

## **Discussing school celebrations from an intercultural perspective – a study in the Finnish context**

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### **Abstract**

The increased diversity in pupils' cultural and ethnic backgrounds in schools causes urgent demands for the organization of school celebrations in many countries. Celebrations represent the cultural values of the society and it is important to find out how various traditions are expressed in them. This study examines teachers' and other educational staff members' perceptions of Finnish culture, Lutheran religiosity, and intercultural education in Christmas, Independence Day and end-of-term celebrations in Finnish schools.

The data of this paper consists of 12 thematic interviews, and two participations in school festivals. The interview data were analyzed qualitatively with content analysis. The analysis of this study shows that festivals are perceived as important parts of education and they can help to create a sense of national or cultural community. However, the intercultural potential of school celebrations is often not put into its full use. There exists an urgent need to create new ways of carrying out celebrations in multicultural school communities so that they would be meaningful for all students.

**Keywords:** Intercultural education, school celebrations, minorities, religion, social representations

### **Introduction**

In the global world the question of how school celebrations define the majority culture and how they acknowledge the plurality within the pupils' backgrounds is urgent. While celebrations encompass an enormous amount of potential for reciprocal learning of various traditions, they are very little studied from the perspective of intercultural education (IE). This paper contributes towards filling this gap in research by analyzing Finnish teachers' and other school staff members' perceptions of Christmas,

Independence Day and end-of-term celebrations in Finnish schools.

IE aims at enhancing pupils' knowledge and understanding of local and global plurality in languages, worldviews and other traditions. The importance of IE is stressed in many recent studies across the world (eg. Demerath & Mattheis 2012, Dervin et al 2012). Coulby (2006, 246) has even stated that it should be the starting point of all education. However, its practical implementations are often challenging and do not always lead to the desired goals (Coulby 2006, Dolejšiová 2012, Leeman & Ledoux 2006). International or intercultural education in schools should aim at developing 'a sense of international mindedness' that goes deeper than the surface level of cultural tokens (Walker 2012, Skelton et al. 2002)

While there have been several language and religious minorities in Finland for centuries, for example the Sami, the Roma, the Tatars and the Jews, a larger scale multiculturalization of the country can be seen to start from increased immigration in the 1990s (eg. Lappalainen 2009). The current diversity in the pupils' linguistic and cultural backgrounds is historically large and recognized at the national policy level (Ubani 2013). Presently, the five biggest groups of immigrants in Finland are formed by people who have moved from Estonia (33,855), Russia (29,590), Sweden (8,557), Somalia (7,393), and China (6,000) (Finnish Immigrant Service 2012). The new situation has raised debates about the suitability of traditional school celebrations and their religious-based elements in multicultural settings (eg. Poulter , 2013). The discussion shows that celebrations are value-laden and are perceived as important to the society at large.

Celebrations reflect the values of the society and therefore it is important to examine the ways cultures and nations are represented in them. As Banks (2013) has pointed out, the way that student's background cultures are taken into account in society affects the ways students develop 'commitments and identities with the nation-state' (469). The critical analysis of current practices is needed to reveal hidden and unconscious modes of discrimination and propose alternative modes of action (Sever 2012). The research questions of this article are:

- How do the three celebrations represent and define the Finnish cultural and national tradition according to the teachers?
- How do the religious-based elements of the celebrations relate to the Finnish tradition from the teachers' perspective?

- What kind of experiences and attitudes have teachers linked to intercultural celebrations or intercultural content in the Finnish celebrations?

### **Notes on school celebrations in previous research**

The existing literature published on school celebrations in English is small and focuses mainly on the North American context. Special attention has been paid to the legal perspective of religious celebrations. For example, over 20 years ago Hartenstein (1992) stated that Christmas celebrations in (American) public schools are religious acts that favor Christian pupils and discriminate against others. Later, Russo & Mawdsley pointed out that the courts are ‘increasingly disfavoring religious celebrations and other religious activities in American public schools’ (2001, 385). While Russo & Mawdsley expressed their concern about this development, Berry (2011) concluded that public schools should not be ‘the vehicle for presenting religious messages’ (40). In Europe the question of school celebrations has not been widely studied but other forms of religious elements in secular schools (e.g. the use of crucifixes or the Islamic veil) have been debated in many countries (McGoldrick 2011).

