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To cite this article: Kerstin von Brömssen (2021): Exploring the Concept of Race in Swedish Educational Research after WWII – A Research Overview, Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy, DOI: 10.1080/20020317.2021.2002510

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2021.2002510

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Published online: 18 Nov 2021.

Article views: 87

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Exploring the Concept of Race in Swedish Educational Research after WWII – A Research Overview

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ABSTRACT

Research about race and racism(s) has helped to explain power relations and differences in education. However, it has been difficult to have a theoretical lens using the concept of race and racism(s) accepted in areas of education, as well as in educational research in Sweden. Issues formulated in terms of race and racism(s) are controversial and there is strong resistance to talk about race. This article provides an overview of research in education using the concepts of race, racism(s), and/or racialization in Sweden after World War II. The aim is to investigate educational research where these concepts come into use, how this research is framed, the findings of the studies, as well as nuances and tendencies in educational research using the concept of race. The article locates the historical view of the concept of race and its use in Sweden and argues that the history and unresolved political issues around eugenics and race come into play and contribute to the hesitation and avoidance of the use of the concept.

Introduction

The central aim of this article is to present an overview of educational research in Sweden that uses the concepts of race, racism(s), and/or racialization after World War II until today. As in several countries in Europe – with the notable exception of the UK – the concept of race has been almost taboo in Sweden, both in research and in everyday conversations. Instead, the term ethnicity, and partly also culture and religion, have replaced race and, in practice, included it (Hübinnedt & Mählck, 2015, p. 59; Hübinnedt et al., 2012, pp. 44, 58). However, under the influence of particularly Anglo-Saxon research, research using the concept of race, racism(s), and/or racialization has become slightly more common in Sweden since the 1990s, although the use of these concepts is contested within Swedish academia, as well as in society at large (Andreassen & Vitus, 2015; Gyberg et al., 2021; Hübinnedt & Mählck, 2015; Sandberg, 2017). For example, Hübinnedt and Mählck mentioned that there is little statistical knowledge about the current state of racial discrimination and segregation in Sweden, and conducting research on race and racism is still threatening to mainstream Swedish society, which regards itself as anti-racist and as a champion for universal rights (Hübinnedt & Mählck, 2015; cf. McEachrane, 2018; Schough, 2008). Hübinnedt and Mählck have even argued that race as a research topic is deemed to be ‘invalid’ in Sweden (2015, p. 60), while Mulini et al. (2009) and Eliassi (2014) have drawn attention to the persistence of colour blindness in Nordic and Swedish societies. Given that academic contexts are intertwined with national discourses, policies and geopolitical positions that influence not only what kind of research is being conducted, but also how and by whom (Kurečić, 2015), it is interesting to explore the use of the social category of race and its derivations in educational research in Sweden. Moreover, there has been an emphasis on the need for educational responses to racism in education in the Western world since World War II (Arneback, 2012; Arneback & Jämte, 2021; Dadzie, 2000; Lynch et al., 2017; SFS 2010:800; Swedish Government, 2000/59, 2011:39), which has further increased interest in how the issues of race and racism(s) are used and handled in Swedish educational research. Issues related to race and racism(s) also became central to the agenda due to right-wing populism and anti-immigration movements such as the Sweden Democrats formed in 1988, which contradicted the antiracist self-image of Sweden and contributed to the normalization of racism in Swedish society. For example, Ekman and Krzyzanowski showed how xenophobic and racist discourses, once propagated by the far and radical right, gradually penetrated into Swedish news media and how the mainstream discourse of editorials normalizes and legitimizes...
racist discourses (Ekman & Krzyżanowski, 2021; cf. Bergman, 2017). Given the debates and the Swedish history of racism, it is interesting to explore when concepts such as race and racism are used within educational research. Thus, the present study asks the two following questions:

(1) When does the concept of race and connecting derivations come into use in educational research in Sweden?

(2) In case the concept of race and its derivations are used, how is the research framed and what are the contributions of the use of the concept?

The article is divided into five sections. I will start with a retrospective personal narrative to contextualize the experience of working with the category of race in education. I am aware that an uncritical and exclusive application of stories as a basis for theorizing can be problematic and might only serve an instrumental function (cf. Jones & Anderson Crow, 2017). However, I believe the narration serves as an interesting starting point and sets the scene to discuss the idea and the concept of race in use in educational research. As argued by Jones and Anderson Crow (2017), stories are not intended to distort the truth but to support people to engage with problems and issues on a more human level in terms of what matters to them. I then give an account of my method, data and analysis before providing a brief overview in order to locate the concept of race in Sweden in a historical perspective, in legal frameworks and in education. The fourth part of my article is formed as an overview in three waves of educational research in Sweden that uses the concept of race and its derivations. The paper ends with a concluding discussion.

