



## Integration, race and “doing good” – some critical reflections

**Abstract:** This article discusses reflections on doing research with and about migrant children, focusing on addressing “race” and racialization processes as well as integrationist implications of “doing good” among both school professionals and researchers. The motivation is to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how to research integration while also promoting a child-centred approach and taking children’s own understandings and opinions into account. Written at the threshold of the phase of analysing data from fieldwork with children, which is one of the main analytical tasks in the MiCREATE project, this article is a summary of some focus points and concepts that turned out to be of importance during the ongoing epistemic reflexivity process in the research project. Taking a point of departure in general methodological reflections on a structuralist-constructivist approach and on constant epistemic reflexivity, three approaches that could be useful in reflections and analyses are suggested: reflections on the concept of integration, on race and diversity, and on researcher positioning within a research project both while studying practices of “doing good” and aiming at “doing good” in itself as well.

**Keywords:** migrant children, integration, race and diversity, MiCREATE project

### Researching integration in the MiCREATE project

Integration is a central concept in the MiCREATE project. Already in the Horizon 2020 call under the Work Programme 2018–2020: “Europe in a changing world – Inclusive, innovative and reflective societies” the title and motivation of the specific call (MIGRATION-05–2018–2020) was:

*Mapping and overcoming integration challenges for migrant children.  
Specific Challenge: At a time where the integration of refugee and mi-*

*grant children into host societies is most pressing, education systems face multiple challenges due to growing cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity and to socio-economic inequalities.* (Horizon 2020 Work Programme, 2017)

Furthermore, the call text stated that the focus of the successful project should be “integration in schools of pupils (ISCED 0–3) from existing migration cohorts, children of refugees and asylum seekers, and unaccompanied minors, including those residing in hotspots and reception centres” (ibid.) and should “assess issues related to gender, identity, achievement, well-being, home-school links and discrimination among others” (ibid.). Stating that the aim of projects called for was researching “strategies to promote resilience, avoid segregation and to enhance children’s skills and well-being” (ibid.) indicates what can be seen as the meaning or content of the concept of integration. Hence, these concepts may indicate that an integrated child is resilient, does not experience segregation in any significant ways, and has the same level of skills and well-being as other children. This focus on equality also emerges from the aim of identifying “Best practices supporting equal life-chances” (ibid.) as a suggested part of the project.

What is more, the H2020 call accentuates the Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as a starting point for the research, including the principle granting “the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child” (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989).

In the MiCREATE project, financed by this part of the H2020 programme, it is therefore not surprising that a main focus is to promote integration during a child-centred approach to research. In the project description, which formed part of the application, it is stated:

*The overall objective of the project is to stimulate the inclusion of diverse groups of migrant children by adopting a childcentred approach to their integration at the educational and policy level. Stemming from the need to revisit the integration policies on the one hand and consistent with the specific focus of the call on the other hand, the research project aims at comprehensive examination of contemporary integration processes of migrant children in order to empower them.* (Proposal, 2018, Abstract)

On this basis, it is announced that the project will firstly describe the existing situation by identifying the existing measures for integration of

migrant children, secondly will analyze “social impacts of these integration programmes through case studies” (ibid.) and, finally, it will develop new integration measures regarding education and schools. The theoretical underpinnings of these overall research aims are described in terms of defining the integration concept as well as broader understandings of its implications, outlining a theoretical framework for research in the MiCREATE project. Here, three aspects should be emphasized.

The first is the definition of the concept of integration as such. The project description states that “integration means ‘the process by which people who are relatively new to a country (i.e. whose roots do not reach deeper than two or three generations) become part of society’ (Rudiger and Spencer, 2003)” (Proposal, 2018, p. 6), and furthermore emphasizes its legal, political, socio-economic and cultural-religious dimensions as well as measurable factors such as employment and income rates.

Secondly, the research field is outlined focusing on social science approaches and relational dimensions of integration. Inspired by Papadopoulos (2011), integration is seen as a “process involving relational, institutional and discursive aspects, which affect dynamics between diverse social agents” (Proposal, p. 7). Following this, it is emphasized that the relational dimensions of integration, to some extent stemming from policy interactions, may be studied at the micro-level: “it is through micro-level practices and institutional regulations that different discursive constructions of the ‘integrated migrant’ are actualized” (ibid.).

Thirdly, the project description announces that the project, following Scholten (2011), aims at moving beyond ‘models thinking’ of either assimilationism or multiculturalism to a structuralist-constructivist approach.

