



# Identity

An International Journal of Theory and Research

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: [www.tandfonline.com/journals/hidn20](http://www.tandfonline.com/journals/hidn20)

## From Avoidance to Competence? How the Identity Project Inspires Teachers to Engage with Ethnicity and Culture with Their Students

Salman Türken, Brit Oppedal, Warsame A. Ali & Hayat Abdu Adem

**To cite this article:** Salman Türken, Brit Oppedal, Warsame A. Ali & Hayat Abdu Adem (2024) From Avoidance to Competence? How the Identity Project Inspires Teachers to Engage with Ethnicity and Culture with Their Students, *Identity*, 24:4, 379-398, DOI: [10.1080/15283488.2024.2373476](https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2024.2373476)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2024.2373476>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.



Published online: 23 Jul 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 514



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

# From Avoidance to Competence? How the Identity Project Inspires Teachers to Engage with Ethnicity and Culture with Their Students

Salman Türken <sup>a</sup>, Brit Oppedal<sup>b</sup>, Warsame A. Ali<sup>c</sup>, and Hayat Abdu Adem<sup>b,d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Early Childhood Education, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway; <sup>b</sup>Department of Childhood and Families, Norwegian Institute of Public Health, Oslo, Norway; <sup>c</sup>Department of Health Services Research, Norwegian Institute of Public Health, Oslo, Norway; <sup>d</sup>Department of Psychology, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

## ABSTRACT



Multicultural education highlights the need to promote students' diverse identities, recognizing their ethnic-cultural backgrounds as resources in their teaching. However, most teachers perceive they lack competence and learning material to this end. Research suggests the Identity Project may be an appropriate tool to resolve some of these challenges. We explore both teachers' and students' narratives about teaching issues of ethnicity and culture in multicultural classrooms centering on potential changes from before to after teachers delivered the IP. We conducted one focus group interview with seven teachers before they were trained and implemented the IP in their classrooms, and individual interviews with them after they had completed the intervention. Data from three focus groups with 16 students from the same schools, and individual interviews with 16 other students that received the intervention are included to add perspective to the teachers' narratives. A reflexive thematic analysis resulted in four themes: From avoidance to embracing the diversity topics, from not addressing to affirming student identities, teachers pushing for inclusion (or exclusion), using cultural background as a learning/teaching tool. Our findings imply that the IP can be a tool for multicultural education that enhances teachers' competence in supporting students' identity development.

## KEYWORDS

Identity project; multicultural education; teacher competence; ethnicity; culture

## Introduction

Norway, as the rest of Europe, has become increasingly culturally diversified over the last fifty years (Steinkellner et al., 2023). This diversification of the population requires that people of all backgrounds adapt to each other and to the changing cultural realities, to achieve positive interethnic relations and avoid interethnic tensions. Schools are important contexts for such processes to take place. Thus, there is a growing need for cultural diversity competence in Norwegian schools, i.e., competence of school staff to ensure inclusive educational practices and learning environments and involve their students' ethnic and cultural backgrounds and identities in their teaching to a diverse student population (Darling-Hammond, 2017; OECD, 2005; Schwarzenhal et al., 2017). However, many teachers feel that they are not sufficiently prepared to teach in multicultural classrooms (Barrett, 2018; European Commission, 2017; Fosse & Scheie, 2021; Lehman, 2017; Paine et al., 2017). Norwegian researchers have pointed out that while both pre- and in-service teachers show an interest in and concern for cultural diversity, they seem to lack the necessary multicultural knowledge and competence to promote inclusive classroom environments (e.g., Lund, 2018; Thomassen & Munthe, 2021).

**CONTACT** Salman Türken  [salmant@oslomet.no](mailto:salmant@oslomet.no)  Department of Early Childhood Education, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo 0130, Norway

This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes does not impact on the academic content of the article.

© 2024 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Moreover, there is a lack of teaching material and other tools to support their efforts in establishing culturally inclusive environments (Midtbøen et al., 2014). Hence, European policy makers, practitioners, and researchers have suggested theoretical frameworks, pedagogical strategies, and interventions to provide schools and teachers with knowledge and tools to promote positive multicultural developmental school contexts for children and youth (Barrett, 2020; Bennett, 2001; Juang et al., 2022; Lehman, 2017). One such example is the efforts of an international research network of educational, social, and developmental psychologists to culturally adapt and implement an U.S. curriculum, The Identity Project (Umaña-Taylor & Douglass, 2017), in schools in six European countries (Juang et al., 2022). The aim of the present study is to explore if the Norwegian version of the Identity Project can potentially change teachers' engagement with cultural diversity and competence in multicultural education through analyzing their and students' narratives about the ways they address issues of ethnicity and culture in multicultural classrooms.

### ***Promoting identity development in multicultural contexts***

The Identity Project is a school-based universal (i.e., targeting all students regardless of their ethnic background) intervention developed in the United States (Umaña-Taylor & Douglass, 2017). The intervention has at its base the Eriksonian thesis that identity formation is a life-long process and a key developmental task that gains particular importance during adolescence (Erikson, 1968). In addition, social identity perspectives highlighting the role of context and importance of the social groups young people belong to in their exploration of who they are, are also incorporated into the Identity Project (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The intervention centers on one aspect of young people's identity that arises from the persons' ethnic-racial<sup>1</sup> group membership(s) and is informed by the cultural heritage of that (those) group(s), namely their ethnic-racial identity (Umaña-Taylor & Douglass, 2017). Research has shown that this aspect of one's identity is salient to persons with an immigrant or ethnic minority backgrounds, but it also becomes salient to persons representing the ethnic majority in contexts when they are the numerical minority (Syed & Juang, 2014), as is the case in many Norwegian multicultural schools. The positive psychosocial, academic, and behavioral outcomes of a strong and resolved ethnic-racial identity has been thoroughly documented in the research literature (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014), mediated by a stronger global identity cohesion (Syed & Juang, 2014; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018). The aim of the Identity Project is to stimulate ethnic-racial identity exploration and resolution with cascading effects to global identity cohesion and positive psychosocial and academic outcomes (Umaña-Taylor & Douglass, 2017). The students work together on the Identity Project curriculum once a week over eight weeks, on various topics related to their ethnic-racial identity and heritage cultural backgrounds. Recently, the intervention has been culturally adapted to be relevant to multicultural schools in six European countries (Juang et al., 2022). Findings from interviews with users in the United States, Germany, and Norway have shown that the Identity Project promoted intercultural learning and relationships and hence more inclusive classrooms (AUTHOR, 2023; Juang et al., 2020; Oppedal et al., 2023; Umaña-Taylor, 2023). This suggests that the Identity Project intervention has the potential of providing teachers with tools and strategies to strengthen their multicultural teaching competence. Based on this, our aim is to analyze teachers' narratives of teaching about ethnicity and culture before and after they were trained in and delivered the Identity Project in their respective classrooms with particular attention to possible changes. To add perspectives to the narratives of the teachers, their data is triangulated with information from students at the same schools. We utilize a multicultural education approach primarily based on theorizing by Banks (2009, 2014; see also Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2017) to make sense of and discuss the potential usefulness of the Identity Project to increase teachers' multicultural competence.

### **Conceptualization of multicultural education**

Multicultural education adopts a broad and dynamic definition of cultural diversity, not limited to normative characteristics associated with peoples' ethnicity/'race,' culture, language, or nationality (Banks, 2009; Bennett, 2001; Lehman, 2017). Multicultural education recognizes the value of diversity and promotes a greater understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures in the classroom. It acknowledges the pluralism that students represent (racial, ethnic, social class, gender, and other) as resources to be used in teaching (Nieto, 2017) in accordance with basic ideas of the Identity Project. According to Banks (2009) multicultural education is based on values of democratic citizenship and committed to human rights. Hence, in addition to the academic development of students, this approach emphasizes developing social environments that are inclusive regarding cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious diversity. In this way, students not only develop and preserve these social identities, but at the same time they learn to respect and accept each other despite those differences (Banks, 2009, 2014). The Identity Project curriculum mirror these ideas of self-development in context of learning about others: "... one of the ways adolescents believed they learned about their ethnic-racial identity was by learning about their peers' ethnic-racial identity and experiences related to race and ethnicity" (Umaña-Taylor, 2023, p. 6).

The ultimate goal of multicultural education is "to restructure schools so that all students acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills needed to function in ethnically and racially diverse communities [...]" (Banks, 2009, p. 14), by applying a culturally responsive pedagogy. Similarly, Ladson-Billings (1995) argued for a culturally relevant pedagogy which is "not only address[ing] student achievement but also help[ing] students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate" (p. 469). However, critical voices point to a potential tension within multicultural education that needs to be acknowledged, between on the one hand recognizing ethnicity and culture as significant for group identities, and on the other hand, avoiding essentializing them (e.g., May, 2009). Hence, to overcome such critique, multicultural educators should avoid construing ethnic and cultural groups as internally homogenous, static, and unable to change (Lentin, 2005).

