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2023

http://hdl.handle.net/10138/573002

Helakorpi, J, Holm, G & Liu, X 2023, Education of Pupils with Migrant Backgrounds : A Systemic Failure in the Finnish System? in M Thrupp, P Seppänen, J Kauko & S Kosunen (eds), Finland's Famous Education System : Unvarnished Insights into Finnish Schooling. Springer, Singapore, pp. 319-333. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-8241-5_20

Chapter 20
Education of Pupils with Migrant Backgrounds: A Systemic Failure in the Finnish System?

Jenni Helakorpi, Gunilla Holm, and Xiaoxu Liu

Abstract This chapter discusses the structural issues and mechanisms behind the lower academic performance and poorer health of the pupils categorised as "pupils with migrant background" compared to other pupils in Finnish schools. In PISA 2018 migrant pupils were almost three years behind other pupils in literacy and pupils with a migrant background about two years behind. Finland has the largest gap in the OECD between migrant and migrant background students and non-migrant students in literacy. Not only do migrant students and students with migrant background perform more poorly, but they are also bullied more in school. We base our analysis on critical race and whiteness theories and also lean on theoretical constructs from intersectionality research. We have treated the findings of inequalities between pupils with and without a migrant background as symptoms of a systemic failure not of failing students, families or teachers. In order to understand the failure of educating pupils with migrant background well, an analysis of structural racism and an intersectional analysis of race, racialisation, whiteness, gender and social class in Finnish school and society are needed.

The Finnish education system is often regarded as a highly egalitarian system where all pupils can educate themselves as far as their potential and motivation carries them. Basic education is built on equity and equality and Finnish education is free of charge right up to doctoral level.[1] However, within Finnish education there is a diverse group of pupils, those categorised as pupils with a migrant background, who, according to national and international reports, have a higher risk of not reaching their educational potential.[2] Multiple studies have found that pupils with migrant background have more positive attitudes to schooling and and higher aspirations than

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M. Thrupp et al. (eds.), *Finland's Famous Education System*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-8241-5_20

pupils without migrant background.[3] Yet there is something in the Finnish education system that places pupils with migrant backgrounds in vulnerable positions and imposes vulnerable learner identities.

Indeed, this 'something' is so strong that according to PISA[4] Finland has one of the biggest discrepancies between migrant and non-migrant background pupil performance as well as more segregation and feelings of exclusion among migrant background pupils when compared to other countries. Nevertheless, this possible failure in the Finnish system, is rarely analysed in depth. The emphasis of research has been descriptive and sociological analysis of the processes that structure the education of pupils with migrant backgrounds is still rare. In this chapter, we first discuss the category of pupils with migrant background in Finnish schools. Then we show, with the help of previous research, the many ways the Finnish education system renders pupils with migrant backgrounds more vulnerable. The chapter then discusses how to understand and describe this systemic failure. We end with reflections on our analysis and suggestions for the future.

Pupils with Migrant Background

There is a strong narrative of Finland having been culturally and linguistically homogenous. Yet Finland has for a long time been a culturally diverse country including, for example, indigenous Sámi, Swedish-speaking Finns, Roma, two national churches and two national languages. Historically Finland has targeted its minoritised ethnic groups such as Roma, Sámi, Tatars, Jews, and Russians with measures of exclusion, assimilation, and deportation.[5] The myth of the homogeneity of Finland is often used as a backdrop when discussing education of pupils with migrant background.