According to Scholten, such a perspective, inspired by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), “gives way to a much more empirical and dynamic approach to immigrant integration” (2011, p. 31) which “is not so much meant to deconstruct immigrant integration policies as mere discourse but rather, to develop better understanding of how and why specific discourses emerge and change over time.” (2011, p. 32). The empirical approach means studying how research and policymaking are constructed in actual social relations and practices, and also “how these structured fields influence the way actors socially construct the world around them, for instance, how they define social problems like immigrant integration, or how they conceptualise the research-policy nexus.” (Scholten, 2011, p. 32). Hence, this approach means that both the research-policy nexus and the problem framing should be studied empirically, defining

“both as ‘relational’, being products of actual social practices and relations” (Scholten, 2011, pp. 32–33).

For the MiCREATE project, this means that both the “problem” of integration and the aim of the project as doing research with a political impact (the research-policy nexus) should be addressed as produced by and in social practices and relations including relations of power and racialization processes.

Summing up, the MiCREATE project does research on migrant children’s integration according to the funders’ call for research on integration regarding equal life chances, involving indicators such as skills and well-being – in other words, it is a project aiming at contributing to ‘closing the gap’ of unequal possibilities between migrant children and local children. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is taken as a starting point, emphasizing children’s right and capacity to express their own views. Hence, the MiCREATE project researches integration in education at both practice and policy levels using a child-centred perspective in all possible aspects.

The used theoretical framework, as announced in the project description, focuses on integration as a process of becoming part of a new society regarding both relational, institutional and discursive aspects, thus studied at both a micro level and at a policy level. Applying a structuralist-constructivist approach means that both the research-policy nexus and the framing of the “problem” of integration will be studied empirically as relational products of actual social practices and relations. In this case, the integration processes are studied mainly in the educational system.

In the following part, three analytical and reflexive approaches to researching integration in education will be discussed, taking the Danish context as the point of departure. First, however, the concept of epistemic reflexivity will be presented as a research approach informing these three analytical focus points.

The notion of epistemic reflexivity (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Wacquant, 2011) offers a more detailed explanation of how to conduct a structuralist-constructivist approach in practice in a multi-faceted research project such as MiCREATE. To distinguish between categories observed in the studied field of practice (“folk categories”) and analytic categories, used in constructing the object, is thus of utmost importance. Following “the imperative of epistemic reflexivity” (Wacquant, 2011, p. 81) means that during the whole research process, in its all stages, it is crucial that the researchers are aware of the concepts and theoretical prerequisites informing their work in all types of tasks in the research process:

*It targets the totality of the most routine research operations, from the selection of the site and the recruitment of informants to the choice of questions to pose or to avoid, as well as the engagement of theoretic schema, methodological tools and display techniques, at the moment when they are implemented.* (Wacquant, 2011, p. 89)

Thus, epistemic reflexivity means that the researcher must be conscious and reflexive on how the research object is constructed during all stages of the research process, which is in line with the structuralist-constructivist approach.

In a project studying integration at an educational level and, as much as possible, applying a child-centred approach, this is important when encountering agents in the practice field: both teachers and children. How to listen to and represent their points of views while simultaneously holding on to the consciousness of the construction of the research object? According to Wacquant, the “anthropologist or sociologist who relies on fieldwork must double the dose of reflexivity” (2011, p. 89). This may become even more important to the extent that researchers have the same aim as the professional research participants (teachers, school principals, etc.), that is to promote integration, learning, well-being, etc. of migrant children. In such a case, as in the MiCREATE project, the imperative of epistemic reflexivity reminds one that collecting descriptions of good practices and approaches observed in school practice is not sufficient if the aim is to produce a significant research contribution, and secondly, a meaningful contribution to the practice field as well. In other words, a double focus on “critique” in a Foucauldian sense is necessary:

*A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest.* (Foucault, 2013, p. 154)

Hence, not only should research in the migration field contribute to developing better practices in a simple “critique” of the existing models; it should also study the assumptions and ideas that both existing and new practices rest on. Both the overall integration practices studied as the research object and the researchers’ own attempts to contribute to making a difference in the integration and education field should be exposed to critical reflections.