A retrospective personal narration

The time of this event is 20 years back in time but remains in my memory as if it happened yesterday. A colleague and I were employed at a university department in Sweden with extensive teacher education and further training in education. On this particular day, we were hired to present work and research at a training day for teachers on ‘multicultural education’ in a secondary school. All teachers were sitting in the auditorium and the atmosphere felt good. My colleague, a researcher in the field of postcolonial studies, started the lecture discussing a theoretical lens on the history of Europe and Sweden, obviously in a postcolonial perspective. The concept of monocultural education was introduced and Western education, colonialism, race, racism and white supremacy were problematized initially. After a while, my colleague got into the concept of race and Sweden’s racial and eugenic history. I was sitting at the side but in the front of the auditorium, and I could see people looking a bit uncomfortable and casting glances at each other. Suddenly, two or three men right at the back got up and walked out. I could feel how tense the situation was and no one said anything. During the break, I talked to some of the teachers, who said that they did not understand why we should talk about race and Sweden’s history around this when it was supposed to be about multicultural education. These teachers assumed that the male teachers who left didn’t want to hear about a downgrading of Sweden and Swedes and the talk about racism and the history of eugenics. ‘We don’t have any racists in our school,’ they claimed.

I interpret this personal narrative as an indicative example of denial of racism, which has also been pertinent in academic settings in Sweden (cf. Måhlck & Fellesson, 2014; Thapar-Björkert & Farahani, 2019; Vetenskapsrådet. [The Swedish Research Council], 2017). Among the forms of denial mentioned by van Dijk are disclaimers, mitigation, euphemism, excuses, victim-blaming, reversal and other moves of defence, face-keeping and positive self-presentation in negative discourse about minorities, immigrants and (other) anti-racists (Van Dijk, 1992). Previous research indicates that people object to being called racist, just like the teachers in the narrative, and the self-image as tolerant Swedes makes people deny racism (cf. Idevall Hagren, 2019, p. 2). Thus, the issue of race and racism is a sensitive one, which is also facilitated by the difficulties of defining race and racism as their meaning is rarely specific or precise but consists of a number of conflicting dimensions (Mac an Ghaill, 1999; Roth, 2016; cf. Glasgow et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the concept of race can be described as a ‘chameleon-like’ concept that adapts to the cultural and political situation (Lentin, 2008, p. 491). Since the occurrence mentioned in the personal narrative above, situations where denial of racism or racist talk occur have been common for several colleagues as researchers and teacher educators in Sweden (Måhlck & Fellesson, 2014; Thapar-Björkert & Farahani, 2019). The mentioned experience from the teachers’ training day made us as lecturers and researchers depressed about how the teachers reacted, but also about the heavy and difficult task of working with these issues.

Below I provide an account of my method, data and analysis for this article, before briefly looking back into the idea of race in Swedish history.

Method, data sources and analysis

The material for this article consists of reviewed and published articles and book chapters using the concepts of race, racism(s) and/or racialization in the field of education in Sweden from 1945 to 2021; that is, from the end of WWII until 2021. The publications were recognized based on the following criteria: they should be produced within a context of
education dealing with primary, secondary or high-school education or school contexts in Sweden. This means that the publications should be research-based and should problematize education and/or contexts of schooling for children and youths from one to 19 years of age in the Swedish school system. I have not included research work on higher education within academia or adult education beyond traditional schooling, such as studies at municipal adult education (Komvux) or Swedish for immigrants (SFI). I think these fields need attention on these matters in their own right.

However, it is important to mention that there is a vast field of research covering many aspects of exclusion and inclusion, culture, language, religion, ethnicity, discrimination and ‘othering’ in education in Sweden. A good overview of this extensive theme is offered in the chapter by Behtoui, Hertzberg, Jonsson, Léon Rosales and Neergaard entitled ‘Sweden: The Otherization of the Descendants of Immigrants’ (2019, pp. 999–1034).

The literature search for this article was performed in the databases ERIC and Scopus with the research strings race*, racial*, racialization*, education* and Sweden*. The database for Swedish PhD thesis was included in the literature search, as well as a search in the most common Swedish educational journals like Pedagogisk forskning i Norden, Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, Educare, Education Inquiry, Utbildning & Demokrati and Nordidactica. The literature search was assisted by the University West Library in Trollhättan, Sweden. The research literature will be discussed from the authors’ use of the concept of race, racism or racialization in order to find what kind of theoretical approaches and what kind of findings that are the result of the studies.