Previous studies have also examined problems related to old and new festival traditions in schools with ethnically and/or nationally heterogeneous pupil groups. For example, Kromidas has provided a detailed inquiry about a ‘Multicultural Fair’ (2011, 77) that was held in a school in New York. The study shows that the event was organized from a top-down perspective and undermined the pupils’ views about their cultural belonging. In Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia’s (2012) study, kindergarten teachers expressed concerns about having a Christmas party in a multicultural setting. However, it was shown that the organization of more inclusive celebrations merely demands a new approach, and the inclusion of families and the neighboring community was seen as an asset. The need to reflect on and develop the current traditions in a more inclusive direction is evident in Finland (Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012, Kallioniemi et al 2009).

### **Finnish schools and celebrations**

In Finland the observance of annual celebrations such as Christmas, Finnish Independence Day (6.12.) and United Nations Day is seen to be ‘part of the Finnish culture’ and they are included in curriculum-based school activities (National Board of Education 2006, 6–7). ). Of these, Finnish Independence Day is unique from the

national perspective after the country gained independence in 1917.<sup>1</sup> Independence Day is a national holiday so celebrations are usually held in schools the day before. The celebration can be seen as a way to reproduce ‘national collectivity’ in educational arenas (Lappalainen 2002, 131).

The Finnish national curriculum for basic education (NCCBE) covers the aims and contents of comprehensive school education (7 to 15 years old pupils). It is an overall frame and it is specified in local and school-level curricula. The curriculum includes a cross-disciplinary theme ‘cultural identity and internationalism’. According to this, pupils should come to ‘know and appreciate their respective cultural inheritance’, be introduced to ‘other cultures and philosophies’ and understand the ‘component factors of cultural identity and their meaning for the individual and community’ (NCCBE 2004, 37). Education should also provide support for ‘pupils with immigrant backgrounds’ (including both first- and second-generation immigrants) so that they can achieve an active and balanced membership in Finnish society as well as in their culture of origin (NCCBE 2004, 34).

The current curriculum was written a decade ago and a new version is expected to appear in 2016. The document does not say how the ‘cultural identities’ of the pupils should be supported, but the question has never been more topical than it is today. In addition to the two official languages, Finnish and Swedish, the number of speakers of other languages is increasing dramatically. According to the official population forecast, almost one fifth (18%) of the children attending comprehensive school in the Helsinki metropolitan area in 2030 will come from language backgrounds other than Finnish or Swedish (Urban Facts Unit 2012, 61).

The cultural change is also reflected in the fact that while the majority of 5.4 million Finns belong to the Lutheran Church (over 4 million) and to the Greek Orthodox Church (over 50,000), traditional religious membership is decreasing. For example, the number of people who do not belong to any religious community is currently around one million. It has also been estimated that this number includes practitioners of religions who have not been officially affiliated to any religious congregations. For example, the increasing Muslim population in Finland comes from various traditions and, according to Ketola (2010, 42), the actual number of practitioners of Islam in

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<sup>1</sup> Before this Finland had first been a part of the Swedish kingdom and from 1809 onwards until gaining independence the country was an autonomous part of the Russian Empire.

Finland is close to 45,000 rather than the 10,000 listed in the statistics as members of Islamic communities (Statistics Finland 2012).

In the schools growing religious pluralism can be seen in the number of classes organized for religious and secular ethics education<sup>2</sup> (Kallioniemi & Ubani, 2012, 179). In 2010 Evangelical Lutheran classes were taken by 92.8% of comprehensive school pupils, secular ethics by 3.2%, Orthodox religion by 1.3%, and other religions by 1.9%. The percentage of people not participating in any religious education was 0.7% (Statistics Finland 2011). A change towards offering a diversity of religious education alternatives is mainly found in southern Finland (Statistics Finland, 2013). While the relationship between language, religion and cultural identities cannot be discussed further in this article, the statistics provide an overall image of the current diversity of ethnic and national backgrounds in the Helsinki area.