## Research integration? Write against it!

One concept that came to mind in a disturbing way during the research process was the concept of integration itself. Whether and how is it possible to do research on integration, bearing in mind the structuralist-constructivist approach and the imperative of epistemic reflexivity? In his paper *Writing Against Integration* (2019), a Danish anthropologist Mikkel Rytter discusses exactly this question, and while his discussion, he illuminates the Danish context specifically as its suggestions may also be of relevance for research in other national contexts. Referring to Brubaker's distinction between 'categories of practice' and 'categories of analysis' (Brubaker, 2012) Rytter notes:

*Ideally, there should be a vast difference between emic categories used in popular discourse and etic concepts used in academic analysis. However, the concept of integration often seems to be used more or less uncritically on both levels. This conflation means not only that academic analysis risks losing its critical potential, but also that the analysis itself tends to become an active element in the stigmatisation of vulnerable ethnic and religious minorities. (Rytter, 2019, p. 678)*

Rytter argues that an uncritical use of the integration concept in research can "re-enforce and even widen the asymmetrical power structures that it was intended to describe" (Rytter, 2019, pp. 678–679) because, in a context such as Denmark, integration as an emic concept has certain implications, apart from the obvious meaning of newcomers becoming part of the new society. If not aware of these implications, research will risk confirming them and thus their paradoxical and non-inclusive consequences. To be more precise, Rytter, drawing on ethnographic studies, explains how the dominant social image in Denmark is characterized by three scenarios: 'welfare reciprocity', 'host and guests', and 'the Danes as an indigenous people'. These scenarios, which can be traced in laws and other policy documents, public discourse, etc., altogether point to an asymmetrical power relationship between majorities and minorities making integration a demand for newcomers but at the same time an unobtainable one. Hence, migrants in Denmark (and even their children and grandchildren) will always be seen as guests neither living up to the demands of welfare reciprocity nor being part of the 'original' ethnic Danish people.

Therefore, in the Danish context, integration as a concept and a process becomes paradoxical: both desirable and impossible. This means that when

working with a research project on integration, the concept of integration is an inevitable topic in the epistemic reflexivity process. Rytter suggests three points of attention in this work. Firstly, one must ask critical questions to the concept of integration and its inscription in power relations, not only in public and political (“emic”) discourse, but also in academic writings. Secondly, it is important to problematise the problematisation related to the integration concept, including for instance social imaginaries as the three scenarios characterizing the Danish context. And finally, Rytter argues that “we should attempt to develop a new language in order to enable a more inclusive analysis” (Rytter, 2019, p. 690). This means avoiding the integration concept in academic writings in favour of developing other more precise concepts, but it also means including “a plurality of conflicting voices and positions within the analysis” (ibid.) – thus not only focusing on immigrants and their so-called integration processes, but also on majority citizens, political and media discourses, etc. Then, when researching processes during which migrant children become part of communities in a new country, deploying epistemic reflexivity means constant and recurring reflections on the distinction between analytical categories and practice categories, among those the ideas of state, nation, etc. reflected in the most practical integration initiatives at the micro level.

## **Race and racialization**

A second analytical point of attention in migration research is racialization. Epistemic reflexivity during the research process must include recurring reflections on racialization at all levels: including methodological reflections on researcher positioning and choice of methods, concepts and theories used at analytical level, and an attentiveness towards how such a phenomenon is talked about, and importantly not talked about, in the educational practice studied through fieldwork.

Racialization may basically be understood as “a process that ascribes physical and cultural differences to individuals and groups” (Barot and Bird, 2011, p. 601) or as “the act of giving a racial character to someone or something: the process of categorizing, marginalizing, or regarding according to race” (Merriam-Webster, 2021), race meaning “any one of the groups that humans are often divided into based on physical traits regarded as common among people of shared ancestry” (Merriam-Webster, 2021).

As the scenario ‘Danes as an indigenous people’ mentioned above as a part of the Danish self-understanding (as an imagined family with common

kinship) indicates, racialization is an influential factor in the Danish context. Rytter (2019) notes that “integration talk is highly racialized” (p. 685), as “The Danish emic concept of integration has a racial bias since it offers a legitimate vocabulary to speak of ‘others’ in ways in which reified notions of culture, ethnicity, religion and race merge.” (Rytter, 2019, p. 685).

One illustration of this is the official Danish state term ‘non-Western’ used in statistics on both immigrants and their descendants. This term, used by Statistics Denmark and other Danish authorities, covers all countries except EU and associated countries plus Canada, USA, Australia, and New Zealand (Elmeskov, 2019). Since ‘non-Western’ countries are often associated with people with physical traits such as darker skin or hair than ‘Western’ countries such as Denmark, a correlation between this category and racialization processes is obvious. While on the one hand race and racialization processes are not often talked about in Danish policy and discourse (Jensen, Weibel and Vitus, 2017), on the other hand – a growing number of academic studies describe and discuss racialization processes in Danish education (for instance: Jaffe-Walter, 2019; Khawaja, 2015; Lagermann, 2013; Tørslev, Nørredam and Vitus, 2016; Vertelyte, 2019). Thus, reflecting on racialization processes should be a part of the ongoing epistemic reflexivity in a research project on integration.