The history of race in Sweden

As Soo-Jin Lee argued, ‘it is prudent to keep in mind the lessons learned from the history of scientific racism’ (2015, p. 32). I agree with this claim that we need to reflect on the issue of race in a broader historical perspective in order to understand the Swedish context of the use of race today. Researchers have noted that race, if recognized at all, can be articulated, used, and thought of at the individual, institutional and cultural levels, and are underpinned by racial ideologies and structures. Such ideologies can be viewed as global systems of power relations and played out within political and ideological struggles locally (Murji & Solomos, 2015). Thus, racism does not occur in a vacuum; it is shaped by the changing structures of power conflicts and ideologies in the larger surrounding society, thus shifting and appearing in new forms such as anti-Muslim racism in Sweden and in Europe (von Brömssen, 2008; Mulinari & Neergaard, 2012). It is also important to emphasize that race and racism, in my understanding and also in broader scholarly understanding, are social constructs; that is, ‘social inventions’ and a ‘biological fiction’ acted out by people on societal arenas (Delpit, 1995/2006; cf. Zakharov, 2015; Wasniowski, 2018). Thus, as Said argued, racial differences, both historically and today, are ‘the product of human work’ (1985), perpetuated and reinforced by society. As such, it is important to be aware of the concept’s different historical socio-cultural embeddedness and different and shifting meanings (Gillborn, 2018; Mac an Ghaill, 1999; Murji & Solomos, 2015; Roth, 2016). However, it is also important to mention here that even though it is a social construct, the everyday life consequences and effects of racism are real – people feel racism in their bodies and experiences (cf. Smedley & Smedley, 2005).

As part of Europe, Sweden contributed to, participated in and benefitted from the colonial creating of the world, and thus also around categorizations and discourses of race depending on geographical locations, origins, and physical appearances of peoples (Fur, 2013; Lindmark, 2000; Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012; McEachrane, 2018). This is obvious in work, all the way from the Swedish botanist Carl von Linné’s taxonomies in the work Systema Naturae (1735–1758) until the middle of the 20th century in schoolbooks that referred to ‘lower’ and ‘higher’ races and Europe as the central place of historical evolution (McEachrane, 2018; Palmberg, 2009).

Moreover, Sweden has a history of racial constructions in the name of eugenics and ‘social engineering’, which were heavily influenced by Social Darwinism and racial biology (cf. Broberg & Tydén, 2005; Ericsson, 2016; McEachrane, 2018; Osanami Törngren, 2019; Spektorowski, 2004). However, this was not exceptional at the time. Sweden’s racial hygiene and sterilization policy emerged in an international context and eugenics programmes appeared throughout much of Europe, the USA and Canada (Broberg & Roll-Hansen, 2005; Ladd-Taylor, 2001). The laws that were introduced concerning eugenics and racial hygiene had broad support among the Swedish Government (Broberg & Roll-Hansen, 2005). Thus, such ideas were part of the scientific society and view at the time, and Swedish scientists were aware of research in the field (Wasniowski, 2018). The Swedish Society for Racial Hygiene was established in 1909 following a larger European pattern and had intimate ties with the eugenic movement in Germany that shaped the Nazi ideology (Björkman & Widalm, 2010).

After WWII, Sweden supported eugenics and a productive welfare, in which ideas of ‘efficiency, productivity, and social peripheries set the frame for what could be defined as a eugenic welfare state of
“the fittest” (Spektorowski, 2004, p. 85). Spektorowski stated: ‘Indeed, Sweden, the most benign type of socialism, and Nazi Germany, the most reactionary type of collective regime, shared similar or seemingly similar approaches towards eugenics and towards the idea of a productive society. Despite ideological and political differences, both the Nazis and the Swedes used “eugenics” to define two different types of “social exclusion” (2004, p. 85). The eugenics movement in Sweden was far greater than in all of the other Nordic countries that had similar laws and Sweden was the only country with a state eugenic society. The involvement of the political party, the Social Democrats, has also been widely discussed and remains a critical point, as argued by Spektorowski and Mizrachi (2008, pp. 333–334). Racial biology began to lose influence in the 1930s, both in Sweden and in other countries like Great Britain and the US but was implemented in the Nazi regime’s biological hierarchisation and race politics, with terrible consequences.

After WWII, the concept of race as a biological concept and race biological discourses were largely abandoned (Goldberg, 2006; Miles, 1989). Race came to be regarded as a questionable analytic social category; instead, sanctions towards all forms of discrimination were put in place. However, as Brännström (2016) argued, instead of disappearing, the concept of race underwent similar changes in Sweden as it had in Germany; namely, becoming associated with phenotypic differences linked to the white-black-yellow triad. This meant that, for example, Jewishness sank back as a race and the concept of race was transferred in peoples’ views to places ‘elsewhere’, not in Europe and not in Sweden. In discussions on migration during the 1960s and 1970s, the concept of race was seldom used, and the problem of racism was not acknowledged (Brännström, 2016, p. 35).

It was suggested in the mid-1970s that the concept of race should be eliminated from constitutional texts and laws in Sweden as the concept was ‘challenging’ and ‘unnecessary’ (Brännström, 2016, pp. 39, 49). The proposition was to use ‘ethnic group’ instead and as commented by Brännström, ‘as if the very possibility that discrimination related to skin color could occur in Sweden was troublesome’. Instead, migrants and minorities in Sweden were categorized in relation to language and culture and a distance to a colonial and racist past was established for Sweden (Brännström, 2016, p. 39). This contributes to what Goldberg (2006) referred to as ‘racial vaporization’ or what Hall (2000) termed ‘historical amnesia’, which reinforces the idea that racism belongs to the past.