### **The intercultural potential of school celebrations**

In this article, culture is defined as a system of meanings that is created through social interaction but perceived from individual viewpoints (Hall 1999, 446). According to social representations theory, objects gain their meanings through communication processes (Duveen 2000, 2, Hall 1997, 17). Shared concepts enable individuals to interpret the world in ways that are similar to those of others. Social groups, such as families, nations and cultures, are based on the shared understanding of the purpose of the group and representations are also used to separate them from other groups (Hall 1999, 78–80).

This social nature of culture bears two important consequences that should be noted when introducing cultural matters into schools. First, it should be noted that even as members of cultural groups, people perceive the representations as part of their identity and engage with them in individual ways (Dervin et al 2012). Second, the social nature of reality means that cultures and cultural identities consist of networks of values, worldviews, and habits that are not static elements but are ‘liquid’ (Dervin 2011, 39–40) or ‘fluid’ (Bradatan et al 2010, 176). The recognition of these aspects is one of the core aims of IE (Tarozzi 2012, Ohana & Otten 2012) but it is not often found in practice.

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<sup>2</sup> In Finland religious education is organized according to the religious or non-religious belongings of the pupils (Kallioniemi & Ubani, 2012).

Previous studies on celebrations in schools reveal that cultures are often presented in static and extrinsic terms, such as food, clothing or ‘traits that one possesses’ (Kromidas 2011, 78, Tarozzi 2012, 400). Another common problem comes from the fact that on the one hand minority groups are primarily depicted through their ‘diversity’ (based mainly on their extrinsic characters) and on the other hand diversity within the majority group is often ignored (Maylor 2010, 23, Walton et al. 2013). The difficulties in recognizing and appreciating children’s cultural diversity are also visible in the studies conducted in Finnish kindergartens and preschools in the 2000s (Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012; Lappalainen 2006). This kind of expression of IE provides a simplistic image of cultures as static and neglects the individual differences within groups. In order to avoid this kind of stereotyping, notions connected with school celebrations need to be examined and brought forward. As Howarth (2006) has pointed out, social representations are not merely reflections of reality, they are also ways of upholding social order and group categorization.

Celebrations at schools are important stages for intercultural encounters as they provide representations that operate simultaneously in multiple social dimensions. Bleszynska (2008) has categorized IE into ‘macro-social,’ ‘mezzo-social’ and ‘micro-social’ levels. Of these, the macro level represents the global questions of cultural awareness and respect towards others. The mezzo level consists of national questions and the support of social equality within societies. The micro level includes the enhancement of intercultural contacts at the individual level, for example by the ‘development of intercultural competences and facilitation of acculturation processes’ (Bleszynska 2008, 538).

School celebrations act at all three levels as they are often organized in order to promote an understanding of macro-social values, such as peace, freedom, cultural heritage or religion. They also illustrate the national history of the country and its relation to contemporary society. This provides people with an individual-level understanding of their national and cultural origins and heritage. As Rogoff et al (2007) have pointed out, children’s participation in cultural practices is an important part of creating a sense of participation and belonging in the community.

### **The research procedure**

The data of this study were collected from a school including lower and upper secondary level (12- to 18-year-old pupils) in Helsinki by the first author of this article.

The data consists of 12 thematic interviews with teachers of different subjects (9), a special education teacher (1), a study advisor (1) and a school social worker (1). School staff were chosen as the target group based on the fact that they have authentic experiences of school celebrations and a long history of them over the years. Two participant observations were carried out at the school's Independence Day celebration and Christmas party in 2011. The school has around 500 pupils and around 50 teachers, and it is a good example of a typical school in the Helsinki area. The number of pupils with immigrant backgrounds in 2012 was small, but there was significant diversity in the backgrounds of these immigrants.

