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ABSTRACT
This paper analyses and discusses the possibilities and challenges of collegial mutual deliberation among teachers as a way of counteracting racism. It takes its starting point in research on teacher collaboration that emphasises the importance of creating conditions locally for critical discussions, building on knowledge from different perspectives and going beyond simple solutions. With a focus on the practical, the idea of deliberative communication serves as a theoretical lens to analyse discussions among eight teachers on their responses to racism. The study provides theoretical and empirical knowledge about the potential contribution of collegial deliberation to developing a communicative teacher community that counteracts racism.

Introduction
Earlier research on teacher collaboration has pointed to the importance of “revealing and probing problems of practice, providing evidence or reasoning, making connections to general principles, building on others’ ideas, and offering different perspectives” (Lefstein, Louie, Segal, & Becher, 2020, p. 8). In order to do this, there is a need to go beyond general inquiries, with greater specification, in order to “to build a knowledge base that adequately accounts for differences between groups with respect to goals” (p. 10). In this article, we will respond to this call by analysing and discussing possibilities and challenges in collegial mutual deliberation among teachers as a way to counteract racism.

Our interest in teachers’ deliberation has developed over time as part of the research project How to Counteract Racism in Education – A qualitative study of teachers’ anti-racist actions (Swedish Research Council, grant nr 2015-01046). From our empirical findings, based on interviews with teachers, we have observed that there is a relative absence of discussions among colleagues in which questions of racism are problematised. A preliminary conclusion is that the combination of local school traditions, differences between study programmes, physical barriers within the schools, and the influence of different traditions among school professionals clearly limits what it is possible to do. Situating our preliminary findings within research on teacher collaboration (Kelchtermans, 2006; Lefstein et al., 2020; Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes, & Kyndt,
we can conclude that they are far from unique. On the contrary, introducing diverse and competing perspectives to challenge teachers’ assumptions and taken-for-granted practices is a challenge in itself, not just for local school practices, but also with regard to the contribution research is able to make.

Against this background, the present article has both an empirical and a theoretical aim. Empirically, it seeks to contribute knowledge about whether mutual deliberation can be a possible way for teachers to counteract racism in education. Theoretically, it seeks to contribute to research on teacher collaboration by asking how teachers, in and through collegial deliberation, can collectively develop and deepen the moral and political dimensions of their work. The methodology used takes its theoretical starting point in the concepts of deliberative democracy and deliberative communication and builds empirically on recorded group discussions among eight teachers.

**On teachers’ deliberation**

The idea of deliberation and deliberative democracy was introduced in the 1990s by researchers such as Benhabib (1996), Bohman (1996), Bohman & Rehg (1997), Habermas (1996) and Dryzek (2000). Their basic argument was that the legitimacy of democratic institutions “must be thought to result from the free and unconstrained public deliberation of all about matters of common concern” (cf. Benhabib, 1996, p. 68). And it is in a perspective of legitimacy that the idea of deliberation can be seen as a long-term project, concerned with breaking down selfishness, misuse of formal authority and private egoistic aspirations in favour of deliberation in the public interest and the public good – a project that has to reckon with difficulties and resistance. This also means that the critique against deliberation on the grounds of inefficiency (Knowles & Clark, 2018) has to be understood in the light of the long-term nature of the process of creating deliberative attitudes through deliberation (Englund, 2000, 2006). In addition, it means that the educational form of deliberative democracy – taking shape as deliberative communication – in schools and other democratic institutions does not assume preferences are predetermined and static. Rather, positions are arrived at through the process of making arguments and giving justifications. In this sense deliberation can be transformational for individuals participating in it, thus making deliberative conceptions of democracy suitable for applications in democratic education (Harell, 2019, p. 300).

It may be noted, however, that the idea of deliberative communication or deliberative democracy related to education has historically taken shape as an idealised construction of principles, focusing “primarily on normative elements of democracy in ideal conditions and not necessarily on implementing their theories in complex modern societies” (Knowles & Clark, 2018, p. 14), although significant attempts have also been made to implement deliberative communication in Swedish schools (cf. Englund, 2006). The critique does not, in our opinion, mean that we should give up the normative ideal of deliberative communication. In this respect we would refer to Benhabib, a political philosopher inspired by Habermas, who advocates the need for normative analyses, even if a priori conditions may be seen as imperfect in relation to specific ideals. We
consider this view especially important with regard to the common critique and rejection of such analyses, since “the fact that a normative model does not correspond to reality is no reason to dismiss it, for the need for normativity arises precisely because humans measure the reality they inhabit in the light of principles and promises that transcend this reality” (Benhabib, 2002, p. 134).