In the mid-1970s, Sweden officially adopted multiculturalism as a national policy with respect to migrants and national minorities, even though immigrant groups had been the focus when the policy was formulated (Ålund & Schierup, 1991; Borevi, 2012). The basis for the policy was summarized through the concept of ‘equality, freedom of choice, and cooperation’, which was used in the guidelines adopted by the government in 1975. Thus, the concept of multicultural and multiculturalism was used and an emphasis within policy and issues concerning migration was placed on language, culture, religion and, not least, on the concept of ethnicity.

However, in the late 1990s, the concept of ethnicity was heavily criticized for contributing to the invisibility of power dimensions (Neergaard, 2020, p. 484). In 2000, the cultural geographer Allan Pred wrote his seminal book ‘Even in Sweden: Racisms, Racialized Spaces, and the Popular Geographical Imagination’, in which he described the intensifying cultural racism of the 1990s, the proliferation of negative ethnic stereotypes, and the spatial segregation of the non-Swedish in the society. Pred quoted the Swedish newspaper Daily News, which argued in relation to the Swedish idealized self-image: ‘It is high time that Sweden reconsider its self-image as the stronghold of tolerance and analyses the strategies that allow people to maintain that self-image’ (Pred, 2000, p. 287).

In the Swedish legally anchored frameworks, it has been stated since the 1990s that ‘generalizing assumptions about ethnic groups should be avoided in general and differences in appearance and behavior related to human backgrounds should remain unseen and unnoticed (or at least uncommented)’ (Brännström, 2016, p. 50). The new discrimination law of 2009 removed the concept of race as a ground for discrimination and used the concept of ethnicity (‘ethnisk tillhörighet’ in Swedish), (SOU 2008: 567.). Avoiding use of the concept of race is still an issue for the government, which insists on not using the concept, despite criticism from both the United Nations and the Council of Europe (SVT News 2017.). In 2014 the debate became quite heated and the minister for integration at that time, Erik Ullenbäg, argued:

> We know that there are not different human races. We also know that the basic part of racism is that one believes that there are different races, that racial affiliation causes one to behave in a certain way, and that some races are superior to others […] We want to fight racism, and in racism the basis is that there are different human races. Then a legislation should not contain the word race, if we actually mean that there are no races. (SVT News 2014.)

Samson Beshir and Tobias Hübinten5 responded to Ullenbäg by arguing that:

> race, as a social construction, is still a variable that affects many Swedes’ living conditions as well as how they are assessed and treated. The razor-sharp seggregation in the housing market and the equallypronounced
segmentation in the labour market are increasingly running along racial lines, and this especially in Sweden. (Beshir & Hübinette, 2014)

One can conclude that the Swedish history concerning issues of racial thinking in a biological understanding left deep traces in Sweden, with consequences well into the 20th century. Jonsson and Behtoui stated: ‘[O]fficially […] racism was abolished through laws and conventions from the 1950s onwards. Still available racism remains … ’ (2013, p. 179).

Race and racism, in its different forms, remain and are key issues in debates, not the least due to migration and populist parties. Boundaries between those who are perceived as belonging to the nation and those who do not are intense, and populist parties continue to repeat a discourse of race and difference, which contributes to the normalization of racism (Ideall Hagren, 2016; Loftisðóttir, 2020; cf. Mulinari & Neergaard, 2017). Given these debates and the Swedish history of racism, it is interesting to explore how the concept of race and related concepts such as racism and racialization are dealt with in educational research. The importance of critical investigations on concepts in this field has been stressed by researchers such as Lee (2003) and Troya (1995), who critically evaluated the terminology of ‘race’, ‘diversity’ and ‘ethnicity’ in educational research. They found concepts used that are highly biased and associated with negative connotations such as ‘at risk’, ‘inner city youth’ and ‘immigrants’. This can also be applied in educational research in Sweden, as discussed by both Kocke (2006), Bunar (2011) and Arneback (2012, pp. 16–17). In Sweden, concepts such as xenophobia, immigration hostility and recently ethnic discrimination have been used instead of using concepts with connotations to race and racism. However, the focus in the present article is the use of race, racism and/or racialization within educational research in Sweden, so it omits research that uses terms such as the above-mentioned xenophobia, or ethnic discrimination. As will be shown, educational research using the terms race and racism in Sweden started in the mid-1990s.