Multicultural education underscores the key role teachers have in teaching, and points to the need for developing their multicultural competence to ensure that they can work successfully with culturally diverse groups of students (Banks, 2009; Lehman, 2017; Nieto, 2017). This implicates that teachers establish inclusive teaching by incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into their teaching practice and recognize the group identities of marginalized students (Banks, 2009; Bennett, 2001; Nieto, 2017), all the while taking into account variation in ethnic and cultural groups (May, 2009). The Identity Project can be one means toward this end.

### **Dimensions of multicultural education**

The aims, content, and pedagogical structure of Identity Project align with several of the dimensions described by Banks (2009, 2014) as necessary for a viable multicultural education approach. Firstly, *content integration* relates to the degree to which teachers make use of content and examples from diverse cultures to illustrate key concepts, principles, understandings, and theories in their teaching (Banks, 2009). Students' backgrounds, identities, perspectives need to be included in the teaching (Nieto, 2017) for instance by use of examples from students' own experiences which create conceptual links between the curriculum and aspects of their cultures. The Identity Project curriculum promotes such practices e.g., by encouraging the students to share their experiences and practices related to ethnicity and culture, and by encouraging the teachers to relate the content of the Identity Project to the knowledge goals of the overall curriculum. Secondly, *knowledge construction* relates to not only infusing ethnic content into the curriculum, but also changing how students understand and interact with knowledge. Teachers help students understand and problematize how, for instance, implicit cultural assumptions or biases influence knowledge production, on one hand, and how they can

become knowledge producers themselves, rather than passive consumers of knowledge (Banks, 2009). The Identity Project can contribute to this end in various ways, such as through the section of stereotypes, history of oppression of minority groups, and not the least by stimulating the students' exploration of what their ethnic-cultural background means to them. Thirdly, *prejudice reduction* implies that teachers need to initiate activities that focus on equality and mutual respect to contribute to increasing understanding and respect toward diverse groups of students (Banks, 2009), in accordance with principal pedagogical structure of and ideas inherent in the Identity Project. In addition, *equity pedagogy* is realized "when teachers modify their teaching in ways that will facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse" racial, cultural, gender, and social-class groups (Banks, 2009, p. 16). Making didactical adjustments and developing strategies which attend to the needs of minoritized students are essential. Lastly, *empowering school culture* involves changing the culture and organization of the school to facilitate equality, thus creating relationships between diverse groups within the school based on (mutual) respect for cultural differences (Banks, 2009). The last two dimensions also reflect important values in the Identity Project. However, to achieve this presumably a whole school approach is needed that involves strategic activities on all levels and among all actors of the school community, and that is anchored in local and national policies and practices.

In summary, multicultural education is not only about academic success, granting students access to education and equal opportunities regardless of their ethnic, cultural, religious backgrounds. In accordance with the intention of the Identity Project, it also underscores the importance of acknowledging and fostering the development of ethnic-cultural identities of the students (Banks, 2009; Nieto, 2017; Nieto & Bode, 2018; Umaña-Taylor & Douglass, 2017), and instilling pride in minoritized students' minds through "affirmation of self-worth" (Bassey, 1997, p. 233). Hence, assimilationist (Banks, 2009) or homogenizing color-blind pedagogical approaches (Gorski & Parekh, 2020) should be avoided as they might not adequately address the needs and experiences of, especially, minoritized students. Teachers are thus expected to develop the necessary cultural competence, to create a sense of belonging for diverse groups of students who can feel attached to the social milieu at school.

### **Preparing Norwegian teachers for multicultural education**

Immigrants and Norwegian-born children to immigrants make up about 20% of the population as of 2023 (Statistics Norway, 2023), and the numbers of students with immigrant background in classrooms have steadily been growing (Steinkellner et al., 2023). Thus, it is essential to prepare teachers sufficiently to teach in multicultural classrooms, and the necessary measures must be taken to provide multicultural competence (Nieto, 2017; Thomassen & Munthe, 2021). As a response to such socio-cultural change in the Norwegian society, a multicultural approach has been included as a central characteristic of teacher education: The Teacher Education Regulations demand that the teacher training programs prepare all preservice teachers to teach in a diverse society (Ministry of Education, 2010). In line with this, teacher education institutions have incorporated learning outcomes such as *gaining more knowledge about students with multicultural and multilingual backgrounds, developing skills and abilities to conduct teaching in multicultural learning environments, and developing a critical understanding of culture* that should help future teachers to take the multicultural reality seriously (Egeli & Thomassen, 2015). Nevertheless, teacher education programs about cultural diversity typically focus on second language learning (Hauge, 2014), with less attention to other aspects of multicultural education practices (Egeli & Thomassen, 2015; Hauge, 2014; Thomassen & Munthe, 2021).

In addition, the preparation of teachers to teach culturally diverse populations is usually reduced to a small and separated part of teacher education programs rather than being infused into all the education activities and curricula (Gorski, 2012; Zygmunt & Clark, 2016). This is also the case in Norway (e.g., Benediktsson, 2022). Thus, instead of preparing pre-service teachers for multicultural education, the programs may even look more like monoculturalism, promoting yet the dominant majority norms (e.g., Juárez et al., 2008).

Discrepancies between intentions and practice exist in many societies that have accepted multiculturalism and social justice as public policy (Nieto, 2017). Multicultural education initiatives tend to focus on celebrating diversity and understanding the cultural “other,” obviously a relevant and necessary part of multicultural practice, yet there is a lot of uncertainty about how these initiatives are realized in practice in the classroom (Gorski, 2009; Nieto, 2017). In contrast to the goal of diversity-based approaches of making ethnic, racial, and linguistic identity defining features of education, teachers tend to introduce cultures superficially (Ladson-Billings, 2014). They may for instance initiate multicultural events such as United Nations Day, instead of working toward increased awareness of inequalities in systematic ways as part of the overall curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2014). When cultural diversity is treated in trivial ways by teachers, a likely result can be an essentialization of culture, implying a problematic premise that students from the same group should share the same convictions, same values and learn in the same way (Banks, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2014). There is therefore a need to identify and investigate how teachers’ competence to engage with issues of cultural diversity to create inclusive and equitable classrooms for their students can be strengthened.

### **The Norwegian multicultural school context**

Norway is regarded as an egalitarian welfare state. The liberal welfare service policies, free health care, and free education including at the tertiary (college/university) level are considered significant sources of the social mobility observed among ethnic minority youth born in Norway to immigrant parents (Midtbøen & Nadim, 2022). Despite this, there are subtle interpersonal mechanisms that contribute to othering and minoritizing the immigrant background population, as illustrated by the description of Norwegianness/Norwegian social identity below.

In Norwegian public records, the population is defined according to the place of birth of the individuals, their parents and grandparents, without consideration of their citizenship. Hence, the ethnic Norwegian majority population consists of individuals who are Norwegian- or foreign-born, with two Norwegian-born parents and four Norwegian-born grandparents. This group also includes the indigenous Sami population, and five groups that, because of their long residence in Norway have been endorsed status and privileges as *national* ethnic minorities (i.e. Kvens/Norwegian Finns (people of Finnish descent in Northern Norway), Jews, Forest Finns, Roma and Romani people/Tatars.) (Government, 2024). However, the largest ethnic minority groups are part of the *immigrant population* which comprises individuals who either have immigrated themselves or are born in Norway, and have two and four foreign-born parents and grandparents, respectively (Statistics Norway, 2023). They originate from around 220 different countries worldwide, and as of January 2024, the largest groups are from Poland (126 728), Ukraine (67 242), Lithuania (50 847), Syria (45 679) and Somalia (43 629) (Statistics Norway, 2024).

Despite this increasing ethnic and cultural diversity of the population, the ethnic Norwegian majority has constructed Norwegianness and hence belongingness to the Norwegian social “we” in ways that reflect an assumed shared ethnic and cultural background over centuries. Further, light skin color is still perceived of as an important marker of being Norwegian, even though equality (e.g., across gender, socio-economic status, personal abilities, ethnicity, and religion) is construed as a fundamental value in the Norwegian society (Führer, 2021; Gullestad, 2004). Gullestad (2004) has argued that, in Norway, equality is typically comprehended as (imagined) *sameness* without paying attention to any kind of differences. In education the endorsement of equality values implies color-blind pedagogical approaches that often disregard the importance of the bi- and multi-cultural realities of the ethnic minority students (e.g., Chinga-Ramirez, 2017). Paradoxically, the notion of equality as sameness also implies that belonging to the “Norwegian we” is predominantly conceptualized by the ethnic majority in terms of symbolic notions of kinship, exacerbating ethnicity and otherwise visible characteristics as fundamental elements of a Norwegian national identity. The result is often that those who are visibly different are treated as outsiders (Gullestad, 2004) even if they are legally Norwegian citizens.