Altogether 14 staff members signed up as volunteers for the interviews in November 2011. Interviews were held with 12 as two people did not reply to the follow-up e-mails. The interviews were coded by indicating a specific number for each Respondent (R). In order to secure the anonymity of the staff members within the school, exact information about the participants work history cannot be reported. Table 1 illustrates the backgrounds of the participants.

[Table 1 around here]

Altogether the participants had worked in several schools and at various school levels in different parts of Finland. Participants R4, R5, R8 and R12 had worked for the shortest period of time in the target school, while respondents R2, R7, R9, and R11 had worked there the longest.

The interviews focused on the participants' experiences of the celebration of Independence Day, Christmas and end of spring semester at the subjects' school and in the schools where they had previously worked. The interviews were semi-structured thematic discussions that each lasted from 40 to 60 minutes. The qualitative content analysis (e.g. Cohen et al. 2007) was based on the representations mentioned in the data as being *Finnish* (having a connection with Finnish history or tradition), *religious* (message, acts or rituals of Lutheran or other religions) or *multicultural* (references to other than Finnish traditions). These core categories arose from the individual representations mentioned in the data, such as songs, hymns, the Finnish flag, poems, and performances.

As the data were coded and categorized around these themes (e.g. Cohen et al 2007, 475–483), each group was cut down into smaller sub-groups according to the way the elements related to the structure, atmosphere or purpose of the celebrations. These units of analysis were then set in a wider theoretical frame of previous theories.

The process of the analysis was multilayered and it was done during and after transcribing the data. All data were handled in strict confidentiality. Words removed are marked in the quotes with a double hyphen (“- -”.)

## Key findings

### A) *The ‘Finnishness’ of Finnish celebrations*

*Celebrations as core parts of Finnish tradition.* In the following quotes participants 10 and 3 describe their thoughts on the *celebration of Christmas* as part of the Finnish cultural heritage.

Well, in general Christmas parties belong to the Finnish tradition. (R10)

In a way it is related to the Finnish culture and - - tradition, so I think it plays a huge role that we celebrate Christmas in schools. (R3)

While R3 says Christmas is ‘related’ to Finnish culture, teacher 10 sees an even stronger connection between them by saying that the tradition ‘belongs’ to Finnish culture. A similar importance of tradition was attached to the celebration of *Independence Day*. The following excerpts describe the thoughts of teacher 10 and 11:

I think it’s very important to remind [pupils] why we celebrate it [Independence Day] - - In my group of pupils two out of ten remembered when Finnish Independence Day is [-]. (R10)

If we want to uphold - - patriotism and - - appreciate -- the work done by previous generations - - for this country and nation then we must celebrate - - Independence Day and - - bring these values forward. (R11)

As the quotations show, both of these teachers see the celebration as an educationally important event that expresses the *continuity of the nation across generations*. This level of knowledge about the *history of Finland* is seen to be an essential part of the all-round education of pupils.

The end-of-term *spring celebration* was also characterized as the peak of the academic year, and six of the participants described it as a ‘rite of passage’ for pupils. Teacher 5 describes the celebration as follows:

I think there are several Finnish elements [in the spring celebration] like nature, spring, warmth, sun and, - - if included, *Suvivirsi* [the closing hymn of the ceremony] - - and as it [the



celebration] takes place at the turn of May and June it - - starts the short summer and there are many elements related to Finnish nature and the change of season. (R5)

The comment shows that the celebration's theme concerning the cycles of life is highlighted by change in the Finnish seasons.

*Depictions of Finnishness* were expressed in various forms in the ceremonies. These included the use of the *Finnish language* (through literary quotations and speeches), *Finnish music* (either composed by a Finn or performed in Finnish), *Finnish nature and landscape* (images and plants), as well as *characterizations of the Finnish people* (values and ideals represented in the texts and music). The characterizations related to the Finnish people can be seen as idealistic and aimed at creating a sense of national solidarity and unity. According to the data the Finns were described as *determined* (described with the Finnish notion of 'sisu'), *honest* and *hardworking*. The following comments describe the values passed on in the celebration.