Sweden introduced a multicultural policy in 1975 (cf. Borevi, 2012) and the concepts of multicultural education and intercultural education have been key concepts in both Nordic and Swedish policies and practices (James, 2018; Mikander et al., 2018). When discussing issues of differences and inequalities in education in relation to language, nationality, heritage, religion and tradition, a common feature has been the use of the concept of ethnicity, as it has throughout whole society. Thus, a sociological understanding of the concept of race, as constructed and embedded in its social milieu, has never been common in official discourse in Sweden. This condition was critiqued in the official report of the Swedish Government, with the title ‘The dilemma of education – Democratic ideals and second-leading practices’ (SOU 2006: 40.). This governmental report received attention in 2006 and thereafter. The report contains 10 research chapters edited by the researchers Sawyer and Kamali (cf. SOU 2006:40). The work was performed in response to a government decision to identify and map ‘mechanisms behind structural/institutional discrimination on the grounds of ethnic and religious belonging’ (SOU 2006: 40., preface). The work for the report draws on critical educational and postcolonial theories and problematizes reproducing power systems within education. The work discusses mechanisms of ‘othering’, ‘racialized profiling’, ‘symbolic violence’ and ‘discriminatory mechanisms’ as well as critical explorations of ‘the immigrant’, the ‘multicultural school’ and ‘normative Swedishness’. According to the authors, one of the ‘most striking’ findings in the report is ‘how the school’s key actors as teachers and study-consultants ignore students’ experiences of racism and discrimination within the school’ (2006:40, p. 16). The authors wrote:

That adults explain away students’ experiences of racism and not seeing and talking about racism is an important aspect of symbolic violence which several of the contributions point to. This silence is reproduced i.a. through a color-blind discourse. (SOU 2006: 40., pp. 35–36)

Thus, the authors of the governmental report (SOU 2006: 40.) directed out from their research findings strong criticism towards education and school for performing othering and racist practices.

Below I provide a detailed overview of published research in education using the concept of race, racism, and/or racialization in Sweden from the end of WWII until the present. It is clear from this research overview that the discourse in the educational

The concept of race, school and education

The fact that schools reproduce racist patterns has been long discussed in research internationally (see, for example, von Brömssen et al., in press; Connolly, 1994; Gillborn, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Leonardo, 2013; Ma can Ghaill, 1988). However, this has been difficult to get accepted in education and educational research in Sweden as described above, which can be problematized from the perspective of ‘historical amnesia’ (Hall, 2000) as already perceived as ‘racial Europeanization’, as argued by Goldberg (2006). There is a growing body of research showing these patterns.
research field concerning race is changing, albeit slowly, and there is still reluctance to use the concept and/or theories using race.

Studies in educational science in Sweden using the concept of race and racism(s) after WWII – three waves

After WWII, the first studies related to educational research in Sweden in which the word race was mentioned were those by Lange and Westin (1997), Lange et al. (1997), and Lange and Hedlund (1998), (cf. Behtoui et al., 2019). Thus, the term race has not, as far as I can ascertain, been in use in any educational research in Sweden for the 50 years prior to 1997. The aim of the studies by Lange and Westin and colleagues in 1997–1998 was to find out and map teachers’ exposure to political and ethnic-related violence and threats by and to pupils in schools and their contact with racist/Nazi/anti-Semitic propaganda, as well as anti-racist/anti-Nazi organizations and campaigns in schools. These studies used a quantitative approach and posed questions on race; an example was the statement ‘It is against the laws of nature that people of different races have children together’, with which 1.8% of the respondents partially or completely agreed. To the statement ‘It is natural for children to see and value differences between different races’, 27.2% partially or completely agreed (Lange et al., 1997, p. 55). These perceptions were indexed as racist in the report (1997, p. 55).

At that time, in the early and mid-1990s, violent conflicts between new and young migrant racial ideologies began to appear in National Socialist parties in Sweden (Lööw, 2016). Some of these young racists (men) appeared in secondary schools and confrontations took place between racists and certain groups of immigrant youths. The studies by Lange and colleagues (1997, Lange & Hedlund, 1998) attracted attention, especially given that one of the studies showed that only 66% of respondents felt sure that the Holocaust had taken place. Another discussion concerned the construction of the questions, as several of them were quite provocative.6 The concept of race was used in one part of the study, which asked questions on values in relation to race formulated as ‘concerns about “racial mixing” as a consequence of immigration’, ‘attitude to people with “non-Swedish” appearance’, ‘attitude towards whether certain “races” are suitable for living in modern society’, and ‘attitude to ban racist organizations’ (Lange & Westin, 1997, pp. 105–127). The term race was used in survey questions and not problematized theoretically as such. However, Lange and Westin discussed the use of questions on racism and ‘racist’ attitudes in their survey and argued that

today ‘racist’ [is used] in an extremely nuanced and ‘inflated way to describe a whole spectrum of perceptions and attitudes in humans […] We do not deny that xenophobic and, in some cases, racist attitudes exist in Swedish society. We believe however, in order to identify such attitudes, one must ask adequate questions that ‘elicit’ the feelings and thoughts in question. That someone is critical of refugee policy or believes that we have had too much refugee immigration in Sweden does not have to - but can - mean that the person in question is strongly xenophobic and/or racist. (Lange & Westin, 1997, p. 28)

Here we can see that the concept of xenophobic is used together with ‘being racist’. The term xenophobia is often used instead of race or racism in the Swedish discourse (cf. Hjerm, 1998), and might be interpreted as a way of avoiding the race concept. Lange and Westin further claimed, based on their study, that people who harbour xenophobic and racist views in Sweden are opposed to immigration, especially immigration of ethnic groups that are phenotypically very different from Swedes and northerners (Lange & Westin, 1997, p. 53). These findings naturally challenged the image of the tolerant and anti-racist Swede and belong to what I comprehend as the first wave of the use of the concept race, from the end of WWII until the end of the 1990s.