According to the Norwegian Education Act, “[e]ducation and training shall provide insight into cultural diversity and show respect for the individual’s convictions. They (schools) are to promote democracy, equality, and scientific thinking” (Education Act, 2007). The core curriculum states that the school “shall give students historical and cultural insight that will give them a good foundation in their lives and help each student to preserve and develop her or his identity in an inclusive and diverse environment” (Government, 2017, p. 7). Hence, political and pedagogical initiatives have been put forward to address increasing cultural diversity (Burner & Biseth, 2016). However, several studies analyzing Norwegian teacher education policy discourse, point to a discourse of cultural diversity perpetuating hierarchical notions of Norwegianness and non-Norwegianness, along racial lines (e.g., Burner & Biseth, 2016; Fylkesnes, 2018). Thus, there seems to be a tension in Norwegian educational discourse between standardization and differentiation, due to notions of national identity which is construed as inclusive through the emphasis on concepts of equality and diversity yet is based on imagined sameness. A paradoxical result of this pairing is that the definition of normality, based in equality, inevitably creates deviant *Others* as a side-effect (e.g., Chinga-Ramirez, 2015). The combination of such subtle perception of equality as a value and light skin color as a marker of Norwegianness creates a challenge regarding how to address ethnicity and culture in the society in general, and in education in particular, within the one unitary school for all students (Seeberg, 2003).

Thomassen and Munthe (2020) found varying degrees of self-reported competence among pre-service teachers and a certain level of uncomfortableness when talking about “race” and color. Such uneasiness and lack of competence were also reported by Midtbøen et al. (2014) study in which teachers admitted having difficulty dealing with diversity topics and encouraging students to participate in discussions. While teachers instead tended to employ so-called color-blind pedagogical approaches (Midtbøen et al., 2014), several studies have underscored that color-blind approaches to cultural, ethnic, and “racial” differences, based on Norwegian ideals of equality, might contribute to exclusion and minoritization of students of ethnic diverse backgrounds (e.g., Burner et al., 2018; Chinga-Ramirez, 2017).

### **The Norwegian version of the Identity Project**

Against this tapestry of demographic factors, attitudes, policies, and pedagogical values, the Identity Project (Umaña-Taylor & Douglass, 2017) was adapted to be relevant for students in Norwegian culturally diverse secondary schools (Juang et al., 2022). The Identity Project comprises a curriculum with eight modules that is taught to the students one module a week, over eight weeks. The theory of change of the Identity Project posits that the intervention promotes ethnic-racial identity exploration and subsequent resolution, with later cascading effects on global identity cohesion furthering positive psychological and academic outcomes (Umaña-Taylor, 2023; Umana-Taylor et al., 2018).

The Norwegian research team established a working-group in collaboration with the Directorate of Integration and Diversity in this endeavor, via six minority counselors<sup>2</sup> working in three different secondary schools (Juang et al., 2022). The working group met regularly over the course of one year. Both surface and deep structure adaptations were made. Surface structure changes involved e.g., substituting stories of discrimination of various U.S. ethnic-racial groups with discrimination of indigenous and national and other ethnic minorities groups in Norway. An example of deep structure changes is the conceptualization of ethnic-racial minorities. Within the context of the historical trauma that Sami and national ethnic minorities were exposed to from 1850 to 1950, because of the Norwegian governments’ assimilation policies, and the World War II racially motivated genocide of Jews, the use of “race” in public discourse is strongly contested (Kyllingstad, 2017). When racism is dealt with in public documents and everyday discourse, “race” has been substituted by “ethnicity, background and skin color” in Norwegian laws, and racial categories are never used in statistics (Kyllingstad, 2017). Based on focus group interviews we conducted with students, the experiences of the German Identity Project team members, and careful reflections and discussions among the working-group members, we agreed on applying “ethnic-cultural” group or identity in the 1<sup>st</sup> edition

of the Norwegian manual. This was because 1) many youth associated *ethnicity* only with geographical origin, 2) many adults were unclear about the concept, or 3) reluctant to use it in their teaching for sensitivity reasons. Thus, we wanted to highlight that the Identity Project focuses on the close relations between ethnicity and culture and minimize the discomfort many associated with the use of ethnicity. To acknowledge the racialized experiences of many ethnic minority youth, we nevertheless included an activity about race in the manual, informing about the history of the socially constructed concept.

In 2021 the Identity Project was implemented in six classrooms of three multicultural upper secondary schools. The research team conducted a feasibility study to get information about potential effects on ethnic-cultural identity exploration and about intervention acceptability. In recruiting the schools to participate in the feasibility study, it was a precondition that the schools' minority counselors should team up with the main teachers of the partaking classrooms in facilitating the Identity Project. Hence, seven teachers and five minority counselors were trained by the research team to facilitate the Norwegian version of the Identity Project during three consecutive days a week before they started implementing the intervention.

The present study exploits interview data a) from teachers collected before and after they were trained in and had implemented the Norwegian version of the Identity Project and b) from two groups of students – one who participated in the Identity Project and one who did not. We examine both how teachers' narratives about teaching diversity issues such as ethnicity, ethnic identity and culture changed from before to after they delivered the curriculum to their students and what students reported about teachers' multicultural competence. Based on the reported lack of preparedness among teachers on the topic of multicultural education, we ask whether, and to what degree, implementing the Identity Project may help teachers develop competence to understand and teach issues of ethnicity and culture in multicultural classrooms.

## Method

As the study involved special categories of data participants (ethnic minorities) the research team conducted a privacy impact assessment according to the General data protection regulation (GDPR) that was approved by the Data Protection Officer of the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (NIPH, September 30, 2021). Participation was conditioned on written consent from youth and school staff.

## Recruitment

The minority counselors who had collaborated with the research team in culturally adapting the Identity Project to Norwegian multicultural school context, invited the three respective schools where they worked to partake in a study to assess the feasibility and acceptability of the Identity Project in Norway. The research team informed about the study and the intervention at meetings with the teachers at each school. The principals then assigned the main teachers of two classrooms, to team up with the minority counselors in facilitating the Identity Project and participate in the study. The majority of the students, in all six intervention classrooms had an ethnic minority background, in total 84%. They were recruited to the study through information meetings at their schools. As they were all older than 16 years of age, they could sign the consent forms themselves, which in addition to respond to a web-based questionnaire before and after the intervention, included an option to be interviewed by the researchers after participating in the Identity Project. As we did not want to prime the students in the intervention classrooms for the data collection, we recruited participants to the focus groups from a nonintervention classroom at the same grade level at each school. Based on specific criteria (see Sample section) the relevant students received an invitation letter from the research team handed out by the minority counselors, whereupon students volunteered to participate.



## Sample

The sample comprised schoolteachers ( $n = 7$ ) and students ( $n = 32$ ) representing vocational tracks of six classrooms of the three multicultural upper secondary schools that participated in the feasibility study of the Norwegian Identity Project (see Table 1). We used data from one focus group interview that was carried out with the seven teachers of the intervention classrooms from the three schools before they were trained to implement the Identity Project, and individual interviews with them after they had completed the intervention. We included student voices in our study as a way of triangulating data sources with the potential of obtaining different perspectives (Carter et al., 2014). Three students' focus group interviews were carried out before the start of the Identity Project with a total of 16 students. To avoid priming them for the following questionnaire data collection they were recruited from nonintervention classrooms. Data from individual interviews with 16 other students who had received the Identity Project conducted after they completed the intervention are also included here.

Four teachers were immigrants from Morocco, India, Kenya, and Sweden, the other three were of ethnic Norwegian background. In the latter group, one teacher was not able to participate in the post-intervention individual interview. Their experience as teachers ranged from three to 33 years, and besides education their multidisciplinary backgrounds included nursing, social work, medical emergency service, and psychosocial work with children and youth.

The students were either from 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> year upper secondary school classrooms, i.e., 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade (16–18 years). We conducted one focus group interview with students from nonintervention classrooms at each of the three schools based on the following criteria: At the first school the focus group included four ethnic minority *boys* from Somalia, Afghanistan, Ghana, and Iraq. At the second school the group comprised five ethnic minority *girls*, two from Afghanistan, one Kurd, and two students with unknown national origin, but who identified as Muslims. At the third school the focus group involved four ethnic Norwegians, three girls and one boy, a Kurdish boy born in Turkey to Iraqi parents, and one Norwegian born boy with an ethnic Norwegian father and an immigrant mother from the Philippines.

