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A response from the perspective of Finland

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The chapter authored by Karen Ramlackhan addresses creativity and critical thinking in the context of online learning in academia, which during the times of (post)-Covid-19 has turned out to be one of the most burning issues in university pedagogy. As educators in academia, we all struggle with questions of how to sustain our students' enthusiasm and engagement, and how to deal with the power relations in both on-site and online interaction. Moreover, challenging taken-as-granted notions on society can be a cognitively and emotionally charged experience for both teachers and students. These are challenges that become emphasised in online learning where our pedagogical practices as well as students' participation are mediated by digital technology. Therefore, we must seek sensitive ways to facilitate learning of critical thinking.

After reading the chapter, we would like to direct attention and elaborate further on a question of atmosphere within teaching situations and among heterogeneous student groups. In various approaches of critical pedagogy, such as in this particular Freire-inspired chapter, a safe atmosphere is highly emphasised. However, the safe atmosphere is somehow assumed to be created spontaneously. A relatively typical feature of critical pedagogy, including Freire's approach, is that little consideration, perhaps to the point of being ignored, is given to examining the relevance of group dynamics: how social differences and power relations are related to interaction and relations between students. Social differences and power relations related to gender, race, ethnicity, social class and dis/ability are present among university students and student groups, and they have a bearing on how and when each student can and will express their opinions or share their life experiences within the

student group. Taking these social differences and relations into account as a basis of the creation of the safe atmosphere is, in our view, also essential in distance learning. This is a perspective that could have been considered more in the chapter. How can we take into account the differences between students in a way that encourages these students to take part equally in interaction and group work, and also to bring out their differences and similarities and discuss these within the pedagogical practices of teacher education?

In Finland and other Nordic countries, the national self-image as a forerunner to equality and democracy obscures the view to social and cultural mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, including the existence of social differences such as race, ethnicity, gender, social class and disability. Social differences in education have so far been examined critically mainly from a gender perspective, and generations of feminist researchers have, for example, troubled the hegemonic ‘worry discourse’ on underachievement of boys compared with girls, even though, internationally, Finnish boys have succeeded relatively well at school (e.g. [Lahelma, 2014](#); [Pietilä *et al.*, 2021](#)). In addition to other social categories and variation within categories, voices of critical scholars have rarely been heard in teacher education contexts. In the recent critical study of Finnish multicultural education ([Hummelstedt, 2022](#)) it has been concluded that Finnish teachers need awareness and critical reflection on norms, power relations and privileges in order to discuss these issues with their pupils at schools. However, not all the teacher education institutions in Finland have included in their curricula even a single obligatory course concerning the topics such as social justice, power relations and culturally responsive pedagogical practices. We claim that this tendency has even been reinforced by a shift in neoliberal, individual-centred education policies to reduce social disparities. Therefore, the US way of discussing and drawing attention to various categories of differences and their connection to vulnerable social position of children and young people in teacher education contexts is exciting. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement raised the issue about the presence of structural racism in Finnish institutions, including education, but the challenges of persons belonging to ethnic or racial minorities are still widely discussed in terms of language learning rather than by looking at social class, poverty or race.

Finland invests in phenomenon-based learning, meaning a holistic pedagogical approach that breaks the subject-based approach, where, for example, STEM-related concepts are studied in STEM lessons only. Instead, arts and crafts can be harnessed for the learning of mathematical

concepts. It seems to us that this phenomenon-based learning has many similarities to the pedagogical approach presented in the chapter. The way that the article discusses creativity as one of the key pedagogical and conceptual starting points could strengthen the Finnish discussion as well. Presently, the examination of creativity often falls under other themes, and, for example, the role of art-based methods is actually seen as quite instrumental as a tool for learning something that is considered more relevant, such as concepts related to the 'hard sciences'. Paying attention to the creativity perspective in a way that has been done in the article would certainly reinforce the debate on phenomenon-based learning.

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