language community. Particularly, for Indigenous groups of Sami people and Finnish Roma this has happened through decades of assimilating

policies and practices – including custodies of Roma children or boarding schools for Sami children – resulting, for example, in generations of people losing their own languages (i.e. Lehtola 2014; Friman-Korpela 2014; Helakorpi 2021). However, the national narrative has been blind to colonial complicity, and Finland has been seen as a small country, with a history of struggling between the superpowers of Sweden and Russia (Keskinen 2021).

When, due to the changes in the geo-political conditions around 1990, migration increased, and the national education system, based on the idea of cultural homogeneity, faced a new situation. Finnishness (including language, whiteness, and a nominal Christianity) as a norm was called into question (Lappalainen 2006). Debate concerning education adopted a liberal version of multiculturalism (Lappalainen 2006), which operates with the benevolent discourse of tolerance (Hage 2000) but does not challenge the privileged position of the hegemonic culture (Anthias and Lloyd 2002). Even though research on racism has repeatedly shown that racism framed the everyday life of children and young people (i.e. Rastas 2007), it was long considered an inappropriate topic in education (Souto 2011). Feminist ethnography was a forerunner in troubling cultural practices in educational institutions, highlighting how pedagogy aiming to promote multicultural understanding and tolerance easily reproduced existing power relations benefiting the hegemonic majority.

Feminist ethnography has made 'trouble' by strongly contributing with critical approaches, such as post-colonial theories, race-critical studies, and intersectionality in the field of educational research. Drawing on the concept of the nation-space, Sirpa Lappalainen (2009) analysed how nationality, gender and ethnicity intertwined in children's peer relations and pedagogical practices of preschool classes in the beginning of the millennium. Her study troubled Finnishness as a norm by understanding the national curriculum as a script in the performance of the nation-space with a neo-conservative ethos (Lappalainen 2009; see also Gordon and Holland 2003). She highlighted the crucial role of the embodied practices (such as meal choices or table manners) when belonging to the nation-space was evaluated by children. Belonging was also colour-based, Finnishness was conceptualised as self-evident whiteness, and children who did not easily fit into the colour palette of the Finnish nation-space were painfully aware of the exclusive power of colour. Still, they avoided victimisation by actively negotiating with and resisting the narrow borders of the Finnish nation-space. The concept of the nation-space highlighted racialising forms of exclusion in pre-primary education in the time of liberal multi-culturalism (Anthias and Lloyd 2002), which did not even provide concepts for discussing racism. Lappalainen's study contributed to the discussion on social justice of recognition (Gewirtz 2006) by suggesting the movement towards an openly anti-racist agenda in pre-primary education.

Later on, Anne-Mari Souto (2011) continued the tradition of ethnography in education established by feminist ethnographers when explicitly addressing the silenced topic of racism at school. She conducted her study at a lower secondary school located in a city which, in the previous decade, had hit the media headlines due to the organised, violent, and openly racist group of skinheads who targeted immigrants and anti-racist and anti-fascist groups (i.e. Perho 2010). Drawing on theorisations developed in the fields of sociology and cultural studies (Essed 1991; Hall 1992), Souto operated with the concept of everyday racism, meaning routines, habitual practices and attitudes

through which racism is established and reproduced in everyday interaction. Her results highlighted the hidden ways that everyday racism operates, challenging the myth of youth as being free from prejudices and flexible in their social relations. While a shift towards the anti-racist agenda as a route towards equality and social justice in education was suggested already by previous research (Lappalainen 2009), Souto's study was crucial in troubling education by positioning her work within the anti-racist scholarly debate. In subsequent years, a rich body of feminist ethnography was published in education, in which policies, practices and representations concerning racializing policies and practices had been troubled (i.e. Riitaoja 2013; Kurki 2019; Armila, Rannikko, and Sotkasiira 2017). However, ethnographic research focusing on questions of how the education system addresses national minorities has, until recently, been relatively rare.