The second wave of the use of race in education: 1999–2010

In 1999, the cultural geographer Tesfahuney published an article about Western education entitled ‘Monocultural Education’. In the article, Tesfahuney discussed education from an ontological and epistemological approach, arguing that Western education plays a crucial role in the re-creation of Western, male and white hegemony, and thus functions as an instrument maintaining the superior position of power of the West and the White, and the subordination of the Other. This article challenged the Swedish educational discourse on multicultural education at the time by turning the gaze and focus to the concept of monocultural education. The period from 1999–2010 saw increased use of the concept of race, and also the use of new theories in the field of education. Gender researcher Gaby Weiner, her doctoral student at the time Camilla Hälgren, and co-researchers published book chapters and articles (see f. ex. Hälgren, 2005Hälgren & Weiner, 2003) as well as a PhD thesis by Hälgren (2006) within the Swedkid project (year 2001–3). The aim of the project was to develop an anti-racist website for school students and teachers. The website addressed issues concerning the treatment of minorities, the situation of newly arrived refugees and migrants, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and cultural differences. The project used a framework that included critical multiculturalism and critical race
theory (CRT), where issues of everyday racism, colour-blindness and multicultural education were critically explored. The research findings show that racism was present at both micro and meta levels in Swedish schools and reported in the findings as ‘overt’, ‘hidden’, ‘routine’ and ‘everyday’ racism (Hällgren, 2006, p. 35).

In 2007, Gruber published her PhD thesis using an ethnographical and intersectional approach when analysing ethnicity, gender and class in elementary school. Her findings show how the school staff classify and make a difference to students and how this is related to ethnicity, culture and national background. Categories such as Oak girls, immigrant boys, city students, kings in the corridor, and Swedish students are constructed and constantly repeated. Gruber noted how the school staff’s daily work with the students is surrounded by high ambitions in terms of justice and tolerance, but that these intentions are rarely combined with insights into the aspects of power relations. Instead, the attention in the teachers’ daily practice is concentrated on the classroom situation rather than making visible or discussing students’ different experiences and living conditions. The school’s intentions and opportunities to work for equality and against discrimination risk being transformed so that it produces and maintains unequal relationships. Gruber (2007) drew on the concept of ‘cultural racism’ from D. T. Goldberg (1993) and ‘everyday racism’ (Essed, 1991) to analyse how students are constructed as different and divided into certain categories in school.

As we can see, there was some use of the concepts of race and racism in educational research in Sweden from the mid-1990s, and there was a clear increase in its use from 2000 to 2010. However, the concept of race and its derivations were generally still stigmatized and largely not in use in educational research. This was recognized by Beach and Lunneblad (2011), who explored the use of race in ethnographic educational work in Scandinavia some years later. They claimed that ‘race and colour seem to be “ontological givens” [in educational research] that are only of secondary analytical importance in relation to concepts like language, gender, religion and culture’ (Beach & Lunneblad, 2011, p. 35). Beach and Lunneblad argued that this situation could be due to the Scandinavian educational policies that emphasize and build on the concepts of multicultural and intercultural education, and certainly not on multiracial and interracial approaches.

The third wave of the use of race and racism in educational research: 2013-2021

After 2010 we can see an increase in the use of the concept of race, racism(s) as well as the use of critical race theory (CRT) in educational research in Sweden. Through re-analyses of ethnographic data from primary and secondary schools, Dovemark explored how routines in the schools’ everyday practices have meant that ‘racism flows in both hidden and less obvious forms as a routine, integrated into everyday situations’ (Dovemark, 2013, p. 17). Dovemark drew on critical race theory (CRT) and the concepts of ‘everyday racism’ and ‘racial denial’ and found continual repetition in education of ‘Swedish values’ and teachers’ focusing on students’ differences rather than similarities. The teachers also avoided talking about the issue of racism(s) in school when being told, by saying that ‘they [who offended them] probably didn’t mean it in that way’ (Dovemark, 2013, p. 25). According to Dovemark, the denial of racism becomes a common strategy within the institutions, confirming a ‘color blindness’ strategy (2013, p. 25).