In an introductory phase of the MiCREATE project, an analysis of the political and media discourses in Denmark showed some tendencies of racialization characterizing the context to which newcomers arrive (Hobel et al., 2019). It is important to pursue this focus further in the subsequent research phases of fieldwork in schools, analyses of interview data, and development of practice recommendations and tools. Regarding fieldwork, a special attention should be placed on researcher positioning (Khawaja and Mørck, 2009). Researchers must reflect on their own positioning not only theoretically but also relating to their own experiences and social categories of difference such as class, age, gender, and not the least, racial physical traits. Such aspects must be actively reflected upon regarding both researcher positioning, the research process, and its subjects: “Studying the other, with the aim of transcending processes of marginalisation and othering, requires reflection on the ways in which one is always implicated in the processes of othering, whether by overcoming or reproducing them.” (Khawaja and Mørck, 2009, pp. 41–42). Moreover, the awareness of a tendency to understand whiteness as an unmarked or neutral category in research, hence white researchers taking a specific position, is important (Andreassen and Myong, 2017).



## Doing good and the desire of happiness

As the third analytical focus in a process of epistemic reflexivity, a critical approach to intentions of ‘doing good’ is suggested. As already mentioned, a central aim of the MiCREATE project is to ‘narrow the gap’ between migrant children and local children regarding well-being, learning, etc. In other words, the aim is to contribute to ‘doing good.’ Simultaneously, the studied school practice has the same aim: to do good in the sense of offering students the best possible conditions for education. This raises the question: Which kinds of reflections are relevant in the research process of fieldwork, analysis and development of practice recommendations regarding migrant children becoming part of a new society? The ambiguities of the integration concept and the unsettled matter of racialization processes in education point to further reflections on this topic.

Scrutinizing good intentions in universalistic welfare work characterizing the institutions of the Danish welfare state, including public schools, Padovan-Özdemir and Øland (2020) suggest a postcolonial welfare analytics which takes the Nordic exceptionalism and denial regarding racism and colonialism into consideration. They point to a certain tendency towards management by colour-blindness among professionals involved in education of refugee children. This means that racialized children such as refugees arriving to Danish schools should be contained and dispersed into the normality of Danish schools, meaning that the newcomers should adapt to Danish norms and not be too visible. An ongoing debate on dispersion and desegregation of migrants in Danish schools, focusing on percentages of “bilingual children” (“not too many”) (Jacobsen, 2017), illustrates this tendency.

However, such practices not only point to processes of racialization also immanent in the emic Danish integration concept, but also “seem to work effectively by denial of their relations to the post-colonial ordering of global economy, ideology, and cultural production” (Padovan-Özdemir and Øland, 2020, p. 13), promoted by a (neo-)liberal and progressive language of doing good and majoritarian benevolence and intervention (*ibid.*).

In other words, as also Rytter (2019) warns in the context of research on integration: an uncritical approach to doing good may result in the opposite effect, hence confirming discriminating and racializing structures that a project on promoting inclusion of migrant children is intended to oppose. Yet, how may this be done practically, when the purpose of the project is to

“do good”? Ahmed (2007) provides a relevant reminder to be attentive to the “institutional desire for good practice” (Ahmed, 2007, p. 164) in diversity work:

*This desire takes the form of an expectation that publicly funded research on race, diversity and equality should be useful, and should provide techniques for achieving equality and challenging institutional racism. In actual terms, this involves a desire to hear ‘happy stories of diversity’ rather than unhappy stories of racism. We write a report about how good practice and anti-racist tool kits are being used as technologies of concealment, displacing racism from public view. Anti-racism even becomes a new form of organizational pride. The response to our final report: too much focus on racism, we need more evidence of good practice. The response to your work is symptomatic of what you critique. They don’t even notice the irony. You have been funded to ‘show’ their commitment to diversity and are expected to return their investment by giving evidence of its worth. (Ahmed, 2007, p. 164)*

Ahmed adds, importantly, that such a desire for happy stories of diversity is also found in academic work. Hence, in a research project on integration of migrant children, researchers must be attentive to desires for good practices and not go uncritically into the work of both identifying and developing good practices, which is part of the project. When encountering the desire for good practices among both funders and professionals it is crucial to stick to epistemic reflexivity – thus not mirroring the categories of practice, but instead arming oneself with analytical categories and tools such as the ones introduced in this article. With Ahmed’s concept of “happy stories of diversity” in a racialized context of ambiguous integration policies, researchers are reminded to be suspicious when experiencing affects of happiness and curious when experiencing discomfort.