The 16 students from the three schools who participated in individual interviews after receiving the Identity Project all had ethnic minority backgrounds and were culturally diverse: They represented six different national origins or (semi) autonomous areas, namely Pakistan, Somalia, Colombia, Poland, Bosnia, Kurdistan, and Chechnya. We did not ask the students about their place of birth, but through the interviews we learnt that three of them were born in Norway and one was adopted by ethnic Norwegian parents and came to Norway when s/he was only a few months old. Four other students informed that they were foreign-born, while the rest of them did not mention their birthplace. Nevertheless, we may infer that there was diversity among the students regarding their ethnic-cultural background as well as their status as immigrants and descendants of immigrants.

## Procedures

Four members of the research team, of which three are coauthors of this study, carried out all the interviews in pairs. We conducted all focus group interviews that took place before the start of the Identity Project, face-to-face. We interviewed the students at their schools, while the teachers focus group was conducted at the NIPH. The post-intervention interviews with students were also carried out face-to-face at their schools, while the teacher interviews took place on the digital platform Teams. The focus group interviews lasted around 1.5 hours, and the individual interviews from 45 to 60 minutes.

For the focus groups, we employed an interview protocol that was developed by the Swedish Identity Project research team (Abdullahi et al., 2024), to get information about the framing of ethnicity in pre-service teachers' education, the teachers' experiences with teaching about ethnicity and culture, as well as high-school students' perception of the framing of ethnicity in their schools. The post-intervention interview protocol was developed by the NIPH research team and addressed students' and teachers' general experiences with the intervention and more specifically what they perceived as positive and negative aspects with it. The protocol was similar for, but adjusted to, the two

**Table 1.** Participant characteristics.

Teachers	Gender	Ethnicity/Parents' background
Teacher 1	Woman	India
Teacher 2	Woman	Morocco
Teacher 3	Woman	Kenya
Teacher 4	Man	Sweden
Teacher 5	Woman	Norway
Teacher 6	Woman	Norway
Teacher 7	Woman	Norway
Students in individual interviews		
S 1	Girl	NA
S 2	Girl	Chechnya
S 3	Girl	Somalia
S 4	Girl	NA
S 5	Girl	Columbia
S 6	Girl	Somalia
S 7	Girl	Poland
S 8	Girl	NA
S 9	Girl	Bosnia-Hercegovina
S 10	Boy	Kurdistan
S 11	Girl	Kurdistan
S 12	Girl	Somalia
S 13	Boy	Pakistan
S 14	Girl	Pakistan
S 15	Girl	Somalia
S 16	Boy	Pakistan
Students in focus groups		
FG 1	Boy	Somalia
FG 2	Boy	Afghanistan
FG 3	Boy	Ghana
FG 4	Boy	Iraq
FG 5	Girl	Kurdistan
FG 6	Girl	Afghanistan
FG 7	Girl	Afghanistan
FG 8	Girl	NA
FG 9	Girl	NA
FG 10	Girl	Norway
FG 11	Girl	Norway
FG 12	Girl	Norway
FG 13	Boy	Norway
FG 14	Boy	Norway
FG 15	Boy	Iraq
FG 16	Boy	Norway/the Philippines

groups. We decided on individual interviews after the implementation of the Identity Project to facilitate a more detailed description of how each interviewee experienced the Identity Project curriculum, and to help each participant to talk more comfortably about possibly sensitive issues which they might have been exposed to throughout the Identity Project (Carter et al., 2014). All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim in Norwegian language.

### **Analyses**

We utilized thematic analysis (TA), as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), to make sense of the collected data. We had an inductive approach and performed a latent level analysis to generate themes: “patterns of shared meaning, underpinned by a central meaning-based concept” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593) in what is reported by the participants. We adopted a constructionist position. This implies that we accept ontologically the possibility of multiple socially constructed realities and truth claims and underline the epistemological dependence relating to ways in which participants and we as researchers mutually construct meanings (Willig, 2013). Therefore, our positionality for instance as four privileged, able-bodied,

cis, heterosexual individuals, three with an immigrant background (either immigrants or born in Norway to immigrant parents) and one with ethnic Norwegian background, all with egalitarian values and social justice orientation, has fed into the research. Throughout the whole project period, the research team members discussed own and others' experiences with being visibly different, ethnically non-Norwegian, and how this might be a challenge for being accepted into the Norwegian "We" by the ethnic Norwegian majority. Thus, the diverse experiences we have in the Norwegian society based on the mixture of age, gender, ethnic and cultural backgrounds among us helped us gain insights into and deeper comprehension of how teachers and students in our study narrated inclusion and exclusion.

We followed a stepwise process as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first author read and reread all the interviews to get familiar with the data set and coded all interviews inductively by using each separate utterance by the participants as the unit of analysis, creating an initial code list. Then, the first and the second author discussed these codes. As reflexivity underpins any methodological choice and relates to "ways in which a researcher's involvement with a particular study influence, acts upon and informs such research" (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999, p. 228), our expertise in the research field and knowledge of theoretical foundation guided us, thus in a deductive sense, in developing and naming the themes. This process involved going back and forth to both sets of interviews (focus groups with students and teachers before the implementation of the Identity Project and individual interviews with teachers and students after the implementation) as the themes presented below are developed based on both data sets. The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so raw data are not available.

## Results

We have structured our analysis so that under each theme we will make connections between the first wave of interviews, i.e. focus groups with students and teachers before the implementation of the Identity Project and the second wave of individual interviews after the teachers and students had completed the curriculum of the Identity Project. The focus group interviews with the teachers may be considered to provide a baseline upon which their individual interviews, after the completion of the Identity Project, should be made sense of. The students' information can serve as a backdrop for a deeper understanding of the teachers' experiences.

We have developed four themes, which capture the essential parts of the interview data that can direct a discussion of the potential changes in the teachers' competence in multicultural education. These are: 1) *From avoidance to embracing the diversity topics*, 2) *From not addressing to affirming student identities*, 3) *Teachers pushing for inclusion (or exclusion)*, 4) *Using cultural background as a learning/teaching tool*.

### **Theme 1: from avoidance to embracing the diversity topics**

Teacher 7: There is not awareness about it . . . There is a focus on that in Norwegian [course] regarding the Sami minority . . . I don't think we use, we don't have a conscious understanding of ethnicity.

These words by the Teacher 7 illustrates the point well: In the focus groups before the implementation of the Identity Project, both the students and the teachers agreed in general on the fact that topics related to diversity such as ethnicity and culture were usually avoided in the everyday teaching at school. They described a superficial handling of these topics, limited usually to covering parts of the curriculum related to the Sami populations and religion, and celebrating special occasions such as the United Nations Day. The students' focus groups explicitly pointed out that there was limited focus on identity and ethnicity at school, that the schoolbooks were poor on the topic of ethnicity which was usually dealt with only in relation to religion, and that while they wanted to learn more, the teachers were avoidant and lacked competence. Several students reported that they felt they were not taken

seriously as teachers would either talk superficially about ethnic and cultural differences or avoid the topic. As one female student with immigrant background in one of the focus groups said:

“I think many teachers are skeptical . . . they dare not say much. They say a little, and when it begins to resemble a serious talk in the class, they drop it. ‘Let’s get back to . . .’ I think they don’t dare to speak because there are many different cultures in the classroom and many different opinions.”

In line with Norwegian research (e.g., Thomassen & Munthe, 2021), most of the teachers in the focus groups pointed out that teacher education programs lacked the necessary coverage and thus they were not sufficiently prepared to teach in culturally diverse classrooms. They emphasized that they needed more awareness and experience regarding the diversity students represent, to avoid cultural misunderstandings. Throughout the implementation of the Identity Project, however, they dealt with topics related to diversity such as ethnicity, race, and culture over an extended period. Teacher 1 illustrated how this was something new to both students and teachers:

It took some time before they really understood and were comfortable with it. Because they are not used to being asked those questions, right? For the school needs to be careful. We do not pick at ethnicities and who you are or who your parents are unless it is a learning outcome to look at . . . cultural background.