**Encountering racism in education**

In earlier research on how teachers counteract racism in education it has been demonstrated, primarily from other countries, that teachers develop different approaches to do that (cf. DiAngelo, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Gillborn, 2004). However, in the case of Sweden, it could be argued that for a long time much of the discussion has been colour-blind (Arneback & Jämte, 2021). While a teacher’s background is often addressed in terms of class and gender, it is more rarely touched on in terms of race and culture. From a structural perspective it can thus be argued that inequality based on race and culture can manifest itself in everyday school practice, and that teachers therefore need to challenge themselves and their understandings of “white dominance” and “white privilege” in order to make anti-racism possible (Gillborn, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Altogether, by explicitly turning the spotlight on teachers’ deliberations on racism, we bring in a specific content with the potential to contribute knowledge in line with the purpose of this article.

Of relevance for this article is that the empirical data have been collected in Sweden, a country that has had a self-image as “a land of tolerance” and where racism has been located in other places and times (Jämte, 2013). This self-image has, however, been challenged since the 1990s, as ideological racism has become increasingly evident. Since then, there has been a struggle in Sweden over how racism is to be understood, both at a political level and in academia, leading to greater awareness of structural racism and political polarisation (SOU 2006:79; SOU 2012:74). The combination of this national background, an understanding of racism as “multifaceted, deeply embedded, often taken-for-granted aspects of power relations” (Gillborn, 2005), and changes in the legal framework for the education system in recent decades, which have placed greater demands on teachers to counteract racism, calls for challenging self-reflection on different institutional levels (Arneback, Bergh, & Tryggvason, 2021; Bergh & Arneback, 2019; Lgy 11; SFS 2008:567).

In the research project which this article forms part of, we proceed from an understanding of racism as an “exclusionary and discriminatory practice grounded in a variable of shifting assumptions, logics and ideational constructs that manifest on individual, social and structural levels” (Arneback & Jämte, 2021). We thus understand racism as a practice that is performed and enacted on different levels, a practice that sorts and categorises people on the basis of their actual or assigned belonging. Although national education policies in Sweden clearly state that teachers have a responsibility to counteract every form of discrimination and racist expression in schools (SFS 2008:567; SFS 2010:800), teachers still need to make interpretations and discretionary judgements in complex situations, often under time pressure, and to decide how to act (Arneback & Englund, 2020; Bergh & Wiklund, 2021).
By focusing on the Swedish national context and more specifically the chosen local case, we have an opportunity as researchers that is in line with Schwab’s (1970/2013) call to orient studies towards the practical. However, to study how teachers, in collaboration with colleagues, reflect on their actions to counteract racism is methodologically challenging. Different expressions of racism will most likely be interpreted in different ways. For example, if racism is understood as structural and internalised, rather than an individual problem, those different understandings will probably affect teachers’ reflection on how they can act (Berman & Paradies, 2010). On the one hand, it could be argued that questions of power in relation to racism (Gillborn, 2005) might be overlooked in deliberative communication (Young, 2002). On the other hand, which is our argument, this is ultimately an empirical question that needs to be further studied.

**Understanding the practical by applying the theoretical framework**

To contextualise teachers’ collegial deliberation as a practical tool to counteract racism in schools, we believe that it is necessary to draw upon Habermas’s notion of schools as public spheres, or we might say, weak publics. “For this to be possible, knowledge, perspectives, and values must be public in the sense that they can be challenged by other forms of knowledge, perspectives and values” (Englund, 2006, p. 514). This implies that pluralism is constitutive of deliberative communication, but also that processes of deliberation help to determine how best to act in the always uncertain circumstances that characterise educational settings. “Under such conditions, there is a need for a more ‘deliberation/phronesis-centred’ understanding of the practical” (Hardy, 2018, p. 235; cf. Westbury, 2013, p. 642). This is also an approach in line with Schwab’s (1970/2013) classic call for the field of curriculum to be reoriented towards the practical. However, Schwab’s deliberation-centred interpretation of the practical … “has not captured the field of curriculum studies” (Westbury, 2013, p. 641). But as Hardy and Westbury argue with Schwab (1973), mutual deliberation – in this case, among teachers – can help determine how best to act in the always uncertain circumstances characterising educational settings.