In her PhD thesis, Lundberg (2015) analysed, based on ethnographical fieldwork, how cultural difference is constructed socially and discursively in policy and practice in a suburban primary school. Based on a critical race theory (CRT) approach, Lundberg used the concepts of race, ‘colour-blind racism’, ‘overt racism’, ‘banal racism’, ‘cultural racism’, ‘everyday racism’, ‘racialized subjects’ and ‘whiteness’ as analytical lenses. Lundberg claimed that education in Sweden is embedded in a colour-blind ideology, which not only involves the denial of colour but also denies the experiences of racism and the opportunities of students’ empowerment. Lundberg argued that ‘Racism is exacerbated by the lack of knowledge and denial of race and racism in the formal education system’ (2015, p. 236). Lundberg’s study was the first PhD study in education in Sweden to be firmly grounded in a critical race theory thus research perspective.

After 2015, the use of the concept or race and its derivations continued to increase, and it is not possible to comment closely on all of the studies here. It is possible to claim that the use of race in educational research has ‘opened up’ in Sweden since 2010 with the use of more nuanced concept from both critical race theory (CRT), whiteness and intersectional studies, all with inspiration from the Anglo-Saxon world.

However, a study using a perspective of race and education policies is a new research perspective in the field. Arneback and Quennerstedt (2016) analysed how racism in education is framed at different policy levels and what kind of anti-racist actions are proposed. They showed how terms such as discrimination and harassment have been increasingly used in educational policy, thus avoiding the concept of race at the policy level (Arneback & Quennerstedt, 2016, p. 773).

In 2019–2020 the Swedish educational journal Educare published a special issue with the title
'Racism and School' (‘Rasism och Skola’). That special issue was based on work on theories drawn from critical race- and whiteness studies (e.g. Ahmed, 2007, 2009; Bonilla-Silva, 2010, 2011; Crenshaw, 1994; Fanon, 1963, 1967), and from theories using the concept of race in an intersectional approach (e.g. Crenshaw, 1994; Lykke, 2009). According to Léon – Rosales and Jonsson, who wrote the introduction to the special issue, the overall aim is to problematize the Swedish school perceived as an antiracists place and space, and especially what they called ‘a tolerant color-blind anti-racism’ in school and education (Léon – Rosales & Jonsson, 2019, pp. 4, 3). Another aim was to deconstruct the conceptualization of race as a homogeneous phenomenon, and instead indicate in the many various forms race and racism(s) appear (Léon – Rosales & Jonsson, 2019, pp. 4, 1–15). The findings in the articles in the special issue clearly show how racism, in different forms, is reproduced in Swedish schools, regardless of a well-intended and clearly articulated attitude of tolerance and anti-racism in accordance with the Swedish curriculum.

Arneback and Jämte (2021) recently discussed how teachers are responding to ‘racist acts’ in school and education in Sweden based on interviews with teachers who, in different ways, try in their work to counteract racism in upper secondary schools. From the interviews, Arneback and Jämte identified six types of anti-racist actions that teachers use to counteract racism, ranging from the emancipatory, normative, critical and intercultural perspectives, to approaches that engage individualized forms of racism; the relational, democratic and knowledge-focused perspectives. Arneback and Jämte (2021) underlined the complexity of the problem of racism, which they argued calls for a wide range of anti-racist actions and approaches in anti-racist work in education. The present article is related to a growing field of research connecting to anti-racist approaches in education in Sweden (cf. also Mattsson & Johansson, 2020) that might expand the research field of race and racism in education in Sweden in the future.

**Concluding discussion**

The present article has explored and provided an overview of educational research in Sweden using the concept of race, racism and racialization since World War II to today. The review shows that while race as a concept is still perhaps not stigmatized, it is rare to find this concept being problematized and theoretically explored and developed within the large category of educational research. Thus, studies in educational research in general increasingly mention the concept of race and intersections of race, but most often in passing and as a descriptive concept.

The research review shows that it is possible to talk about three waves in educational research where the concept of race is used, but in clearly different ways. The first wave began in the mid-1990s with the studies on youth attitudes, partly from an educational and school perspective, by Lange and Westin (1997), Lange & Hedlund (1998). At that time, neo-Nazi and right-wing extremist organizations were attracting attention in Sweden and research work in the field about race directed their interest towards this group.

A second wave, containing a more critical discussion on race, racism(s) and education in its own right, slowly emerged around 2000, when educational discourses on tolerance and the multicultural school were challenged by studies such as Tesfahuney (1999), Hällgren and Weiner (2003), Hällgren (2006), and Gruber (2007). A third wave, in which race is studied out from critical race theory, whiteness studies and intersectional perspectives on race, seems to have arisen to have arisen around 2015 and is a slowly growing research perspective at present.

However, many researchers in the educational field still seem to avoid the concept of race or do not find it useable; or, as some would argue, Swedish educational research exhibits colour blindness (James, 2018) and a discourse of ‘imagined sameness’ (Gullestad, 2006).

The specific contribution of the educational research using the concept of race, which is presented here from a Swedish horizon, is the insistence on the exhaustive of white hegemony that needs to be addressed in educational research. This has been argued by James as well (2018, p. 185), but needs to be emphasized. As long as the research does not use a lens to critically examine white hegemony, practices of ‘othering’ will undoubtedly be the consequence.