The following two recent studies that we introduce here highlight perspectives of two national minorities with a history of oppression, discrimination and assimilation. When analysing the policies and practices concerning Roma and Travellers in basic education, Jenni Helakorpi (2021) expanded her research context to cover three Nordic Countries. She examined policies and practices aiming to promote the basic education of national minorities of the Roma and Travellers in Finland, Sweden and Norway by focusing on power relations. In her methodological framework, Helakorpi combined approaches on feminism (i.e. Ahmed 2017) and post structuralism (i.e. Lather 2007; St. Pierre 2000) with critical theories on race and whiteness (i.e. Goldberg 2015; Lentin 2005; Keskinen and Andreassen 2017). Her research highlighted how the educational policies downplayed existing discrimination and racism by guiding the gaze towards Roma and Traveller pupils, families, and cultures as inadequate in terms of education. She also made visible the complex processes of knowledge production by which Roma and Travellers were made responsible for their own racialisation. The study troubled educational policies concerning Roma and Travellers by arguing that the constantly repeated discourse of the 'need to increase knowledge' about Roma and Travellers turns the focus away from structures, thus is not able to tackle racialisation.

Concerning the problematics of representation, feminist ethnography has highlighted the incompleteness of produced knowledge and truths and questioned the attempts to produce great all-round theories. This incompleteness has been introduced by various exploratory and alternative ways of performing academic knowledge. Such alternative ways have striven to trouble both the 'colonial gaze' of the ethnographic researcher and ethnography (Visweswaran 1994). Feminist and indigenous theorisations (i.e. Braidotti 2013; Barad 2007; Todd 2016), post-qualitative (Koro-Ljungberg 2016) and auto-ethnographic approaches (i.e. Adams and Holman Jones 2015) are utilised in a study, authored by Hanna Guttorm (2020). Identifying herself as Sami and an academic, who has learnt Sami language as an adult, Guttorm examines cultural knowledge and the learning process of Northern Sami language. She takes seriously the idea of Laurel Richardson and Elisabeth Adams St. Pierre (2005), who argue for *writing as a method of inquiry,* and makes seeking an alternative, creative manner of academic writing one of the explicit aims of her work (Guttorm 2020, 59). She ends up writing her study in the format of a 'love letter' for her departed father, an active and recognised member of Northern Sami community. Guttorm troubles academic knowledge production by arguing first that the ways of academic knowledge

production are entirely colonial, considering indigenous ways of knowing as inadequate. Secondly, she points out that various 'post approaches', when challenging 'traditional' Western ontology, still ignore the long history of holistic and non-human-centered ontology of indigenous groups.

Troubling special needs education through feminist ethnography

Internationally, critical research notions concerning learning results and over-representation of working-class and racialised minority students in special education and stigmatising effects of segregated special education started already during the 1960s. These examinations troubled the dominant understanding of special education as self-evidently promoting social justice and urged researchers and policymakers to consider whether dominant ways of organising special education could actually reproduce inequality. The first accounts of critical, sociological perspectives concerning special needs education in Finland were published during the mid-1980s and early 1990s, making visible students' experiences of stigmatisation and how special education has structured the educational and labour-market paths of students (i.e. Kivirauma 1995; Jahnukainen 1997). These studies provided important critical perspectives for the academic discussion concerning special education in Finland and they were radically rearranging the relationship between social justice and special education. As the title of Jauhiainen and Kivirauma's (1997) article asks whether school can be viewed as disabling, the studies tried to provide answers to the question of why the education system committed to equality and social justice produced negative experiences and marginalising paths to some students. The question was highlighted even more during the 1990s as the policy commitment to inclusive education was reflected on by all key steering documents in education. The terminology of special education started to change (i.e. inclusion instead of integration; students with special needs instead of special education students), and the call for examination was whether practice would change along with this policy reform. However, the picture drawn of the Finnish special needs education and its everyday practices still remained fragmented, and many of the studies at that time often focused on the individual students by ending up producing descriptive categorisations concerning typical special needs students.

This was the context and starting point for the first feminist ethnographic studies on special needs education in Finland in the early years of the twenty-first century. The studies aimed to trouble the somewhat taken-for-granted narrative of the huge change taking place in special education after the introduction of an inclusion policy. They set out to examine what was actually going on in schools and how the changes affected the historically formed, often segregating practices of special education, social positioning and experiences of students receiving special education. Instead of focusing on students 'with special education needs', their characteristics, needs and diagnoses, the researchers were committed to turning the focus toward everyday practices and how these contributed to the construction of some students as ones 'with special needs'. The change of perspective towards everyday life of schooling felt particularly important in the context of special education where both research and practice were largely rooted in a psycho-medical paradigm and dominated by the perspectives of professionals. This change of perspective was achieved through ethnographic fieldwork: by sitting in the

classrooms, hallways, school yards and teachers' meetings, by talking with and listening to students, teachers and other professionals present in the institutions (Mietola 2014; Niemi 2015; Kauppila, Lappalainen, and Mietola 2021; Hakala 2010).