It is good to bear in mind that the Sámi are the only indigenous people within Finland's borders and Finland has colonised the Sápmi region so that parts of it are within the borders of the Finnish nation-state. All other people have a migration history of some kind.[6] Finland became an independent country in 1917 and thereafter suffered both a civil war and two wars during World War II. Before the Second World War over 300,000 Finns emigrated to North America and after the war over 500,000 Finns migrated to Sweden. Finland also had forced internal migration at this time, namely Karelians who had to resettle from ceded territories. Finland was, in fact, mostly a country of emigration, not a destination country until the 1990s.[7] Furthermore, until the end of the Cold War, Finland had strict immigration policies and turned back asylum seekers and refugees despite being criticised by other Nordic countries.[8] After the 1990s, migration to Finland increased with mostly refugees from the former Soviet Union, former Yugoslavia and Somalia. Still in 2020 the largest numbers of people with foreign background in Finland were from Europe (including the former Soviet Union).[9]

Today, 'migrant background' is a term used quite vaguely and has evoked criticism. Migrant background can include persons born abroad, whose parent or parents

are born abroad and in practice in schools it often includes pupils racialised as non-white whose grandparents are born abroad or who speak another home language than Finnish or Swedish. Consequently, it is often difficult to know in academic and non-academic publications who is included in the category 'pupils with a migrant background'. There are no statistics based on ethnicity or race gathered in Finland. Unlike many other countries, Finland does not have a census, but it gathers register-based data about its population. However, since 2012, Statistics Finland has categorised the Finnish population according to their 'origin' (Finnish/foreign background) and 'background country' (which does not indicate ethnic background). The terms 'person with foreign background' (ulkomaalaistaustainen) and 'person with Finnish background' (suomalaistaustainen) are used where the first refers to those with both parents or the only known parent born abroad and the second to everyone with at least one parent born in Finland. Background country is determined by the birth-country of the parents.[10] Finland also has statistics based on first language. PISA uses the term "immigrant background" which, like Statistics Finland, refers to a person who has both parents born abroad and in PISA the term "pupil without immigrant background" refers to people with at least one parent born in the country of assessment.[11] People with migrant background are also often divided into the categories of those born abroad and those born in Finland. Often these categories are named as first and second generation.

The number of Finns with 'foreign background' has increased over the last three decades. In 1990 only 1%[12] of Finns had a migrant background according to the definitions above. According to official statistics, 444,031 people had a foreign background in Finland in 2020, 8% of the national population. The proportion of people with another first language than Finnish, Swedish or Sami was likewise about 8%. The number of people with foreign backgrounds born in Finland was 76,614 (17% of all people with foreign background). In 2020, there were 497,510 children aged 7–14 in Finland of which 44,471 (about 9%) were children with foreign backgrounds. About half of this 9% were born in Finland, and half born abroad.[13]

In this chapter, with the term 'pupils with a migrant background' we refer both to young people born abroad themselves, and pupils whose parents were born abroad. This is following the definition used in public administration and reports about the Finnish population and pupil groups but we use it with caution here and examine the concept critically later in this chapter.

Symptoms of a Failing System: Educational Outcomes, Bullying and Wellbeing in Lower Secondary School

Previous studies have shown that pupils with migrant backgrounds and their parents have positive attitudes and high aspirations when it comes to schooling—higher than their non-migrant background peers.[14] Despite this, the risk for youths with migrant backgrounds to be positioned outside the education and workforce is higher

than for youth with non-migration backgrounds.[15] According to a 2015 report by Statistics Finland, 11% of youth in Finland at the age of 15–29 were not in education, employment or training (NEET), whereas among youth with foreign background it was 15%.[16]

The latest PISA reports show clear discrepancies in the school performance of pupils with migrant backgrounds and non-migrant backgrounds. Pupils with migrant background participating in PISA 2018 scored significantly lower in reading than pupils with non-migrant background, this gap being the biggest in OECD even when socio-economic background was controlled for.[17] Likewise, in mathematics in 2015 pupils with migrant background scored significantly less than their non-migrant background peers. Almost half of the 15-year-old pupils who were born abroad did not reach the level "basic proficiency in mathematics". Likewise, migrant background pupils born in Finland scored 70 points less in mathematics than their non-migrant peers, which is equivalent to two years of school.[18] The PISA mathematics gap was bigger only in Mexico.