## **Bibliography**

- Ahmed, S. 2007. A phenomenology of whiteness. *Feminist Theory*. 8 (2), pp. 149–168.
- Andreassen, R. and Myong, L. 2017. Race, gender, and researcher positional-ity analysed through memory work. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*. 7 (2), pp. 97–104.
- Barot, R. and Bird, J. 2001. Racialization: the genealogy and critique of a concept. *Ethnic and racial Studies*. 24 (4), pp. 601–618.

- Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. J. 1992. *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Brubaker, R. 2012. Categories of Analysis and Categories of Practice: A Note on the Study of Muslims in European Countries of Immigration. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. **36** (1), pp. 1–8.
- Convention on the Rights of the Child. 1989. 1577 U.N.T.S [https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg\\_no=IV-11&chapter=4](https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg_no=IV-11&chapter=4) (18.10.2022).
- Elmeskov, J. 2019. Derfor inddeler vi verden i vestlige og ikke-vestlige lande. Danmarks Statistik. <https://www.dst.dk/da/Statistik/rigsstatklumme/2019/2019-07-11-derfor-inddeler-vi-verden-i-vestlige-og-ikke-vestlige-lande> (18.10.2022).
- Foucault, M. 2013. *Politics, philosophy, culture: Interviews and other writings 1977–1984*. London: Routledge.
- Hobel, P., Høegh, T., Jacobsen, G.H., Piekut, A. and Sindberg Jensen, S. 2019. *Political and media discourse analysis and review of public opinion. Denmark: Work Package 3 Reception Communities*. MiCREATE: Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe.
- Horizon 2020 Work Programme. 2017. EN Horizon 2020 Work Programme 2018–2020. 13. Europe in a changing world – Inclusive, innovative and reflective societies. [https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/wp/2018-2020/main/h2020-wp1820-societies\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/wp/2018-2020/main/h2020-wp1820-societies_en.pdf) (18.10.2022).
- Jacobsen, G.H. 2017. ”Alle kræver politisk handling, og hvad kan vi gøre”? Skolehenvi sning af etniske minoritetsbørn som undtagelsespolitik i den nationale konkurrencestat. *Dansk Pædagogisk Tidsskrift*. **3**, pp. 17–26.
- Jaffe-Walter, R. 2019. Ideal liberal subjects and Muslim “Others”: liberal nationalism and the racialization of Muslim youth in a progressive Danish school. *Race Ethnicity and Education*. **22** (2), pp. 285–300.
- Khawaja, I. 2015, “Det muslimske sofa-hjørne”: muslimskhed, racialisering og integration. *Pædagogisk Psykologisk Tidsskrift*. **52** (2), pp. 29–38.
- Khawaja, I. and Mørck, L.L. 2009. Researcher Positioning: Muslim “Otherness” and Beyond. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. **6** (1–2), pp. 28–45.
- Lagermann, L. C. 2013. Racialized subjects in a colour blind school. *International Journal on School Disaffection*. **10** (1), pp. 73–89.
- Merriam-Webster. 2021. Race. In: *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/race> (18.10.2022).

- Merriam-Webster. 2021. Racialization. In: *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/race> (18.10.2022).
- Padovan-Özdemir, M. and Øland, T. 2020. Denied, but effective – stock stories in Danish welfare work with refugees. *Race Ethnicity and Education*. **2** (25), pp. 212–230.
- Proposal 2018. *Proposal number: SEP-210489122. Proposal acronym: Mi-CREATE*. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/digital/wp-call/2022/call-fiche\\_digital-2022-deploy-02\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/digital/wp-call/2022/call-fiche_digital-2022-deploy-02_en.pdf) (18.10.2022).
- Rytter, M. 2019. Writing Against Integration: Danish Imaginaries of Culture, Race and Belonging. *Ethnos*. **84** (4), pp. 678–697.
- Rudiger, A. and Spencer, S. 2003. *Social integration of migrants and ethnic minorities: Policies to combat discrimination*. Paper for the conference ‘The economic and social aspects of migration’, the European Commission and the OECD. <https://www.oecd.org/els/mig/15516956.pdf> (18.10.2022).
- Scholten, P. 2011. *Framing immigrant integration: Dutch research-policy dialogues in comparative perspective*. Amsterdam: Amstrdam University Press.
- Tørslev, M.K., Nørredam, M. and Vitus, K. 2016. Doing race and ethnicity–exploring the lived experience of whiteness at a Danish Public School. *Whiteness and Education*. **1** (2), pp. 137–149.
- Vertelyte, M. 2019. *Not So Ordinary Friendship: An Ethnography of Student Friendships in a Racially Diverse Danish Classroom*. Ph.d. thesis, Aalborg University.