In order to trouble the difference between individuals having 'special needs' and others without them, and to challenge perspectives approaching these needs as the individual's symptoms separated from the structures and practices diagnosing and 'treating' these needs, the researchers have drawn theorisations from disability studies (i.e. Campbell 2009; Goodley 2014; Davis 1995). Reetta Mietola's (2014) study focused on the concept of 'special needs' by aiming to trouble the self-evidence of this term. During the fieldwork, she looked into the processes by which difference between 'ordinary' (or 'normal') students and those 'with special needs' was negotiated and reproduced in the daily practices of lower secondary school. The study made visible how the understanding of an essential difference between the students 'with special needs' and students considered not to have them was repeated and reaffirmed both in the educational practices of the school and in the student culture. Ethnographic fieldwork permitted examining both processes where the symbolic distance between the 'ordinary' students and the students with 'special needs' was being constructed and how the students 'with special needs' built and negotiated understanding of themselves as learners by resisting stereotypic categorisations. This in turn allowed the study to argue that, while achievement of educational equality requires provision of specialised support, from the social justice point of view this provision needs to be critically examined in relation to the questions of belonging and recognition – not only in relation to educational achievement.

Mietola's ethnographic study can be described as policy ethnography, which evidently also describes Katariina Hakala's (2010) study as well, in which cultural and historical discourses were studied in governing vocational special education and training in three institutions offering education for persons with intellectual disability in Finland. The state-maintained vocational special schools were administratively merged with vocational special schools of non-governmental not-for-profit organisations in 2009. The analysis of this reform showed the ambivalence in the formulation of ideas of inclusion and exclusion in the education policy, as the policy, on the one hand, supports social justice as full inclusion and, on the other, legitimates and strengthens the segregation of special needs students in separate vocational special education institutions. These studies are examples of careful ethnographic examination of everyday practices in educational institutions with a comprehensive contextualisation of the analysis in the ongoing changes in education and disability policies. Important for the researchers has been to ask, how policy changes affect practices in the field of special education, in particular from the viewpoint of social justice. The focal reference point in these studies has been inclusion and disability policy and their implementation in the practices and structures of the education system. They have made visible the rigidity of the special education system by showing that even though the practices of special education have been reorganised and renamed in various ways, the old exclusive layers still recognisably exist inside the system (i.e. Mietola 2014; Kauppila, Lappalainen, and Mietola 2021; Hakala 2010).

Anna-Maija Niemi's (2015) ethnographic and life-historical studies have also made visible contradictions related to inclusion policy and provision of special educational support at various educational levels. Using a feminist ethnographic approach, she has

conducted her research by focusing on reciprocity and mutual trust among research participants (see also Renold et al. 2008). In this way, first, she thus managed to analyse the former special education students' narrations about experiences of labelling and being at the margins of school during their educational paths. Second, she could analyse the professionals' reflections on the ambivalence of the outcomes of special education practices as part of their job. Niemi's studies have brought out the challenges in realisation of social justice in educational paths of students regarded as having special educational needs. She illustrates how the identification of a student as 'in need of special support' may work against the ideal of non-stigmatisation (the redistribution – recognition dilemma, Gewirtz 2006) – also in post-compulsory education and in educational choice-making – although this identification is a prerequisite for getting support in learning at various levels of education.