Pupils with migrant background are also at risk of poorer well-being than their non-migrant background peers. In PISA 2018, pupils with migrant background were less satisfied with their lives and felt more as outsiders in schools than their non-migrant background peers.[19] In the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare's (THL) School Health Promotion Study, pupils in lower secondary school with migrant background were more likely to be bullied than their peers and every fifth pupil born abroad was bullied weekly in schools.[20] These findings were also gendered with those identifying as boys with migrant background reporting more bullying than those identifying as girls. In the School Health Promotion Study 2017, 21% of 8th and 9th grade pupils born abroad did not feel they were an important part of the school or the class community, compared with 12% of pupils born in Finland with a migrant background and 9% among pupils with a non-migrant background. The numbers of pupils feeling lonely were almost the same.[21] Tuomas Zacheus and colleagues researched young urban ninth-grade pupils in ethnically diverse schools and found that approximately 25% of them been bullied or discriminated against in school and 10% had experienced discrimination in their free time. Their 2019 study did not find any statistical difference in experienced discrimination and bullying between pupils with migrant and non-migrant backgrounds but in interviews pupils with migrant background reported experiences of racism.[22]

The differences between migrant and non-migrant background pupils continue after comprehensive school. Using longitudinal register data until 2012 with youths completing comprehensive school in years 2000–2004 Elina Kilpi-Jakonen found that whereas over 86% of non-migrant background pupils had completed upper secondary education, the number of pupils with migration background was lower, around 70% (including pupils for whom one parent was born in Finland). The relevant figure was 76% for pupils with Russia or Estonia as the background country, and 67% for pupils with a background country in the Middle East. However, among pupils whose background country was on the African continent, only 50% completed upper secondary education[23] (See also Mäkelä and Kalalahti in this book).

Where Is the Failure?

The conspicuous discrepancies in the academic outcomes and well-being between pupils with migrant backgrounds and non-migrant backgrounds clearly indicate that something is not working as intended in Finnish schools. The number of studies about the education of students with migrant backgrounds is increasing and often researchers conclude that more research is needed to understand how Finnish comprehensive education exposes the students with migrant backgrounds to vulnerable positions. At the same time research has a tendency to seek the cause for problems in the students and their families themselves, a typical framework when analysing the school outcomes of pupils with minoritised backgrounds.[24] In this chapter, we want to emphasise the importance of turning the analytical gaze on school structures and cultures, asking how and why the school fails.

A typical research conclusion about the discrepancies in educational outcomes of students with migrant backgrounds is that there is a need for better support of migrant pupils. Although we do not contest the advantage of support for any student, the discussion of support keeps the focus on the pupils instead of on the school system.[25] *Special education* is well developed in Finland and has three levels of support. Pupils with a migrant background can get general level (Tier 1) support for language learning but also in other areas of learning.[26] However, the first author and colleagues have also pointed out that pupils with migrant backgrounds are over-represented in special education classes and schools, and are therefore in segregated educational arrangements which often lead to segregated educational paths.[27] In Finnish schools, special education arrangements can also expose pupils to stigmatisation and bullying[28] (see also Niemi and Mietola in this book).

When it comes to support, the intersection between special education and language learning requires more attention. The *first language* or home language has a particular influence on pupils' academic performance in that pupils who speak the school language as their first language perform better in academic tests. For instance, speaking languages other than Finnish and Swedish at home has been associated with a poorer performance in PISA on reading and mathematics tests, compared to pupils with Finnish or Swedish as their first language.[29] A crucial question is why pupils who are born in Finland to parents who have migrated to Finland and those who arrived as young children and who, subsequently attended daycare, preschool, and nine years of the comprehensive school still do not have strong enough Finnish language skills for doing well in school. What are the processes that make it difficult for the pupils with a migrant background to gain comprehensive skills in the school language even if special education support is available in all schools?

