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The Hand That Goes Up (Again): Why Curriculum Can Never Be Neutral

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Introduction

Every autumn, I co-teach a course at the University of Helsinki that brings together student teachers from across Finland. They come eager, anxious and often armed with a question that surfaces with such regularity that I have come to anticipate it. We have been discussing social justice, critical interculturality, decoloniality – concepts that unsettle the 'tidy' narratives about Finnish education that circulate globally (see Dervin et al., 2026 but also Thrupp et al., 2023). And then a hand goes up. Sometimes it is a tentative hand… sometimes it is defiant. But the question is always the same: "How can we as teachers in Finland stay politically neutral when the approaches you are proposing are clearly political?".

The students are not being obtuse but they are naming a real tension. They have been told, repeatedly, that Finnish teachers are trusted professionals who stand above politics, that the curriculum is built on research and consensus, that their role is to facilitate learning rather than impose values (see e.g., Sahlberg, 2021). Yet here we are, suggesting that they attend to structures of power, to colonial legacies, to the ways in which their own identities shape the classroom. To them, this looks like politics. *And they are right.*

The assumption embedded in their question that teaching can or should be politically neutral, is itself a symptom of a wider myth that pervades education globally. That myth tells us that curriculum is a 'technical instrument', a 'neutral container for knowledge' that can be separated from values, ideology, politics and… money (Dervin, 2025a; Dervin & Yuan, 2022). It tells us that if we simply follow the evidence, design clear learning objectives and assess outcomes accurately, we will have done our job. The student teacher's hand in the air, asking about neutrality, is the moment this myth collides with reality.

Let me state plainly that this moment reveals clearly that curriculum is *never* neutral. Every curriculum reflects specific orientations, whether we acknowledge them or not (Smyth et al., 2014). And when we claim neutrality, we do not escape ideology, i.e., something we cannot opt out of, something we often pretend not to have (see Moller, 2024). As such, we simply render it invisible and therefore unaccountable...

Consider the very framing of the course those student teachers attend. Why do we ask them to grapple with e.g., 'social justice' and 'decoloniality'? These are not random additions to the syllabus. They emerge from a particular understanding of what education is for, related to specific (economic-political) times. That understanding holds that schools are not separate from society but embedded within it; that classrooms reproduce hierarchies unless they actively work against them; that

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knowledge has been shaped by histories of colonialism and exclusion that continue to matter – even in a country like Finland that often claims exceptionalism because of its 'non-colonialist' past (Doran, 2024). These are not neutral positions. They are arguments about how the world works and what educators ought to do about it. I do not pretend otherwise and I tell my students so (Dervin, 2025b).

The problem is not that my own approach is political. The problem is that the alternative (the supposedly 'neutral') approach is equally political but refuses to admit it (Chen & Dervin, 2025). When a curriculum presents a single historical narrative without questioning whose perspective it represents, that is *a political choice*. When it defines 'good citizenship' in terms of employability and economic productivity or 'togetherness' as a way of reinforcing national/regional identity, these are *political choices*. When it treats 'cultural difference' as something to be 'managed' rather than engaged with critically, that is *a political choice*. Neutrality is not the absence of ideology; it is ideology dressed in the language of *common sense*.

In Finland, the myth of neutrality is especially seductive. The global image of Finnish education (e.g., trust, autonomy, equity) often gets translated into a kind of exceptionalism: We do not have the same problems as other countries (Riitaoja, 2026). This allows educators to imagine that concepts like decoloniality or critical interculturality are imports, foreign intrusions into what they have been made to believe is a 'pristine' system. But Finland is not outside history – although, obviously, it also has its own specificities. Finnish education has its own exclusions, its own hierarchies, its own relationship to colonialism, particularly in relation to Sámi peoples in the North and other minoritised groups. To claim neutrality is to render these realities invisible (Doran, 2024).

The student teachers in our course sense this. Their question is not a rejection of what we teach but a request for clarity. They want to know how to hold the tension between the ideal of neutrality that they have been given and the political nature of the work they are being called to do. My answer is this: *Abandon the ideal.* Replace it with reflexivity.

To me, reflexivity means acknowledging that you are always situated and potentially wrong (Tan, 2025; Byrd Clark, 2026). It means being able to tell students and colleagues that I hold the values that inform my teaching because I believe education should challenge inequality. It means telling them that I am not neutral but I am *accountable* and I apply the principle of 'criticality of criticality' to myself (i.e. turning the question back on oneself, see Dervin, 2025b). It means inviting them to question me, to disagree, to hold me to my own principles. This is not the same as *imposing views*. It is the opposite of indoctrination as indoctrination hides its commitments (Dervin, 2025b). Reflexivity makes them visible and open to debate…

If curriculum is never neutral then the question is *not* how to eliminate values from education but how to engage with them *responsibly*. This requires moving beyond what, as a specialist of interculturality, I have called e.g., simplistic approaches in education, which tend to reduce complex issues to checklists of e.g., attitudes or competencies. Instead, we need curricula that treat values as objects of inquiry. A curriculum oriented toward social justice should not simply declare that inequality is wrong but it should invite students to investigate how inequality operates, to examine their own positions within it and to consider what forms of response are possible (Hosseini et al., 2024).

The student teachers who ask about neutrality are already doing something important since they are refusing to accept the myth at face value. They are also noticing the gap between the promise of neutrality and the reality of value-laden educational work. My role is not to resolve that tension for them but to help them inhabit it productively, to recognise that being political is not the same as being partisan; that taking a stand against injustice is not the same as imposing beliefs; that reflexivity (not neutrality!) is the foundation of ethical teaching.

I return to that classroom every autumn, knowing the question "How can we as teachers in Finland stay politically neutral?" will come. And I am grateful for it because it means the myth is being questioned, that another generation of educators is learning to see curriculum not as a neutral

instrument but as a living, contested and profoundly ideological space. I believe that this is where *real* education begins…

Fred Dervin refuses to let interculturality sit still. As Professor of multicultural education at the University of Helsinki (Finland), he disrupts how we think about identity and global interaction across 300+ publications. Dervin also challenges us to move beyond simplistic models and question how we communicate about interculturality itself.

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