We will relate the discussions among the teachers in our study to the idea of deliberative communication that takes its practical starting point in a discursive situation in which there are different views of an issue or problem. This starting point, which in Schwab’s terminology represents discovery, is informed by classical pragmatism (Dewey, 1908/1978; Dewey, 1916/1985; Dewey, 1922/1988; Dewey, 1927/1988) and has been developed by modern pragmatism (Habermas, 1996). Deliberative communication is seen as a means of developing knowledge, mutual respect and democracy through reciprocal argumentation, in our context about different ways of countering racism. Deliberation also has a close relationship to democracy and public-good values, such as social justice, integrity, openness and professional responsibility, which can be seen as qualitative criteria for the content of deliberation.

To those criteria, we may add that in deliberative communication every teacher has to reflect upon their views and assumptions by listening, deliberating, seeking arguments and evaluating in relation to concrete others. Deliberative collegial communication incorporates a collective search for common frames of reference, but also offers scope to analyse what you are not agreed upon and why. Communication of this kind
may, for one thing, offer special possibilities for the multicultural situation of today, as a framework for encounters between different cultures (cf. Englund, 2011). In practice, deliberation implies standing by your values and being able to articulate your argument, but also being open to self-reflection on your position and perhaps ready to change and utilise it after being convinced by a stronger argument from a concrete other.

Proceeding from these theoretical starting points for deliberative communication, we have proposed what deliberative qualities are related to and able to build this kind of communication by being present in teachers’ deliberation. To sum up, those qualities are an acceptance that pluralism and different views are constitutive of deliberative communication, that the development of a deliberative attitude is a long-term process of learning to listen, and that preferences are not predetermined and static. Rather, positions are arrived at by advancing arguments and providing justifications, a process in which deliberation that also involves respect for the concrete other can be transformational for the individuals participating. This endeavour of deliberative action also means that schools are democratic and, as such, public institutions.

Methods, data sources and analysis

The empirical data used are an outcome of a process following from the project mentioned above, in which a total of 27 Swedish high (upper secondary) school teachers were interviewed about their experiences of counteracting racism (Swedish Research Council, grant nr 2015-01046). In line with the design of that project, two sets of interviews were carried out. The first were more open and exploratory in character, while the second set, conducted a year later, presented different cases that the teachers were asked to reflect on. In the time between these interviews, the teachers were also given the opportunity to reflect on issues of racism over a longer period. Alongside these local processes, racism was also a highly emphasised issue in national debate at the time of the interviews (Arneback & Jämte, 2021). One of the key actors in the education sector was the National Agency for Education, which had among other things commissioned Swedish universities to organise courses for teachers on racism. These various circumstances gave rise to a discussion between the two authors of this article and one of the interviewed teachers, who will be referred to here as Martin. The outcome of that discussion forms the basis for the present article.

The fact that the issue had been emphasised at the national level, and that Martin, together with his colleagues, had participated in a course on racism at a nearby university, gave these teachers inspiration and strengthened their mandate to continue working in a more organised way. When Martin told us about his plan, we decided to ask whether he would be willing to develop a joint action with us as researchers, with a focus on collegial deliberation. Martin was positive to the idea and we agreed (a) that he, together with his colleague Catherine, should invite colleagues from different programmes to discuss issues of racism in smaller groups during the autumn of 2019, (b) that those discussions would be audio-recorded and transcribed, and (c) that we would support him in using deliberative communication as a means to structure the discussions.

Once Martin had recruited a group, we joined their first meeting and informed the participants about ethical issues, for example that no names would be used and that
they had the right to withdraw without having to explain why (Swedish Research Council, 2019). We then left the teachers on their own. The empirical data analysed in this article consist of three recorded discussions involving a group of eight colleagues in all. Each of the seminars was led by one person, alternating between Martin and Catherine. They are both middle-aged and teach social studies at a high school with a broad range of study programmes. In addition, they share common views about what needs to be done and how they want to work. The other teachers participating in the discussions are of varying ages and teach on both theoretical and practical programmes. Their ages range from the late twenties to the early sixties. Three of the total of eight teachers are men and five are women. For practical reasons, the number of participants in the three seminars varied between six and eight. When it comes to skin colour, all the participating teachers except one are White. This is also the case for the two of us involved as researchers. We are aware that this has implications for the study and that it probably affected both the structure and the content discussed between the teachers (Fasching-Varner, 2013). However, our impression is that the discussion among the teachers was characterised by trust and confidence. We have also, as researchers, continuously and critically reflected on these conditions in our analysis.