Although Finland has a developed special education system, Finnish language support might need a closer look. In 2015, about half of pupils who had migrated to Finland reported receiving *Finnish language support* during the primary school years. However, the National Audit Office's (NAOF) report indicates that there might be problems guaranteeing equal access and support for Finnish learning to all migrant pupils since pupils from Russia, Estonia, and Iraq reported receiving more support

than those from Somalia, former Yugoslavia, and Turkey.[30] It is unclear what the cause is for these differences in receiving support in Finnish language learning. The intersection of special education and language learning in Finland's special education system is important and needs to be further researched. It seems that sometimes students with migrant background do not get the right kind of support for learning difficulties since the lack of school language skills are blamed for difficulties such as dyslexia and vice versa[31] (see also the chapter by Enser-Kaananen and colleagues in this book).

In trying to understand the way Finnish schools fail pupils with migrant backgrounds, *the categorisation of "pupil with migrant background"* itself is problematic since all pupils with a migrant background are lumped together independently of their country of origin, ethnicity as well as sociocultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, researchers such as Tuuli Kurki, Ameera Masoud, Gunilla Holm and Kristiina Brunila have criticised the category of "immigrant" functioning in educational context in a manner that is othering and disregards all individuality.[32] The category "pupil with migrant background" includes pupils who have just arrived from warzones as refugees as well as youths who were born and raised in Finland. Furthermore, the category does not make a difference between racialised and non-racialised identities or between pupils from different social class backgrounds. Thus, there is a huge diversity of pupils in the category 'pupils with migrant background' (or 'immigrant background' or 'foreign background'). In order to understand what is happening in Finnish education, we need a nuanced intersectional analysis of "pupils with migrant background". Intersectionality refers to how multiple dimensions of difference and power-axes, such as race, ethnicity, gender, social class or dis/ability, position persons simultaneously in an interconnected manner.[33]

One indicator of the need for intersectional analysis is the finding from the Statistics Finland's large-scale survey among persons with migrant background that education among people with migrant background is polarised.[34] The proportion of people with a migrant background that have a higher education degree is approximately the same as for the rest of the population, but the number of people with a migrant background who do not have an education after the comprehensive school is much larger than the average in Finland. The survey also finds that those with migrant background who have migrated to Finland after school-age are more likely to have a higher education than those who have completed their school in Finland.[35] This result in itself challenges the notion of "migrant background" as a shared experience or factor within education. Furthermore, reports have shown differences related to the background countries.[36] For instance, research indicates that Somali-Finns have a higher likelihood for difficulties in education and working life than (many) other migrant background groups.[37] Somali-Finns are the 4th biggest student group with migrant background comprising nearly 1% of the Finnish age group of 7–14-year-olds.[38] In a 2019 study, Abdirashid A. Ismail found that discrimination in Finnish society may hinder Finnish-Somali pupils from using the educational opportunities. He also found that if a pupil's parents do not have formal education in Somalia or Finland, it makes it more difficult for the parents to navigate effectively within the Finnish school system although they are interested and involved in their children's

education.[39] This makes us ask how to best view the connection between background country and educational outcomes. Different intersections such as migration background and social class as well as questions of racism and whiteness within the Finnish school need to be analysed.

By social class we mean both socio-economic realities and resources such as educational level and level of income, but also social class as a lived relation.[40] In Finland, parents' education and employment are connected to educational paths for all pupils and navigating within education is becoming more and more tied to family background.[41] Liisa Larja and colleagues found that education level is passed on among pupils with migrant backgrounds as well as among those with a non-migrant background in a manner similar for all.[42] At a grass-root level, Abdirashid A. Ismail suggested it may be more difficult for Finnish-Somali parents without formal education to navigate the school system effectively due to lacking the cultural capital that one gains through formal education.[43] Furthermore, differences in family income have an impact on pupils' schooling. For instance, THL's report based on register data of the 1997 birth cohort shows that pupils whose parents were born abroad had a lower graduation average grade in compulsory school than pupils with parents born in Finland. However, after families' basic social assistance was controlled for, pupils with migrant background outperformed students who did not have a migration background.[44] It is noteworthy that income support for families was connected to lower graduation average grades of all pupils regardless of migration or non-migration background, meaning that family income is connected to school performance[45] (see also the chapter by Järvinen, Tikkanen and af Ursin in this book).