These ethnographic studies have extended the field of examination from basic education to the different strands of post-compulsory education. They have also raised critical notions concerning the dominant framing in the examination of special needs education. In his recent study, Aarno Kauppila (2022) argues that, in order to build understanding of the practices and targets of the special-needs education system, the historical relationship between special education and the disability service system needs to be considered. In his ethnographic study of preparatory education for persons with a learning disability, Kauppila makes visible how the training for independent living and work in practice prepares the students for normative paths available in the current service system: independent living in a group-home setting and work in a sheltered work(shop). Thus, at the conceptual level, the targets of the training programme are in line with the education and disability policy commitments of enhancing inclusion and equality. However – and problematically – implementation of the targets at the intersection of the historically formed education and social service systems leads to reproduction of institutionalised and marginalised positions of disabled people. We argue, alongside Kauppila, that a critical examination of social justice in the field of special-needs education requires extending the perspective from the field of education to that of disability policy, social services and the labour market; not to be excluded from such an examination, however, is the detailed examination of educational practices in relation to the policy commitments. We claim that the studies presented above are informative examples of research which utilises a feminist ethnographic approach together with theorisations of disability studies in order to analyse the realisation and challenges of social justice in the field of education.

Feminist ethnography: a yielding approach to research

In this article, we have addressed the questions and themes that feminist ethnography has tackled and troubled in the fields of education. In particular, we have wanted to highlight a strong tradition of feminist ethnographic research in Finland, and its contribution to Finnish educational research. As our discussion makes visible, the tradition of feminist ethnography is not uniform. Rather, scholars discuss within different traditions and move through a number of theoretical fields (i.e. postcolonial, classroom research, disability studies, childhood research, youth research), bringing together new and interacting scholarship with existing feminist research traditions (see also Skeggs 2001). We have

also wanted to highlight how feminist ethnographic research works, with an emphasis on a critical examination of power relations and knowledge production. Feminist ethnography is not about confirming ready-made categories or truths and arguments, let alone a reflection of different metrics – this is why it does not always open up easily to public debate or support decision-making. In its current forms, feminist ethnography is, above all, a critical and reflexive way of conducting research.

We started the article with the analytical concept 'troubling'. We have elaborated examples of critical and reflexive ethnographic analyses that have troubled the taken-for-granted idea of social justice and equality in education in Finland. We have shown how nuanced intersectional and contextualised ethnographic studies on differences and social categories have troubled the generalising understandings, for example, on vocational male student as poorly-achievers particularly in literacy skills (Pietilä, Tainio, Lappalainen, and Lahelma 2021), or education policy concerning, for example, national minority of Roma (Helakorpi 2021) or students with a learning disability (Kauppila 2022). There is recurrent interest in everyday life and its messiness as well as the troubling of institutional practices in this study field. During the process of ethnographic fieldwork, the focus is often on the mundane hustle – the doings and beings in the everyday, registering life at hand. Subtle and unrecognised lived experiences are approached as scientifically interesting and worthwhile. This perspective has been successful in making the most invisible and sensitive modes of discrimination and exclusion in institutions visible and observable, and we find it to be a key strength of feminist ethnography in education. In addition, the encounters in the field are different from studies where a researcher focuses on political documents or statements, for instance. We argue that our research – as well as other ethnographies referred to in this article – have been able to produce accounts concerning everyday life in various educational contexts that are recognisable and thought provoking for many professionals as well as for students in educational institutions. This has been significant in the Finnish context where educational practice is mostly considered to be neutral and, as such, equitable.

Yet, ethnography's strong commitment to a qualitative research tradition and writing, as well as situationality and contextualism, has often turned out to be a challenge when disseminating results outside of Academia. Findings that draw on ethnographic data are easily interpreted as unique cases, and one of the ethnographers' challenges is to convince politicians and policy-makers, who prefer to see figures and tables, about the need for change. However, many of the studies discussed in this article have often been contextualised in an education and social-policy framework and produced a critical analysis of how education policy encounters the school's local, everyday life orders and practices, and experiences and meaning-makings of a school's actors. In addition, the shared research projects and collective ways of working have provided researchers opportunities to discuss and compare their research experiences and findings: opening up the perspective in ways that overlap boundaries of particular, separate contexts of fieldwork. This way the research field stretches out from individual places and localities – such as schools – towards the wider education and social-policy contexts.

With critical stories from the field, feminist ethnographers have asked whether and how different key policy commitments – concerning the rights and equality of all children and young people – have actually been transplanted into educational practices. Is everyone treated equally and respectfully regardless of their background, and are there

potentially conflicting interests existing in educational and social practices? Is everyone equally included in the school community, and do they feel that they belong to their peer group? These stories have shown how social justice can be just as much about signs on school toilet doors, the placing of specific classrooms, student groupings, and pedagogical practices, as it is about educational opportunities and academic achievements.

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