Based on the findings of this research overview, I argue that a collective remembrance in politics of the Swedish history of using race as a biological concept, and the still unresolved discussion of the role of the Swedish social democracy and its involvement in eugenics continues to play a role in the educational research discourse in Sweden. There is certainly an avoidance in the use of the concept as an analytical concept. I agree with Arneback and Quennerstedt, who argued that race and racism have primarily been based on a biological understanding in Sweden (Arneback & Quennerstedt, 2016, p. 782) and that a sociological view of the concept has not yet had a common breakthrough.

Thus, there seems to be confusion regarding the understanding and theoretical underpinnings of the concepts of race, racism and racialization, which often makes the concepts unmentionable and unspeakable, and researchers are reluctant to use them as well.
However, as this review has shown, research in education using race and related concepts is expanding in Sweden and since around 2012–2013 there has been a growing body of research influenced by critical race theorists such as Sara Ahmed, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, David Gillborn, David Theo Goldberg and Zeus Leonardo. This research tradition will hopefully continue to grow and critically examine the supposed tolerance, colour blindness and white privilege in Swedish schools and education. Such research is urgently needed as ethno-nationalist rhetoric is growing in Sweden, promoted by radical right-wing parties, supporting ethno-based nationalism through discourses about the nation that once was, a shared historical origin, and cultural homogeneity (see, e.g. Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019). There is certainly a need to continue critically examining, using, and discussing the use of the concepts of race, racism and/or racialization in Swedish educational research. This sentiment is in line with the argument put forward by Navarro and Howard (2007) that large parts of social studies theory, research, and practice in general have overlooked, dismissed, or ignored race. This is obvious from this research overview which have observed three waves of educational research since WWII using the term race as a concept or theoretical lens. These waves are still very small and marginal, but slightly stronger each time.

However, questions can be raised if this kind of research influence school practice and policy and teacher preparation programmes at all? This is an urgent question as teachers and student teachers need to understand race and racism, and how it influences learning, and how implicit bias along racial lines can separate students from school and learning.

Notes

1. The Swedish Research Council has, on behalf of the government, conducted a survey of research on racism in the labour market. The report states that the term ‘racism’ in principle does not occur at all in some research fields, and that the combination of ‘racism and the labor market’ and ‘Islamophobia’ and ‘Afrophobia’ seldom appear as categorical terms in the scientific literature (Vetenskapsrådet/ The Swedish Research Council, 2017).

2. In the work ‘What is Race?’ by Glasgow et al. (2019) the concept of race/racism is presented and discussed from four different philosophical accounts; namely, race viewed as (1) a sociopolitical reality, (2) as cultural constructionism, (3) as biological racial realism, or (4) as a basic racial realist account. From a more sociological perspective, race and racism(s) are also discussed in views of ‘Neo-racism’ (Balibar, 2018), ‘differentalist racism’ (Balibar drawing on Taguieff, in Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991), and society as ‘post-racial’ (cf. Bhopal, 2018; Hübinne, 2013). Roth (2016) pointed to the multiple dimensions of race and that the word ‘race’ is used as a proxy for each of several dimensions. For different understandings of race and racism, see also Hellström (2016, in Swedish). It would be beyond the scope and intention of this article to discuss these different views and argumentations. The purpose of mentioning this work is to point to the many shifting views and discourses in which the concept of race might be used.

3. In the work ‘What is Race?’ by Glasgow et al. (2019) the concept of race/racism is presented and discussed from four different philosophical accounts; namely, race viewed as (1) a sociopolitical reality, (2) as cultural constructionism, (3) as biological racial realism, or (4) as a basic racial realist account. From a more sociological perspective, race and racism(s) are also discussed in views of ‘Neo-racism’ (Balibar, 2018), ‘differentalist racism’ (Balibar drawing on Taguieff, in Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991), and society as ‘post-racial’. (cf. Bhopal, 2018; Hübinnie, 2013). Roth (2016) pointed to the multiple dimensions of race and that the word ‘race’ is used as a proxy for each of several dimensions. For different understandings of race and racism, see also Hellström (2016, in Swedish). It would be beyond the scope and intention of this article to discuss these different views and argumentations. The purpose of mentioning this work is to point to the many shifting views and discourses in which the concept of race might be used.

4. The term eugenics was coined by Francis Galton in 1883, building on a theory that human traits of character are genetically transmitted. Therefore, this social movement or biological ‘science’ attempted to regulate human production in order to improve the human’s genetic quality (cf. Spectorowski, 2004, p. 84).


6. Lange and Hedlund (1998) stated that the reason why a provocative statement was included in the questionnaire was that it was used in the 1993 survey (p. 55). However, I also find some of other questions quite provocative; for example, ‘It is natural for children to see and value differences between different races’ (1998, p. 55).

Disclosure statement

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

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