The result of going through the Identity Project curriculum was that both students and teachers became more comfortable when talking about and engaging with topics such as ethnicity and culture. All the teachers reported in the individual interviews that they realized that being open about topics related to ethnicity and culture, instead of avoiding them, was truly beneficial. Even if some of the teachers reported having time conflicts because of the Identity Project as the time spent on the curriculum implied less time on other subjects, they appreciated the potential ways the Identity Project could be incorporated in their regular teaching. Teacher 4 explained how this could help them cover the focus on diversity topics that were lacking in the ordinary curriculum:

. . . It is to a large degree dependent on how teachers connected, sort of, the main topics from the (Identity) Project to their respective subjects we teach and closed the holes.

Several teachers further explained how they used their own ethnic and cultural background as part of the teaching through the Identity Project (see Theme 3). Instead of avoiding the topic, according to Teacher 3, such openness might even contribute to creating an inclusive social environment whereby students and teachers can relate better to one another as they get to know each other better:

. . . I felt I could use my own ethnic identity to get to know them better and come closer to my students.

This was corroborated by several students who experienced that both ethnic minority and majority teachers throughout the Identity Project opened up and shared their personal stories, their cultures and so on. For instance, S3 and S4 made the point that:

S4: “. . . we have got to know the identity of our teacher . . . she told us about her country.”

S3: “Yes, she talked about her culture and her country [of origin] and what they usually eat and, yes, the traditions.”

## **Theme 2: from not addressing to affirming students’ identities**

A widespread construction among the ethnic minority background students in the focus group interviews, conducted before the implementation of the Identity Project, was the teachers’ lack of affirmation of students’ cultural backgrounds as an essential part of who they are, which corroborates findings of Chinga-Ramiraz (2015, 2017). The students reported that some teachers talked in negative terms about certain cultures and that some teachers considered establishing an inclusive environment for the culturally diverse students as annoying. The students reported experiencing that their identities, their ethnicity, culture, language, were seen as problems to be

dealt with. This was especially relevant for those students who had poor Norwegian language competence, according to several students. But some students mentioned that some of the teachers were interested in them and their backgrounds. Other students were critical of the type of teacher who would take a “*I understand you*”-position toward them, as according to the students, they (the teachers) were in no position to understand them because of lack of engagement and interest in their background and because they did not share the same background.

However, most of the students who had participated in the Identity Project reported that during the intervention they felt “*being seen and heard*” and getting the affirmation they needed for who they (culturally and ethnically) are, not only from the teachers who implemented the Identity Project but also from their classmates. Also, as the Identity Project provided them with time and space to explore their ethnic-cultural identities, the students gained increased awareness of their backgrounds, as illustrated by S14:

... identity is about who you are. This has been educational. There is a lot I hadn't considered as part of my [identity] backpack which I know now are also in there. For instance, culture, that is part of it [identity backpack] I am carrying.

Being acknowledged for the diversity and differences they culturally represent, some of the students with minority backgrounds even reported experiencing *pride* in who they are. They had finally the opportunity to explore and share things about their ethnic-cultural backgrounds and receive affirmation from the teachers and the classmates. For instance, S11, underlining how she became more conscious about “*the Kurdish part*” of her identity, said:

... I have become prouder of my culture. Yes, absolutely. I think it has been exciting to explore it and gain more insight.

Creation of an inclusive classroom environment was seemingly central to this development (Oppedal et al., submitted). The teachers, as they implemented the Identity Project, managed to create a collective sense of belonging. Through sharing personal experiences related to their cultural backgrounds, both teachers and students reported having developed closer ties. As S2 said:

They were interested in hearing from us. About our culture. And I feel that they think it is easier to understand the students once they [the teachers] know how they [the students] think about their [the students'] cultures and stuff.

When this student refers to “our culture” it is the heritage culture that is in question. Even if some teachers during the Identity Project encouraged the ethnic minority students to also consider their belonging to the Norwegian culture, it appears that the intervention gave them the tool they needed to talk with their students about their cultures of origin. Moreover, both teachers and students narrated an added nuance to this sense of belonging. The students seemed to be increasingly unified through sharing their experiences, including negative experiences of prejudice and discrimination with each other. For instance, Teacher 4 explained how the classroom dynamics became more positive as students started sharing their experiences with each other in a safe space. Similarly, S4 underscored the common element of facing discrimination that strengthens the sense of belonging:

... there are many who have experienced discrimination. ... And I thought it was very saddening to listen to the others' stories.

Such shared experiences, for example of discrimination, were common among students with minoritized cultures.

Students with ethnic majority background on the other hand, in the focus group interview talked about how afraid they were to ask their classmates and friends about their heritage culture. They did not have a sense of what questions they could raise without appearing racist or having discriminatory attitudes. One of the ethnic Norwegian students in the focus group explained it in the following way:

“Yeah, and then what happens is that people do not dare talking about it [other’s ethnicity and culture] because we have so little knowledge about it, so we become in a way afraid of saying something wrong . . . “like if you say something about that person for example (name of Kurdish student in the group) then. If I had talked with him about those things [ethnicity and culture]and maybe I said something that was somehow wrong, so maybe (the Kurdish student) would be hurt.”

The ethnic Norwegian students argued that they needed to learn about ethnicity and culture *in depth* in school, so they had enough knowledge to know how to talk with their friends and classmates about such topics.

### **Theme 3: teachers pushing for inclusion (or exclusion)**

As the focus groups and individual interviews revealed, there seemed to be a central mismatch between the identity the ethnic minority students needed their teachers to acknowledge and the acknowledgment they received from their teachers. These findings are in line with results from previous research from Norway (e.g., Chinga-Ramiraz, 2015). These students varied regarding the centrality of their ethnicity and hence how they positioned themselves vis-à-vis the ethnic Norwegians. Several of the ethnic minority students in the focus groups understood ethnicity as the central element of their identity and heritage, creating a stable and unchanging lineage over time for their families and cultures. When they were met by teachers who defined them also as Norwegians, they considered this as rather problematic, as demonstrated by the following discussion.

FG1: “There are some teachers who rub it in and say, “you are Norwegian.” Get it? “You are Norwegian because you are born in Norway.” Yes, but . . .

FG2: “I have noticed that. That’s true. I have experienced that as well.”

FG3: “I say ‘I am from Ghana,’ but they say ‘Yes, but you are Norwegian’ . . . It doesn’t make sense since you were simply born here, right? Your parents, their background, and your grandparents, all the way to grand-grand-grandfather and all that . . . they are from [Ghana], [that’s] the belonging, got it? So, it does not make you Norwegian just because you are born in Norway.”

The above dialogue between three students illustrates that the attempts of the teachers to include them as “Norwegians” backfired when they did not match the students’ needs. As some students pointed out, they often experienced such attempts as “*rubbing in*” Norwegianness and Norwegian values, while they may have experienced that their “dark skin” limited the possibility of claiming a Norwegian identity.

After implementation of the Identity Project, while all teachers reported an awareness of the need to affirm the varied student identities, there was still a rhetoric of color-blindness among a couple of the teachers, as exemplified by the words of Teacher 1:

. . . It is like that all my students who attend to Norwegian school, are Norwegian, right? We operate based on the intentions anchored in the curriculum.

Such a color-blind approach by teachers might not have the intended effect of inclusion on all students, as also reported by other researchers (e.g., Chinga-Ramirez, 2017; Hilt, 2015). However, some of the students who during the Identity Project experienced that their teachers told them they were Norwegians, saw this as something positive, providing them with new opportunities to define themselves. For students with an ethnic minority background who sought to belong to the larger society, this approach was welcomed since they were insecure about where they belonged. As S2 explained:

I think there are many who feel more Norwegian than their [parents’] country because they are accustomed to the environment and Norwegian culture . . . and speak Norwegian better than their language [mother tongue] and so they feel more that they belong here.

Feeling Norwegian, yet being othered by the society, these students might then need teachers who extend them the possibility of negotiating their belonging.



#### **Theme 4: using ethnic-cultural background as a learning/teaching tool**

A common theme in the focus groups with both the teachers and students was the lack of interest in and engagement with topics such as ethnicity and culture by the teachers, echoing much research in Norway (e.g., Jortveit, 2014; Thomassen & Munthe, 2021). After the completion of the Identity Project, several teachers, both of ethnic minority and majority backgrounds, narrated that they had used themselves, namely their own ethnic-cultural background and their own experiences as examples in teaching the curriculum of the Identity Project. They argued that they used themselves as examples didactically to stimulate the learning processes of the students, which resulted in more personally relevant and engaging discussions. As Teacher 2 uttered:

It was great. It became a great interaction. Some asked questions. Some provided examples, and I got to share my own examples. So, great interaction, yeah.

Similarly, Teacher 3 and Teacher 6 explained how they used their own life experiences as illustrations, for instance to show the diverse ways families develop and family heritage takes shape over time.