We could argue that part of the way schools fail pupils with migrant background is due to reasons, such as social class, that put all pupils in unequal positions within Finnish schools. However, a 2015 analysis provided by the National Audit Office of Finland found that even when they controlled for the factors which are known to impact educational achievement such as socio-economic background and differences between schools, discrepancies between pupils with migrant background and non-migrant background were evident.[46] Nevertheless, other studies have found that when controlling for other factors that are known to affect educational outcomes, the differences become much smaller.[47] Thus, it is questionable to what extent we can directly connect "migration background", meaning that a pupil or pupil's parents have migrated to Finland, to the discrepancies described in this chapter. However, some researchers have argued that migrant background as such, positions the pupils as "other" in relation to Finns without a recent migrant background and this position is shared by the pupils regardless of which type of migration background they have.[48]

We suggest that one reason for the difficulties of grasping the failure in the Finnish system is that there is not enough analysis of *racism and whiteness* in Finnish schools. For instance, as Abdirashid A. Ismail shows in the case of Finnish-Somali pupils, a generally negative stance towards Somalis in Finland has an effect on the ways pupils see themselves as learners and experience school as well as possibilities for parents to be involved in their children's schooling.[49] In the Nordic countries, there has been a reluctance to analyse racism and whiteness although it seems evident that without it, we cannot understand our schools. For several decades education scholars

from, for example, the UK and the US have pointed out that race, racialisation and whiteness organise and structure education systems, and that racism is built into the education systems.[50] With *race* we refer to a political, social and cultural construct and *racism* "a system of socio-economic power, exploitation and exclusion" which is organised around the category of race. Race as a category is made, reproduced and established through the process of *racialisation*, and *whiteness* works as a norm against which "others" are racialised.[51] Whiteness is a system "of beliefs, practices, and assumptions that constantly centre the interests of White people, especially White elites" and racialisation maintains whiteness by "assigning race to others".[52] Research has shown that the Finnish school renews whiteness as a norm and privilege through racialisation of minorities.[53] The workings of race/whiteness intersect with multiple social divisions such as gender, social class and religion.[54]

In 2018, a report by the European Union's Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) revealed that 45% of Afro-Finnish parents reported that their children had experienced racist bullying, harassment or violence in the past 12 months.[55] In the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman's survey of Afro-Finns 45% (N = 241) reported that they had been discriminated in education due to their skin colour.[56] Simultaneously, anti-Muslim resentment has become more and more visible and public in Finnish society.[57] When it comes to the question of different "background countries" and the connection to educational outcomes, acknowledging racism and whiteness helps us understand how a person becomes positioned depending on whether one is racialised as non-white or not. Thus, we can further the understanding of Abdirashid A. Ismail's findings about discrimination against Somali-Finns with the concepts of racism and whiteness intersected with questions of religion, and with social class. Both racism and religious hatred affect the position of Somali-Finnish pupils and parents. Souto (2011) has showed in her ethnographic study that racism in Finnish schools organises group relations, friendships and the ways pupils encounter each other.[58] Racism is also evident in youth cultures.[59] Pupils have been observed to use the term refugees for all pupils with a migrant background as a category for dividing pupils into groups without the teacher noticing the explicit othering going on.[60] Pupils have reported that being labelled as "immigrant" is common and degrading.[61] It could be argued that name-calling is structural racism given that it is common and tolerated by teachers and schools as part of pupils' everyday school experience.[62]

Conclusion: Turning the Gaze from Individuals to School and Society

In this chapter, our aim has been to highlight the aspects of the education of pupils with migrant education that still need further research. The focus has been on school and societal structures and processes instead of individuals. We have treated the findings of discrepancies as symptoms of a school system that is failing students, not of individual students, families or teachers failing. Likewise, even though it

is interesting that, for instance, the education level of parents has an impact, this is just another symptom of unjust mechanisms within education, not of incapable parents. Within Finnish education racism, whiteness, social class and gender intersect as power relations in a complex manner that needs further research. In order to understand the failure of educating pupils with migrant background well, an analysis of structural racism and an intersectional analysis of race, racialisation and whiteness in Finnish school and society are needed.