Although the content varied between the different discussions, it always followed the same four-step structure developed by the teachers. First, Martin or Catherine welcomed the participants and asked them to think of a situation involving racism which they had experienced and wanted to discuss with the others, to write a short note about it, and to formulate a question they wanted to discuss. In the opening round that followed, everybody presented their respective question to the rest of the group, after which they were asked to agree on one question for further discussion. That done, the aim of the second step was to put questions to the case owner in order to clarify the situation, provide a better background to the dilemma, and so on. In the third step, Martin or Catherine challenged the group to think of questions that could further problematise and deepen understanding of the situation (referring both to facts and to feelings and values). The participants were then given a minute to put their thoughts into words, and then a new round of discussion followed. In the fourth and final step, participants were asked to individually formulate reflections on what had been said, what had not been said, how to understand the situation, alternatives, etc. The case owner was also specifically asked how they felt about the discussion and if they wanted any advice. Again, a joint discussion followed before Martin or Catherine closed by summarising the session and thanking everyone for their contributions.

When we as researchers were given the three recordings, each lasting a little over an hour, we listened to them carefully, several times. Questions asked by the teachers turned the spotlight on challenging situations, for example when the value base of schools came up against views represented by the students, or when prejudice among students needed to be dealt with. The discussions that followed clearly illustrated how the teachers had to think through ways of dealing with many sensitive questions. Step by step, the process of listening made us familiar with how the participants made use of their own experience as teachers, for example in challenging instances of racist speech, and helped us to identify what we understood to be the three most frequently discussed themes (Patton, 2002; Schreier, 2012).
Guided by the previous theoretical elaboration of the concept of deliberation, the analysis is presented under three headings, with a focus on segregation between groups, language use and actions by teachers. Altogether, the recorded discussions illustrated the challenges as well as the educative potential that comes with conflict and differing views. There is little question that teachers have to be prepared to act, or not act, in subtle situations, often with little or limited knowledge about what is really at stake.

Themes in teachers’ collegial deliberation
The analysis that will now be presented sheds light on what deliberative qualitative criteria we found in the teachers’ discussions, and how they dealt with the tension between the need to act and the intention to deliberate.

Segregation between groups – challenges to deliberate upon
Much of the discussion between the teachers touched on aspects of conflicts, prejudices and misunderstandings that follow from the ways in which individuals, in society as well as in schools, are categorised into groups, large or small. This in turn leads to a kind of segregation, where tensions or conflicts between groups may take explicit forms, such as expressions of xenophobia or racism, but also be of a more subtle character. A recurring problem raised by the teachers was how certain students tended to become stigmatised by being singled out. As one of the participants noted, there was a real problem in being

singled out by other students . . . how should I deal with students’ ethnic backgrounds which historically have been referred to in negative terms (Ellen)?

That the problem of stigmatisation was closely related to processes of segregation was an issue raised by all the teachers in different ways, and especially by one of them, who we have chosen to call Wilmer. Telling his colleagues about his case, Wilmer explained how, in his role as a physical education teacher, he had once introduced a lesson in which the students had the chance to choose themselves what to do. One of the boys quickly told the others that he wanted to play football. But when he very soon realised that he was the only “Swede” among “immigrants”, he protested using the N-word: “I don’t want to play football with the N . . . s”. The question Wilmer put to his colleagues was:

How can I as a teacher handle a situation like this (Wilmer)?

In the joint discussion that followed, Wilmer was asked by his colleagues to elaborate on the situation. He explained that the class was clearly divided into different groups, most obviously between the ethnically Swedish boys from the countryside and different groups of immigrants. After this situation had arisen, when the others left to start their activities, Wilmer asked the boy to come with him for a one-to-one talk. Once they were alone, he explained in quite a straightforward and frank manner that this was the most immature thing he had ever heard. As a consequence, the boy just became more and more upset and angry:
I tried to encourage him to take part anyway, but whatever I said, he just refused to listen (Wilmer).