Teacher 3: *“Yes, for example when we were working on family circles (mapping the family members), I used an example from my life . . . To illustrate that families did not necessarily have to look the same, but rather could be like this and that too.”*

Teacher 6: *“I used a lot of examples . . . from my own experiences . . . about how I experienced it [complexity of family relations] and how I found out who I was.”*

There was an agreement in the teachers’ narratives that talking about cultural background, ethnicity and other diversity topics had an immense positive effect on students’ engagement and motivation to participate in the class. Using the personally relevant background of the students as focal point, students ended up learning not only a lot more about their own backgrounds but also others’ cultures, traditions and so on in addition to widening their vocabulary. Teacher 4 explained this point, underscoring that the classroom became a safe space:

They are actually interested. They don’t get what this is about at first, but when they get a hang of it, so they become curious. And they actually learn something and have a desire to learn more.

## **Discussion**

The present study addresses potential changes in narratives about ethnicity and culture among teachers who have been trained in and have implemented the Identity Project triangulated with information from students at the same schools. Much research in Norway points out that diversity topics such as “race,” ethnicity and culture are usually avoided by teachers as they find such topics uncomfortable to deal with, lack competence and the necessary materials (e.g., textbooks) with nuanced understandings to be able to engage with students (e.g., Midtbøen et al., 2014; Thomassen & Munthe, 2021). Our analysis indicates that the teachers who participated in the Identity Project went from avoiding the difficult topic of diversity concepts to increased awareness and engagement with such, which enabled them to engage mostly in a beneficial dialogue with their students and achieve to varying degree the goals of multicultural education.

Activities of the Identity Project seemingly led teachers to use both their own and students’ background as examples in the teaching. This arguably achieves the goal of *content integration* (Banks, 2009) as examples and content from a variety of cultures both they and the students represent were used to illustrate key concepts and understandings in the curriculum of the Identity Project.

*Prejudice reduction*, according to Banks (2009), deals with creating for the students the possibility of developing more positive understandings of each other’s racialized and ethnic identities. As our analysis indicates, the Identity Project offers the students possibility of identity exploration (see also

Oppedal et al., submitted). Moreover, the common activities in the classroom whereby the students shared their ethnic-cultural related stories with each other, had the positive effect that the students gained a more nuanced understanding of what ethnicity involves, with the result of increased acceptance of and respect for the diversity that each student represents. When the students feel seen, heard, and respected, then this goal is achieved.

*Equity pedagogy* (Banks, 2009) is about using teaching techniques in combination with a positive and inclusive classroom environment to facilitate learning for students from diverse backgrounds. The various cultural perspectives represented in the classroom need to be considered as well as understanding of each student's heritage culture, to develop culturally relevant teaching (Banks, 2009; Nieto & Bode, 2018). The fact that the student backgrounds were a central element of the teaching activities in the Identity Project possibly contributed to achieving this goal.

Although teachers cannot, on their own, overcome structural barriers and societal ideologies, they can contribute to an improvement of the situation in which many marginalized students attend school (Nieto, 2017). Both the teachers and the students underlined that the Identity Project not only offered varied opportunities for cooperative learning activities, but seemingly also helped create, at least, a classroom environment based on mutual respect and accept, as we also reported elsewhere (Oppedal et al., submitted), and equality despite students' diverse backgrounds. Such facilitation of equality arguably resembles *empowering* dimension of multicultural education (Banks, 2009).

Especially important for our paper is the concept of *affirming students' identities*. Students who participated in the Identity Project narrated an understanding of having their diverse backgrounds and unique identities affirmed by both their teachers and classmates. This development shows a contrast to the common thread in the focus group interviews where students complained about lack of such affirmation, in line with much critical research in Norway (e.g., Chinga-Ramiraz, 2015; 2017). Nieto (2017) argues that students' identities (e.g., their ethnic, religious, racialized, cultural backgrounds) are often seen as problems to be disposed of rather than as already available resources to be utilized as part of the teaching. What is expected of teachers within multicultural education is instead that they affirm student identities, through admiration and respect for the differences students represent. This is not only achieved through careful choices of curriculum and pedagogical approaches, but also through establishing a positive relationship with students. Hence, successful teachers are those who also *create a sense of belonging* whereby all students, who may feel alienated regardless of their ethnicity, can claim belonging to the class/school collective. The common experience of more positive relations by both the teachers and the students in our study is illustrative of the potential of the Identity Project, which for some students led to feelings of pride for who they are, and hence, increased self-worth; also, a common goal of multicultural education (Bassey, 1997; Nieto, 2017). For instance, the students in Chinga-Ramiraz (2015) study had the experience of being othered as they were culturally and visibly different from the *imagined sameness* of the "Norwegian We," their ethnic-cultural identities were however paradoxically "invisible" in the school, as they were not affirmed positively. Similar experiences were also reported by some of the ethnic minority students in our study in the nonintervention focus group. However, all students who participated in the Identity Project, confirmed receiving a certain degree of acknowledgment and affirmation for who they culturally are.

Yet, there might sometimes be a case of "too far" in teachers' attempt to include students, which was the case for a couple of the teachers in our study, even after the completion of the Identity Project. Firmly intent on implementing the values of the core curriculum of the Norwegian educational system that emphasize inclusion of all students, there was a tendency among the teachers to extend to students the possibility of claiming a Norwegian identity and thus belonging to the majority "Norwegian we." This tendency among teachers have been reported by several studies in Norway as a manifestation of the colorblind approach of the Norwegian society (e.g., Fylkesnes, 2018; Hilt, 2015; Midtbøen et al., 2014). As reported by several students in the focus groups, such colorblind inclusive attempts by the teachers might indeed backfire and lead to lack of affirmation and experience of alienation. Thus, there is a need to improve the Norwegian version of the Identity Project manual and the training of the facilitators to avoid such possible negative outcomes.

When multicultural education is not made an essential part of teacher education, as was highlighted by the teachers in the present study, teachers may end up with “only rudimentary knowledge of culturally responsive teaching” (Benediktsson, 2022, p. 238). Coupled with the widespread color-blind approaches, based on the idea of equality, of many Norwegian teachers, it becomes then a major challenge for Norwegian education system when minority students “find themselves on the outside of the equity in the school’s social arena” (Chinga-Ramirez, 2017, p. 163). While our analysis of the focus group interviews with the students and the teachers before implementation of the Identity Project, pointed to a lack of multicultural awareness by the teachers and lack of affirmation of students’ diverse identities, there were significant improvement on both issues, as reported in the interviews after the implementation. We have also reported elsewhere (Oppedal et al., submitted) that implementation of the Identity Project has led to culturally more inclusive classrooms, increased engagement which created more motivation for learning and gaining relevant knowledge, and exploration of ethnic-cultural identity.

If multicultural education is to surpass a simple recognition of differences, it must be aligned with the concept of social justice (Nieto, 2017). Even when there may be admirable intentions, no program or approach, like the Identity Project, by itself, can change the sociopolitical status quo in either schools or society. So, regarding the micro system of the classroom, the implementation of the Identity Project may promote more confidence and competence to deal with the ethnic diversity context of their classrooms and thus help students develop and preserve their ethnic-cultural identities, as equal members of the collective that the classroom represents. However, power relations in society that regulate who belongs where, do not disappear simply because such diversity education programs are implemented. Overall, if multicultural education programs do not lead to consciousness-raising and contribute to change, they will be considered not to fulfill their purpose (Nieto & Bode, 2018).

### **Limitations**

Firstly, one limitation is related to the teacher sample’s size. Norwegian teachers are usually over-worked and have little time to use on extracurricular activities. With the help of minority counselors, we were able to recruit seven teachers. Even though a sample size of seven might be considered within the acceptable range for a qualitative study (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009), we included also student interviews in our study as a way of triangulation of data sources to increase the trustworthiness of our analysis. Another issue with the teacher sample is the fact that this is a convenience sample of teachers who were not only interested in but also willing to increase their competence. This should be considered in relation to another Norwegian study which reported lack of willingness among teachers to receive additional training despite lacking multicultural competence (Jortveit, 2014). A related limitation regards the way change in teachers’ behavior/competence was measured. We provide only an indirect measure of such a change through the narratives of teachers themselves, which may be prone to self-serving bias. Including student data however provides a certain level of triangulation, especially considering the fact that students reported, independently in individual interviews, observed change in teachers’ behavior, corroborating the reported change by the teachers. To further increase the validity of the reported change in teacher competence, a direct measure such as classroom observations could be beneficial (e.g., Briggs & Alzen, 2019).