Well, in this one party I thought that [the notion of] sisu had been brought up more than once. It was [mentioned] in poetry and songs and wherever - - sisu [perseverance] and uncompromising and just, and all that. (R8)

[--] we have like gained a lot through work and then things like - - honesty - - and not having a lot of - - corruption in society - - of course [some] athletes [are mentioned] and sisu [perseverance] of course - - it's always emphasized how determined and uncompromising Finnish people are supposed to be. (R11)

*The elements mentioned as traditionally Finnish* varied from decorations to the content of the performances. Some of the elements were strongly linked with nature, e.g. spring celebration decorations with tree branches, or national traditions, e.g. the use of the Finnish flag. However, in addition to these, many teachers mentioned the figure of *Santa Claus*, *Christmas carols* and the *Christmas tree* as traditionally Finnish elements. These elements were also present at the school's Christmas celebration in 2011. By taking a closer look at these elements it becomes clear that many of them actually originated in other countries, such as Germany, Sweden and the United States (Lempiäinen 2000). This provides a good example of the changing nature of cultures and cultural representations.

A similar pattern of cultural alteration can be seen in the fact that the number of Christmas songs performed in English had increased in the last few years, and these replaced Finnish songs. While teacher 6 did not see a problem with this development, teacher 7 provided an alternative view. By describing the feeling of these ‘older teachers’ one is inclined to assume that she counts herself as belonging to this group of people.

Some of the songs are Finnish Christmas songs but I guess the songs that the kids perform have become more and more American. (R6)

There were by the way several older teachers who felt hurt by the fact that they didn’t sing in Finnish this year. But of course it can be the kids wish, and the few musical ones who perform there like to sing in English. (R7)

According to these results it can be said that the staff members perceive certain elements as markers of Finnish social identity and the celebration of these events is *in itself* an act of significance. In terms of Bleszynska’s (2008) model, the festivals can be seen to operate and promote the national, mezzo-social level of IE by emphasizing the notion of Finnishness as an element that joins pupils together.

### ***B) Religious-based elements as Finnish cultural tradition***

As Verkuyten et al state, ‘[q]uestions of immigration and diversity are increasingly questions of religious diversity’ (2012, 1577). Based on the public debate about the appropriateness of religious-based elements in schools, it was hypothesized that the celebration of Christmas would divide the respondents’ opinions more than the two other festivities. These presuppositions proved to be wrong as 8 out of the 12 respondents described the festival as religiously neutral. Like many other schools in Finland, the school in question had a separate ceremony at the church for Christian pupils, while the Christmas celebration held at the school was meant for all pupils, regardless of their religious orientations.

According to the five teachers with the longest work history the religiosity of the school celebrations had diminished since the beginning of the 2000s. The change was most visible in the Christmas celebration, where reading from the gospel and the singing of hymns had ceased to be a major part of the ceremony. Also religious symbolism linked to the celebration of Independence Day showed a similar decline. Only two of the interviewees had experiences of Independence Day celebrations in

which patriotism and religiosity had been linked. Respondent number 5 shared his experience in the following way:

At the end of the 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s, at that time I came across celebrations where - - there was a representative of the congregation who - - hoped to give a speech that - - respected the legacy of the veterans and -- the sacrifice that they had given [for their country] and - - how there had been [divine] protection -- and perhaps a prayer at the end of it --. So this is what I have [previously] seen but not in recent years. (R5)

The religiosity attached to Independence Day follows the results of previous studies made about the religious feelings of Finns. According to these surveys, the senior age group sees Christianity as strongly related to Finnish identity, while the overall religiosity of Finns has decreased (Ketola 2011, 70–71).