So the boy left, and after the lesson was over there was no further conversation between the two. Discussing the case with his colleagues, Wilmer reflected on whether he should have done something more, perhaps talked to the boy’s mentor. One of his colleagues asked him how the other students had reacted, especially the ones who had been referred to using the N-word. To this Wilmer responded that, unfortunately, the students were used to hearing things like this. Some of them perhaps nodded or laughed a bit, but when reflecting on it afterwards he was not sure whether, and if so what, they had actually heard. What could be stressed here, from the viewpoint of our interest in deliberation, is that this critical incident might have been highlighted for everyone to have a view on.

Instead of remaining in the situation, challenging and discussing different alternatives for action, Wilmer’s colleagues were interested in hearing why he thought the boy had acted the way he did. He was asked questions about neuropsychiatric explanations and about the boy’s family background. Wilmer said that he had noticed when meeting some parents that values seem to be very firmly rooted in the family structure, coming in particular from the fathers. He personally found it quite challenging to raise sensitive issues with parents, as he was still in his late twenties and therefore considered himself quite young in his professional role.

The other teachers were also interested in finding out how Wilmer reflected on the use of negatively charged words. This gave rise to questions about language and also about how a teacher can, and must, react. However, despite their potential, these questions were not really further elaborated in a deliberative way that allowed them to be challenged by other forms of knowledge, perspectives and values. This highlights how important it is to try to follow up and make use of the potential issue at hand, that is, how situations like these can open the way for deliberative communication in a broader sense. With regard to the question of segregation between groups, the teachers also reflected on the fact that this was a pattern they could see when some companies, used for work placements, were reluctant to accept students who fell under the label of "immigrant". Although many teachers, in contrast to the example from Wilmer chosen here, design their teaching so that group structures and thus segregation in the classroom are challenged, this is still a pattern that shapes everyday life in the school, during breaks, at lunchtime and in the café.

In our analysis of the data, we first of all reflected on the approach Wilmer had chosen in the situation where the boy used the N-word. For Wilmer it was not a question of whether he should act, but rather how. When he asked his colleagues to help him reflect on this, we noticed that the questions he was asked gave him fairly limited support when it came to deliberating on the situation and reflecting on other alternatives. Instead, the discussion moved away towards psychologically inspired questions (neuropsychiatric explanations), contextual issues (family background and companies), and a more general discussion of language use. As a consequence, Wilmer was never really challenged to reflect on his own reaction and other possible actions, for example what would have happened if he had adopted a more listening and dialogic attitude in approaching the boy. Likewise, by not making more of the deliberative
potential of the collegial discussion, the talk between the teachers did not really succeed in coming to a critical point, with space for conflict and disagreement. This is thus an example of how easily a vulnerable situation is created, a situation that can develop in very different ways. As it now turned out, Wilmer was not really given the chance to listen deliberatively.

Language use – deliberation on content and as process

Turning our attention now to another teacher discussion, we will explore in greater depth the question of language use. This was a theme that arose in several of the seminars, often expressed more specifically in terms of “offensive words” and “racist joking”.

In one of the seminars, Hedda described how racist expression in the form of joking had occurred in a class where racism did not appear frequently. To her colleagues, she posed the question:

How can I, as a teacher, deal with racist joking in the classroom (Hedda)?

The background to the question was that, during a language lesson, a challenging situation had arisen when the class were practising comparing adjectives. At the end of the lesson, one student had said, rather quietly, “black, blacker, blackest”. The words were not spoken out loud and clear, and were not addressed to another group or the whole class. As the teacher in the class, Hedda did not even hear the words herself, but was immediately made aware of them by a group of students. A heated discussion arose in the class, and Hedda tried to form a clear picture of who had said what. When, after a while, she had found out what had happened and turned to the student who had spoken the words, he responded by saying that he had “just been kidding” and soon after apologised to the others. For Hedda, this situation was very challenging, and when she told her colleagues about it she invited them to help her reflect on it, so as to be better prepared next time to handle a situation in which “offensive words” or “racist joking” were used in the classroom.

When we as researchers listened to the recorded discussion, we noticed that it started with initial questions seeking to clarify what had actually happened, such as what the student’s intention could have been, how the others had reacted and what Hedda had done. The other teachers confirmed that they had been in similar situations and that this could create a classroom climate of strong emotion and confrontation. Having established a clearer picture of the situation, the discussion moved progressively towards further problematisation and more nuanced and cautious deliberation. While some reflections widened the problem and started to ask questions about the use of language itself, others tended to draw the discussion back to the classroom, to the very specific situation. For example, one of the teachers reflected on the fact that concepts are charged with history and values, and that this might be something that students were not aware of. The point in this line of argument was that there may be layers of historical and structural oppression, power and hierarchization embodied in certain words. However, instead of there being further deliberation on this insight, the discussion was interrupted when one of the teachers asked another question and thus moved it back to reflection on what the different actors in the classroom had done. Even so, in
this example we see that there were some contributions that paved the way for a more serious and vulnerable deliberative discussion.