Another limitation is the lack of ethnic Norwegian students among the post-intervention interviewees, that may contribute to a sense that the Identity Project only addresses the needs of minoritized students, which is not the case. The significantly higher proportion of ethnic minority students in the participating classrooms cannot explain why ethnic Norwegian students did not offer to contribute to the interviews. We may speculate that these students were less engaged in and motivated by the Identity Project curriculum. However, neither the teachers nor the students that were interviewed mentioned variation related to immigrant vs. non-immigrant background in engagement with the curriculum. Nevertheless, future studies should ensure a better representation of various ethnic groups, including those representing the majority population, when assessing aspects of the Identity Project.

## Conclusion

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to address whether the Identity Project might contribute to a change beyond the classroom context, our analysis points to its contribution to a valuable change within the classroom. The overall experience of both the teachers and the students after going through the curriculum and activities of the Identity Project seems to be in line with what one could expect from a multicultural education approach. In addition, the Identity Project might be a valuable tool for teachers to help their students develop their identities for which they are affirmed, acknowledged and can take pride in, in line with Erikson's (1968) presumptions for positive identity formation throughout adolescence.

Generally, thinking positively about a set of practices will play a significant role in whether teachers will be willing to implement practice them (Fives & Buehl, 2016; Liou et al., 2019). Then, we can expect that to the degree which teachers believe in and are comfortable with the content of the Identity Project, they will want to implement it. Given our analysis, doing so will then increase the likelihood of acknowledging the diverse cultural backgrounds of students, affirming their identities and creating a sense of belonging. Even though the implementation might be time consuming and the curriculum might be demanding, as we (Oppedal et al., submitted) report elsewhere, the Identity Project may create a safe and more inclusive classroom environment in which students in culturally diverse classrooms develop closer and respectful relationships with the classmates and teachers (in Norway), corroborating research from other national contexts (Juang et al., 2020; Umaña-Taylor, 2023), and may lead to increased motivation among students and help students attain a language to comprehend and discuss minoritizing experiences. Hence, also following upon the study by Pevco-Zimmer et al. (2024) who reported increased self-efficacy among pre-service teachers after participating in the Identity Project, we recommend teachers engage with the Identity Project curriculum even when they, to begin with, do not feel confident or think that students lack motivation or language skills, which seems to increase the likelihood of adolescents' exploration of ethnic-cultural identity (Oppedal et al., submitted). In a time with rapid changes along cultural, political and economic dimensions and with increasing diversity in society, educational programs and interventions which stimulate dialogue between students of diverse backgrounds can make a meaningful contribution to sustainable and tolerant societies, promoting social cohesion (UNESCO, 2006). To succeed with implementing a multicultural education pedagogy, challenges must be solved at the school staff level (i.e., competence and attitudes), the school level (i.e. inclusive school culture) and on an education policy level (Gorski, 2009, 2012; Gorski & Parekh, 2020; Nieto, 2017). In this sense, the Identity Project has arguably potential to be a valuable tool for teachers to promote a positive classroom environment and a sense of belonging for all students, especially for those of minoritized backgrounds. Given the school's centrality in reproducing and changing societal structures, such small yet positive interventions might be considered the building blocks of creating social cohesion in democratic societies.

## Notes

1. We use "ethnic identity" when discussing studies in Europe and "ethnic-racial identity" when referring to studies in the United States, considering socio-cultural variations in the understanding of ethnicity, race, and culture. In the Norwegian version of the Identity Project, it was decided to use "ethnic-cultural identity" (see page 10).
2. The Directorate of Integration and Diversity has employed *minority counselors* in culturally diverse secondary schools across the country. They are part of the schools' psychosocial services, and their mandate is to contribute assistance to children and youth who are at risk for, or exposed to, negative social control, honor-related violence, and enforced marriages.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

Salman Türken  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7329-5856>

## References

- Abdullahi, A., Berne, S., Juang, L. P., & Frisén, A. (2024). Framing of ethnicity: Perceptions of pre-service teachers in higher education.
- Banks, J. A. (2009). Multicultural education: Dimensions and paradigms. In J. A. Banks (Ed.), *The Routledge international companion to multicultural education* (pp. 9–32). Routledge.
- Banks, J. A. (2014). *An introduction to multicultural education*. Pearson.
- Barrett, M. (2018). How schools can promote the intercultural competence of young people. *European Psychologist*, 23(1), 93–104. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000308>
- Barrett, M. (2020). The Council of Europe's reference framework of competences for democratic culture: Policy context, content and impact. *London Review of Education*, 18(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.18546/LRE.18.1.01>
- Bassey, M. (1997). Multicultural education: Philosophy, theory and practice. *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, 21, 4.
- Benediktsson, A. I. (2022). The place of multicultural education in legal acts concerning teacher education in Norway. *Multicultural Education Review*, 14(4), 228–242. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2005615X.2023.2164972>
- Bennett, C. (2001). Genres of research in multicultural education. *Review of Educational Research*, 71(2), 171–217. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543071002171>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>
- Briggs, D. C., & Alzen, J. L. (2019). Making inferences about teacher observation scores over time. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 79(4), 636–664. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013164419826237>
- Burner, T., & Biseth, H. (2016). A critical analysis of an innovative approach: A case of diversity in Norwegian education. *Sage Open*, 6(4), 215824401668068. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244016680689>
- Burner, T., Nodeland, T. S., & Aamaas, Å. (2018). Critical perspectives on perceptions and practices of diversity in education. *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education (NJCIE)*, 2(1), 3–15. <https://doi.org/10.7577/njcie.2188>
- Carter, N., Bryant-Lukosius, D., DiCenso, A., Blythe, J., & Neville, A. J. (2014). The use of triangulation in qualitative research. *Oncology Nursing Forum*, 41(5), 545–547. <https://doi.org/10.1188/14.Onf.545-547>
- Chinga-Ramirez, C. (2015). *Skolen ser ikke hele meg! En narrativ og postkolonial studie av sosial ulikhet i den videregående skolen gjennom minoritetselevers erfaringer med å være annerledes [The school does not see whole of me! A narrative and postcolonial study of social inequality in the upper secondary school through minority students' experiences of being different]* [Doctoral dissertation]. NTNU Norway.
- Chinga-Ramirez, C. (2017). Becoming a «foreigner»: The principle of equality, intersected identities, and social exclusion in the Norwegian school. *European Education*, 49(2–3), 151–165. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10564934.2017.1335173>
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). Teacher education around the world: What can we learn from international practice? *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(3), 291–309. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2017.1315399>
- Education act. (2007). Act relating to primary and secondary education and training. *Lovdata*. <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLE/lov/1998-07-17-61>
- Egeli, E., & Thomassen, W. (2015). På vei mot en flerkulturell praksis? Utfordringer og muligheter i dagens lærerutdanning [Towards a multicultural practice? Challenges and possibilities in today's teacher education. In K. M. Jonsmoen & M. Greek (Eds.), *Språkmangfold i utdanningen. Refleksjon over pedagogisk praksis* [Language diversity in education. Reflection over pedagogical practices] (pp. 137–158). Gyldendal.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity, youth and crisis*. W.W.Norton & Company, Inc.
- European Commission. (2017). Preparing teachers for diversity. *Final report*. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/b347bf7d-1db1-11e7-aeb3-01aa75ed71a1>
- Fives, H., & Buehl, M. M. (2016). Teachers' beliefs, in the context of policy reform. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 3(1), 114–121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2372732215623554>
- Fosse, B. O., & Scheie, J. T. (2021). Preparing student teachers to teach in diverse classrooms: A comparative case study of two teacher education programmes. *Acta Didactica Norden*, 15(3). <https://doi.org/10.5617/adno.8362>
- Führer, L. M. (2021). *The social meaning of skin color: Interrogating the interrelations of phenotype/race and nation in Norway*. University of Oslo. <http://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-91570>
- Fylkesnes, S. (2018). Whiteness in teacher education research discourses: A review of the use and meaning making of the term cultural diversity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 71, 24–33. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.12.005>
- Gorski, P. C. (2009). What we're teaching teachers: An analysis of multicultural teacher education coursework syllabi. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25(2), 309–318. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2008.07.008>