The decline in religion can be seen both in the fewer number of religious-based elements but also in the fact that the religious-based elements were interpreted in a non-religious way as part of the Finnish (national) tradition. For example, the singing of the closing *Suvivirsi* hymn at the end-of-term spring ceremony was supported by all of the teachers, regardless of their attitudes towards religions and religious elements in general. The same phenomenon was apparent in the way Christmas carols were seen to be spiritual in origin but non-religious in the school ceremony. Although the question of religiosity is multi-layered, the historical religiosity of the celebrations can be viewed as opening up a discussion about various worldviews and thus it takes the celebrations to Bleszynska's macro-social level.

### ***C) The absence of interculturality in the celebrations***

According to the staff members the celebrations they had encountered in the school in question as well as in their previous work places were mainly 'Finnish'. As participants 1 and 3 described it, the manifestation of diversity was reduced to the fact that there were performances *in English* and *pupils with immigrant backgrounds* performed during the celebration.

No. It's been quite random whether there has been some talk about other cultures, when for example there might be a foreign music performance. Sometimes there has been some really small demonstrations about it - - that is if there has been a performer with another [non-Finnish] background then it has come up. (R1)

I don't think we've especially brought out any other culture in the celebration - - it has been more Finnishness - - But like in the Christmas party there were for example songs [performed] in English. (R3)

According to the data non-Finnish traditions and nationalities had been emphasized in *theme days*. Like celebrations, theme days are part of the school's curriculum-based activities (NCCBE 2004, 19). However, as the excerpts from participants 3 and 7 show, the basic idea of these theme days was different from the celebrations.

[--] there were - - people from different cultures who told about their own culture and their identity and what it feels like to be different or come from somewhere else in Finland and then the pupils made different points. (R3)

- - the multicultural theme has been expressed -- the countries where our kids [in the school] come from and often in such a way that they have been able to familiarize themselves with the - - different ways of greeting and maps and flags - - from the country of their origin - - so I think an effort has been made about internationality and - - taking it into account that everyone is equally important in this community. (R7)

As R3 puts it, the theme days were mostly occasions where 'other cultures' were studied through lectures or posters. The notion of the 'other' was clearly addressed in these events, which were not part of the normal school day or 'Finnish events,' but thematic days devoted to 'learning about others' rather than experiencing the other culture or organizing reciprocal learning about various traditions. Teacher 7's comment also shows, as previously referred to in the introduction, that encountering others had been reduced to the level of flags, maps and greetings.

Of the 12 teachers only five remembered having witnessed a 'multicultural celebration' that linked traditions from various geographical areas during their entire career. There was, however, a general interest in organizing more of these types of events. Of the 12, six teachers were willing to have more elements from non-Finnish traditions in the current celebrations. Seven teachers were also willing to organize celebrations of non-Finnish traditions within the school but with different approaches. For example, teacher 7 thought it possible to organize an Islamic celebration of Ramadan as a whole school event, while teacher 8 was keen to organize such an event but based on Islamic stories and descriptions about the event, rather than actually carrying out and experiencing the celebration.

The way multicultural events are understood and depicted by the participants here is very similar to previous studies. The commonest way of carrying out multicultural events in school is to focus on the extrinsic characters of certain cultural groups (Kromidas 2011, DeLuca 2013). While this kind of approach may act as an introduction to the different traditions, the problem is that it reduces the question of the international and intercultural nature of the world to a very shallow level, and, at their worst, it can even lead to cultural exoticism and the enhancement of stereotypes (DeLuca 2013, Alasuutari & Jokikokko 2010, Skelton et al 2002).

When asked how the teachers considered the current celebrations supported the identity processes of the pupils, the answers were two-fold. On the one side some of the teachers were convinced that the celebrations served as a way of enhancing the Finnish identity of both Finnish-born and non-Finnish-born students, as suggested by teachers 9 and 10:

Like some of the Somali students – they want to belong like ‘we too belong to this group’, so their mum says ‘put your suit on – it’s Finnish Independence Day– Some people have this [attitude] – not all, but some. (R9)

Well the [celebrations] also mark their [immigrant pupils’] school year here – even if the celebrations don’t mean anything to them at least they become familiar with these celebrations and traditions. (R10)

These teachers perceived the celebrations as ways of enhancing the pupils’ sense of belonging to the Finnish community. On the other hand, some teachers were sceptical about whether the celebrations would serve to enhance individuals’ sense of identity. Teacher 5, for example, considered that the way the celebrations were carried out was superficial and thus their role in the creation of identity was negligible.