The above-mentioned examples, the first presented by Wilmer and the second by Hedda, highlight both similarities and differences. One similarity raises the question of the art of listening which, as has been mentioned before, is a central component of deliberative communication, in which there is a need for “tolerance and respect for the concrete other and that participants learn to listen to the other person’s argument” (cf. Englund, 2016, p. 71; 2006, p. 512). On the one hand, it can be concluded that the discussion among the participating teachers can be characterised as very tolerant and respectful. But on the other, it can also be concluded that more careful listening could have helped move the discussion forward, to a deliberative communication characterised as a joint process of searching for understanding of what is discovered. One very practical explanation for this outcome could be that the teachers seemed more focused on the question they themselves wanted to ask than on carefully listening to what the others had to say. There is no doubt, though, that several issues were raised that had the potential to challenge the participating teachers’ safe space and taken-for-granted assumptions about what constitutes a good teacher, and thus to introduce conflict and disagreement into the group as a basis for more in-depth collegial deliberation. Despite this critique, we conclude that both Wilmer’s and Hedda’s examples of classroom situations that had degenerated did inspire the teachers to reflect on how to develop language that was respectful to the concrete other. They also inspired discussion about how “offensive words” and “racist joking” could have opened the way for a deeper analysis of what kind of consequences racist speech might have. Although situations like this will always be complex, the conversations between the teachers serve as examples of how collegial deliberation might help them next time to better balance timing and situatedness, based on a broadened professional repertoire.

**Actions in situ – judgements on how to develop and make use of deliberation**

One “result” or insight that seemed to be crucial in both the examples referred to was that the teacher in the classroom actually responded to the racist expression, and that according to the students they might otherwise have lost confidence in their teacher. But as well as reacting and responding vigorously to expressions of racism, the teachers also needed to create opportunities for deliberation, deliberation related to the value base of the school and a democratic society. It is important to note that the situations described could be seen as discursive situations in which it became clear that racist speech was strongly resisted, both in the classroom and within the teacher community. Here, the teachers had no hesitation in being critical of any expression of racism.

The collegial deliberation among the teachers touched upon the tension between a teacher on the one hand having to act forcefully and respond strongly to racist speech, and on the other not forgetting to create space for critical discussion or deliberation. From the two examples described, however, it can be concluded that this is easier said than done. A first critical point is that the teacher has to make a judgment in situ on how to develop and make use of the discursive situation, moving it towards fruitful deliberation. Another is that such judgment needs to be practised and developed over time in order to utilise a better preparedness and repertoire to counteract racism.
The result emerging from our analysis is that the discussions among the teachers demonstrate a temporal dimension, in which individual experiences are problematised and discovered collectively, with the potential to make participants better prepared to act in the future. One of the teachers, Hedda, reflected on the sometimes difficult situation individual teachers face, and argued the need for collaboration:

*It feels like we as a school have a lot to do. To be a counterweight, to uphold democracy. As an individual teacher, it is difficult and tough. We need a more holistic approach (Hedda).*

That discussions with colleagues are valuable and necessary in achieving this holistic approach was something all the teachers were agreed on. When Martin followed up Hedda’s comment as he concluded the seminar, he said:

*That is the reason we need to have this kind of discussion. To ask critical questions and listen carefully, but without necessarily feeling any pressure to come up with solutions or advice (Martin).*

From this rather general conclusion, a discussion followed on balancing between acting and not acting in certain challenging situations. Again, expressions of racism and the use of certain words were cited as examples. While one of the teachers argued that each such expression needed to be seen in context, and that it was not always necessary to act, others objected. For example, Louise argued that there was a law and that saying certain things was never acceptable:

*The law sets a limit, beyond which you are not allowed to say or do something. There is a limit, and we have to make it clear. Based on the school’s values and the requirement of equal treatment, there are certain things you are not allowed to say (Louise).*

When Wilmer, whose “case” is described above, listened to his colleagues, he started to reflect on the way he had responded to the boy with a hard and clear statement that this was the most immature thing he had ever heard. In contrast to that action, he now formulated an insight that challenged his previously expressed sense of being helpless and not knowing what to do:

*If you know that it is so deeply rooted, you have to give them a battery of things they can say instead (Wilmer).*

Our interpretation of Wilmer’s comment is that we can see here how the earlier deliberation among the teachers had, at least to some extent, created a more nuanced view. Although we have concluded in our analysis that golden opportunities with educative potential for deliberation were often missed, Wilmer’s reflection can serve to illustrate the value of talk between teachers. To be able to provide their students with a battery of alternative thinking, teachers need to develop such a battery themselves. In Wilmer’s case, this involves finding support in Louise’s comment about the law, while also opening up to the possibility of reflecting on the context in which he himself is situated.

Compared with Wilmer, who is still in his twenties and has fairly limited experience as a teacher, Hedda, who is middle-aged, has been in the profession for longer. In the discussion with his colleagues, Wilmer mentioned that he still felt young when he met the students’ parents, and that it was therefore quite challenging to raise sensitive
questions. Although this was not something Hedda touched on, she seemed to understand both the problem of racism and thus her professional role differently. Based on her understanding of racism as a structural problem, she reflected on it as a question of responsibility, social justice and democracy:

*With the debates of recent years, there is good support for no longer using certain words. If you want to live in a democracy and have freedom of speech, you also have to know the limits of freedom of speech. We have been given a great responsibility and we have to take that responsibility. Students also react positively when we react, and conversely see it as a betrayal when we don’t. A difficult question, however, is in what subject, and when, such issues should be discussed, what course should it be done as part of? But that is definitely our mission, and we need to set boundaries* (Hedda).

Zooming out from the examples described above, our interpretation is that they were dominated by two completely different ways of interpreting racism, the first based in an individual and the second in a structural understanding (Berman & Paradies, 2010). But while the discussion of Wilmer’s example defined and located racism to a greater degree as an individual problem, that does not mean that his colleagues did not offer comments and reflections with great potential for further collegial deliberation. For example, in the discussion among the teachers, the underlying reasons for segregation were problematised with reference both to local organisational conditions, such as the way groups were defined in relation to different programmes, and to more historical explanations, including issues such as ethnicity, culture, skin colour, religion and language. The challenge, rather, was that those insights were not held onto, translated and discussed in relation to the concrete pedagogical problem which Wilmer had presented.

To sum up, the responsibility of the teachers and their need to respond to racism is evident from many angles, but the interplay between them in the seminars underscores the need for more nuanced deliberation. The results of this analysis indicate that joint collegial deliberation, starting from questions about how to counteract racism, listening, deliberating, seeking arguments and evaluating, has the potential to create a more meliorist classroom climate.

**Discussion and conclusion**

In line with the aim of the article, we argue that this study provides theoretical and empirical knowledge about the possibilities and challenges of collegial mutual deliberation among teachers as a way to counteract racism. We conclude that there is a need for more empirical research on interpersonal deliberation, not just between teachers and students, but also collectively between and among teachers and over a long-time frame. To avoid teachers being left on their own, this kind of collegial deliberation can potentially contribute to the development of a communicative teacher community, in which every teacher has an opportunity to critically analyse different situations where racism arises and get help and support from colleagues in reflecting on how to act in these different situations in their own specific context.

Theoretically, our aim has been to contribute knowledge to research on teacher collaboration. Returning to the research mentioned earlier, as a starting point for the article (Kelchtermans, 2006; Lefstein et al., 2020; Vangrieken et al., 2015), it has been argued that collegial collaboration holds great potential and that “collaboration that is
deep enough and touches the underlying beliefs of teachers is needed for actual school change” (Vangrieken et al., 2015, p. 27). However, it has also been noted that achieving teacher collaboration appears to be a challenge. As cited in the introduction, there is a need to go beyond general inquiries and become more specific, “to build a knowledge base that adequately accounts for differences between groups with respect to goals” (Lefstein et al., 2020, p. 10). From this call, and with the approach chosen, the present article contributes theoretically in three different ways.

First, by focusing on the practical, as part of the broader field of curriculum studies, this study offers an understanding of the complexity within and between different levels of the education system (Hardy, 2018; Schwab, 1970/2013; Westbury, 2013). The insight that concrete actions are always situated in a broader context leads to our second point, namely that our focus on racism brings in a specific content that must be understood in relation to the Swedish case (Arneback & Jämte, 2021; Gilborn, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Thirdly and finally, the idea of deliberative communication has served as a lens to analyse discussions among the eight teachers on their responses to racism (Englund, 2000, 2006).