- Gorski, P. C. (2012). Instructional, Institutional, and Sociopolitical Challenges of Teaching Multicultural Teacher Education Courses. *The Teacher Educator*, 47(3), 216–235. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08878730.2012.660246>
- Gorski, P. C., & Parekh, G. (2020). Supporting critical multicultural teacher educators: Transformative teaching, social justice education, and perceptions of institutional support. *Intercultural Education*, 31(3), 265–285. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2020.1728497>
- Government. (2017). *Core curriculum – values and principles for primary and secondary education*. Kunnskapsdepartementet. <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/53d21ea2bc3a4202b86b83cfe82da93e/core-curriculum.pdf>
- Government. (2024). *National minorities*. <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/topics/indigenous-peoples-and-minorities/national-minorities/id1404/>
- Gullestad, M. (2004). Blind slaves of our prejudices: Debating ‘culture’ and ‘race’ in Norway. *Ethnos*, 69(2), 177–203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0014184042000212858>
- Hauge, A. M. (2014). *Den felleskulturelle skolen*. Universitetsforlaget.
- Hilt, L. T. (2015). Included as excluded and excluded as included: Minority language pupils in Norwegian inclusion policy. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 19(2), 165–182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2014.908966>
- Jortveit, M. (2014). *Inkludering i en flerkulturell skole En kvalitativ studie av forståelsen av inkludering uttrykt i styringsdokumenter og blant lærere. [Inclusion in a multicultural school. A qualitative study on understanding inclusion expressed in governing documents and by teachers]* [PhD. Dissertation]. University of Stavanger.
- Juang, L. P., Schachner, M. K., Pevec, S., & Moffitt, U. (2020). The Identity Project intervention in Germany: Creating a climate for reflection, connection, and adolescent identity development. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 173(2), 65–82. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20379>
- Juang, L. P., Umaña-Taylor, A. J., Schachner, M. K., Frisén, A., Hwang, C. P., Moscardino, U., Motti-Stefanidi, F., Oppedal, B., Pavlopoulos, V., Abdullahi, A. K., Barahona, R., Berne, S., Ceccon, C., Gharaei, N., Moffitt, U., Ntalachanis, A., Pevec, S., Sandberg, D. J., Zacharia, A., & Syed, M. (2022). Ethnic-racial identity in Europe: Adapting the identity project intervention in five countries. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 20(6), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405629.2022.2131520>
- Juárez, B. G., Smith, D. T., & Hayes, C. (2008). Social justice means just us white people: The diversity paradox in teacher education. *Democracy & Education*, 17(3), 20–25.
- Kvale, S., & Brinkman, S. (2009). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. Sage.
- Kyllingstad, J. R. (2017). The absence of race in Norway? *Journal of Anthropological Sciences*, 95, 319–327. <https://doi.org/10.4436/JASS.95012>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465–491. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312032003465>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2014). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: Aka the remix. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 74–84. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.84.1.p2rj131485484751>
- Lehman, C. L. (2017). Multicultural competence: A literature review supporting focused training for preservice teachers teaching diverse students. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 8(10), 109–116. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1139702>
- Lentin, A. (2005). Replacing ‘race’, historicizing ‘culture’ in multiculturalism. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 39(4), 379–396. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220500347832>
- Liou, Y. H., Canrinus, E. T., & Daly, A. J. (2019). Activating the implementers: The role of organizational expectations, teacher beliefs, and motivation in bringing about reform. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 79, 60–72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2018.12.004>
- Lund, A. B. (2018). En studie av læreres forståelse av mangfoldsbegrepet [A study of teachers’ understanding of the concept of diversity]. *Nordic Journal of Pedagogy & Critique*, 4, 87. <https://doi.org/10.23865/ntpk.v4.608>
- May, S. (2009). Critical multiculturalism and education. In J. A. Banks (Ed.), *The Routledge international companion to multicultural education* (pp. 33–48). Routledge.
- Midtbøen, A. H., & Nadim, M. (2022). Navigating to the top in an egalitarian welfare state: Institutional opportunity structures of second-generation social mobility. *International Migration Review*, 56(1), 97–122. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019791832111014829>
- Midtbøen, A. H., Orupabo, J., & Røthing, Å. (2014). Etniske og religiøse minoriteter I læremidler. Lærer- og elevperspektiver [Ethnic and religious minorities in the curriculum. Teacher and student perspectives]. *Institute for Social Research*.
- Ministry of Education. (2010). *National guidelines for initial teacher education*. [https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/kd/vedlegg/uh/forskrifter/national\\_curriculum\\_differensiert\\_teacher\\_education.pdf](https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/kd/vedlegg/uh/forskrifter/national_curriculum_differensiert_teacher_education.pdf)
- Nieto, S. (2017). Re-imagining multicultural education: New visions, new possibilities. *Multicultural Education Review*, 9(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2005615X.2016.1276671>
- Nieto, S., & Bode, P. (2018). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education*. Pearson.
- Nightingale, D., & Cromby, J. (1999). *Social constructionist psychology: A critical analysis of theory and practice*. Open University Press.
- OECD. (2005). *Teachers matter: Attracting, developing and retaining effective teachers*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264018044-en>



- Oppedal, B., Türken, S., Ali, W. A., Adem, H. A. (2023). “We got to know each other better and talked more about stuff we usually kind of do not talk about”. A qualitative study of the acceptability of the Norwegian version of the Identity Project.
- Paine, L., Aydarova, O., & Syahril, I. (2017). Globalization and teacher education. In D. J. Clandinin & J. Husu (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of research on teacher education* (pp. 1133–1148). Sage.
- Pevce-Zimmer, S., Juang, L. P., & Schachner, M. K. (2024). Promoting awareness and self-efficacy for culturally responsive teaching of pre-service teachers through the Identity Project – a mixed methods study. *Identity*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2024.2344086>
- Rivas-Drake, D., Syed, M., Umana-Taylor, A. J., Markstrom, C., French, S., Schwartz, S. J., & Lee, R. (2014). Feeling good, happy, and proud: A meta-analysis of positive ethnic-racial affect and adjustment. *Child Development*, 85(1), 77–102. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12175>
- Schwarzenthal, M., Juang, L. P., Schachner, M. K., van de Vijver, F. J. R., & Handrick, A. (2017). From tolerance to understanding: Exploring the development of intercultural competence in multiethnic contexts from early to late adolescence. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 27(5), 388–399. <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2317>
- Seeberg, M. L. (2003). Dealing with difference: Two classrooms, two countries. A comparative study of Norwegian and Dutch processes of alterity and identity, drawn from three points of view. *NOVA report 18/2003*. NOVA.
- Statistics Norway. (2023). *Immigrants and Norwegian-born to immigrant parents*. Retrieved November 15, 2023, from. <https://www.ssb.no/en/befolkning/innvandrere/statistikk/innvandrere-og-norskfodte-med-innvandrerforeldre>
- Statistics Norway. (2024). *Immigrants and Norwegian-born to immigrant parents, in total, by sex and country background 1970 – 2024*. <https://www.ssb.no/statbank/table/05183/tableViewLayout1/>
- Steinkellner, A., Krokedal, L., & Andersen, E. (2023). *Innvandrere og deres barn - en mangfoldig gruppe* [Immigrants and their children - a diverse group]. Retrieved November 1, 2023, from <https://www.ssb.no/befolkning/innvandrere/artikler/innvandrerne-og-deres-barn-en-mangfoldig-gruppe>
- Syed, M., & Juang, L. P. (2014). Ethnic identity, identity coherence, and psychological functioning: Testing basic assumptions of the developmental model. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 20(2), 176–190. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035330>
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In W. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (2nd ed. pp. 7–24). Nelson-Hall.
- Thomassen, W., & Munthe, E. (2020). A Norwegian perspective: Student teachers’ orientations towards cultural and linguistic diversity in schools. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 96, 103151. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103151>
- Thomassen, W., & Munthe, E. (2021). Educating Norwegian preservice teachers for the multicultural classroom – what knowledge do student teachers and mentor teachers express? *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 44(2), 234–248. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2020.1758661>
- Umaña-Taylor, A. J. (2023). Promoting adolescent adjustment by intervening in ethnic-racial identity development: Opportunities for developmental prevention science and considerations for a global theory of change. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 47(4), 352–365. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01650254231162614>
- Umaña-Taylor, A. J., & Douglass, S. (2017). Developing an ethnic-racial identity intervention from a developmental perspective: Process, content, and Implementation of the Identity Project. In N. J. Cabrera & B. Leyendecker (Eds.), *Handbook on positive development of minority children and youth* (pp. 437–454). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43645-6\\_26](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43645-6_26)
- Umaña-Taylor A. J., Kornienko O., Douglass Bayless S. and Updegraff K. A. (2018). A universal intervention program increases ethnic-racial identity exploration and resolution to predict adolescent psychosocial functioning one year later. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 47(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-017-0766-5>
- UNESCO. (2006). *Guidelines on intercultural education*. <https://www.gcedclearinghouse.org/resources/unesco-guidelines-intercultural-education>
- Willig, C. (2013). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology*. Open University Press.
- Zygmunt, E., & Clark, P. (2016). *Transforming teacher education for social justice*. Teachers College Press.