I just see the significance of the celebrations as quite slim here, or at least the way they are carried out. (R5)

Teacher 7 was also frustrated about the way in which the celebrations had been simplified over the years.

I don’t like the fact that there is nothing left in the Christmas celebrations. No elves, no Santa – no carols – I think we’ve gone in too cautious a direction (R7)

This discussion shows that celebrations have the potential to encourage intercultural encounters and individual-level reflections on their own and others’ cultural heritages.

However, success in reaching this micro-level relies to a large extent on the way the celebrations are carried out. The comment from teacher 7 implies that the celebrations have been cut down in order not to offend members with different worldviews. However, she questions whether this kind of neutrality actually benefits anyone. This is also the question that we would like to end this article with.

## **Conclusions**

This study analyzed educational staff members' perceptions of Finnish culture, Lutheran religiosity, and intercultural education in Christmas, Independence Day and end-of-term spring celebrations in Finnish schools. The data were gathered from one school and it cannot be generalized to apply to all schools in Finland or even in Helsinki. However, as the research participants shared their experiences from schools they had previously worked in, the results can be seen to apply to a wider context than to this school alone. While the number of interviews is small, it can be justified by the fact that the aim of this study was to provide new insights about school celebrations, and not merely provide statistical data.

The key findings of this study can be summarized in terms of three major outcomes. The first outcome is that the notion of Finnishness presented in the festivals is not an unambiguous term but consists of several variable elements, including certain religious representations. The festivals were perceived to be strongly 'Finnish,' despite the fact that many of the traditions nowadays perceived as 'Finnish' actually originate elsewhere. While the overall religiosity of celebrations had decreased, certain religious traditions, such as the *Suvivirsi* hymn, were perceived to be an important national tradition. These results show that the festivals as well as the culture they represent are not static in nature (Dervin 2011, Bradatan 2012).

The second major outcome is the fact that the festivals encompass a potential for intercultural encounters in all of the three social levels depicted by Bleszynska (2008), but this potential is rarely developed in practice. According to the data, teachers had very little experience of intercultural festivals. The study also showed that even though 'multicultural theme days' tried to enhance the understanding of non-Finnish traditions they failed to do so as they reduced these traditions to equal displays of 'othernesses'. This is in line with previous studies on the problems of arranging festivals in schools (eg. Maylor 2010, Kromidas 2011) and shows a clear need for further study of school events and celebrations. This study shows that both national and

intercultural celebrations may be beneficial for an understanding of oneself and others if they avoid stereotyping and acknowledge plurality within communities (Tarozzi 2012, Ohana & Otten 2012). However, if festivals are carried out in a way that is unnatural or meaningless to the pupils and school staff, they are less likely to achieve any educational goals.

The third major outcome of this study is the fact that the way celebrations affect the Finnish identity construction process in schools is twofold. This means that while the various elements of Finnish arts, nature and heritage presented in the festivals reflect the essence of the Finnish community they simultaneously create this image by reinforcing the role of these elements as core parts of Finnishness. By passing on certain images about Finnishness, the ceremonies actively create this image and define what belongs and does not belong to it. At its best, this notion of Finnishness may enhance the Finnish identity of all pupils and act as a means of inclusion. At its worst, the image can be seen to be exclusionary as it does not reflect the cultural diversity of Finnishness today.

It can be concluded that festivals are important parts of school life and due to their multiple social dimensions they encompass significant opportunities for intercultural learning if they are carried out in a meaningful way. Currently, the risk of cultural stereotyping and exclusive practices is real in many countries, including Finland. More research on schools' cultural events is urgently needed in order to make current practices truly intercultural and to develop new ones.

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