These theoretical contributions also have implications for how teachers’ local discussions can be interpreted and understood in relation to national and international education policies. On a more general level, it is interesting to note that expectations as to what teacher collaboration can achieve have grown in the last decade. As has been reported from Norway, teacher collaboration has become a frequently highlighted policy trend, embedded in a positively charged discourse that leaves very little space for conflict and disagreement (Mausethagen & Helstad, 2019). As those authors argue, conditions need to be created locally for critical discussions that go beyond simple solutions. We fully agree with this conclusion, and call for further studies on how teachers collectively can develop and deepen the moral and political dimensions of their work.

Moreover, seen in a wider context, the growing expectations regarding what teacher collaboration can achieve and the task of countering racism are just a limited part of the last decade’s changes in educational policy. On the one hand, it can be argued that the strengthened legal framework (Bergh & Arneback, 2019), in combination with the growing accountability climate, leaves less room for discussion and deliberation, as a result of “performative demands, including in relation to assessment, curriculum enactment and teaching practice” (Hardy, 2018, p. 231). On the other hand, as we conclude from this study, the idea of collegial deliberative communication between teachers might be a way to approach different demands by starting deliberative processes in which different perspectives are present.

In addition to these specific contributions, our methodological approach also provides knowledge about the power and the possibilities that arise when researchers and organisational stakeholders collaborate. As a result of our contact with the teachers, they were given both time and a mandate by the local school management to focus on issues that they were all highly engaged in. However, when reflecting on our contribution to the work led by Martin and Catherine, we asked ourselves whether the four-step structure the teachers had followed in their discussions supported or hindered deliberation. We also asked ourselves whether we should have given them a more in-depth introduction to deliberation as a theory or, at least, to the criteria for reaching the most
important goals for communication. As it was, we were fairly brief on the subject, as they informed us that they were familiar with it. Our conclusion was that the four-step structure both facilitated and hindered the discussion and that, if we were to do this again, we would more actively raise and problematise questions about the theory and how it could possibly be translated into practice.

As earlier works have shown, countering racism through deliberation is no easy task (Arneback, 2014), but what seems to be necessary is to establish and develop knowledge- and value-based perspectives and concepts that can strengthen collegial deliberation in teacher groups. Of course, we cannot expect these aims to work “automatically”. Therefore, deliberation must be continually driven and space created for it in schools, in such a way that all teachers are able to participate. Such ongoing and continuous deliberation seems very important in strengthening teachers as they deal with racist structures and expressions of different kinds (cf. Gillborn, 2005, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Referring again to Schwab’s (1970/2013) focus on the practical, it is clear that strategic action entails a technicist conception of curriculum and an objectifying relations. Communicative action, in its ambition to outline a deliberative alternative to a strategic approach, is characterised by a communicative curriculum, with its endeavour to foster mutual understanding, equity and human dignity among those involved (Habermas, 1996; cf. Hardy, 2018). What we have also learned is that an integral part of a curriculum capable of counteracting racism is the necessary development of value concepts, concepts which the teachers in our study did come closer to by reasoning about issues such as social justice, equality and the human dignity of every individual.

Finally, in a time when many countries face democratic challenges, we argue that there is a need to reorient the curriculum towards the practical (Schwab, 1970/2013), seeing local school settings as weak publics (Habermas, 1996). This study demonstrates that conversation among teachers holds potential that can either be utilised or missed. Acting professionally to counteract racism requires critical self-reflection and awareness of one’s own values and taken-for-granted assumptions (cf. Harell, 2019). Although the problems presented by the teachers could have been further developed into collegial deliberation, it is still important to note that different ways of understanding the situations and strategies for how to act were thoroughly reflected on. It is also important to recognise that such reflection came to be used more and more by the teachers over the series of seminars. As far as “learning to listen” is concerned, it is important to note the distinction between negative one-way or strategic listening and positive transactional listening in conversation (Waks, 2011, p. 194). Awareness of that distinction might improve the potential for collegial deliberation. Altogether, we conclude that the theoretical perspective and the specific empirical example chosen in this article contribute important knowledge to research into teacher collaboration. We look forward to further discussions on whether collective deliberation between teachers can have a potential for in-depth analysis of complex issues, such as racism, and if that also can lead to the development of a professional deliberative attitude.
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