Research indicates that an example of a structural problem is the school staff not taking most forms of racism seriously enough, leading to racism in schools generally being unquestioned or denied.[63] Since refugees and migrants started coming to Finland in substantial numbers in the 1990s, there has been research showing that teachers have ambivalent views on migrant and migrant background pupils. Various studies by Mirja-Tytti Talib have pointed to teachers thinking of such pupils as enriching the classroom but also being tiring and difficult to teach. At the same time the studies pointed to teachers becoming aware of diversity issues and seeing themselves as tolerant.[64] Likewise, Jan-Erik Mansikka and Gunilla Holm (2011) interviewed teachers who saw themselves as colour blind, tolerant and welcoming of pupils with a migrant background, but only if they spoke the language of instruction.[65] Recent research suggests that teachers tend to connect migrant pupils with marginalisation in schools.[66] Migrant students are described as problematic and migrant cultures and languages are regarded as obstacles to integration. Pupils with a migrant background are described as different from white, middle class, 'normal' pupils.[67] Teachers prefer not to acknowledge everyday racism and choose to interpret racism as cultural differences. In this way addressing racism in schools can be avoided.[68]

Research has also pointed to teachers saying that they welcome pupils with migrant backgrounds but do not intend to change the way they teach.[69] In the early 2000s few teacher education programs had courses focusing on diversity issues, but there was some awareness that teachers needed education and in-service training in order to be able to teach all pupils well and also care for their well-being.[70] There are now compulsory or elective courses on diversity and multicultural education in all teacher education programmes, which is an indication that teacher educators realise that pre-service teachers need to be able to teach all pupils well including those with a migrant background. In a recent analysis of discourses about multicultural education amongst teacher educators in Finland, Ida Hummelstedt-Djedou, Harriet Zilliacus and Gunilla Holm found that a 'conservative discourse' on multicultural education was still the most common one. This meant teacher educators still think of multicultural education as mostly for teaching pupils with a migrant background as opposed to teaching all pupils.[71] The 'other' was seen as a problem and diversity was seen as coming from abroad, which is how diversity and multicultural education was talked about in older versions of the national curriculum.

The current national curriculum[72] has been changed so that ethnicity is only one of many aspects of diversity, other aspects are, for example, language, gender, social class, and religion.[73] Hence, the 2016 national curriculum defined all classrooms and schools as diverse. Teacher educators who have engaged in a more critical

discourse have argued for an intersectional social justice education. Along with researchers, they argue that a conservative or traditional multicultural education approach does not work well for supporting pupils with a migrant background to reach their full educational potential. A critical multicultural education or a social justice approach serves all students by being anti-racist, inclusive, and by working on eliminating power differences and preventing marginalisation.[74] An inclusive curriculum would, for example, require a revision of textbooks (see Mikander's chapter in this book). As Gorski has argued, "schools are essential to laying the foundation for the transformation of society and the elimination of oppression and injustice".[75]

It is important to turn the gaze from individuals to the question of how education systems maintain current power relations, starting with teacher education and throughout the system as whole. At the education policy level, the basic education law (21.8.1998/628, 2§) states that basic education should support the pupils in becoming ethically responsible members of society and should provide everyone with relevant knowledge and skills. However, as we have claimed in this chapter, the racism and whiteness embedded in education prevents pupils from gaining a worldview that enables this. As the focus of this chapter has been on re-framing questions about educating 'pupils with migrant background' we want to emphasise that racism and whiteness embedded in education position pupils unequally and likely hinders learning and wellbeing. All schools in Finland are now obliged by law to have equality and equity plans as a way to change unfair and discriminatory practices, processes and structures. Furthermore, racism as a societal problem has been acknowledged and Finland has a new national action programme against racism.[76] It remains to be seen whether these policy changes reach into the structures of Finnish education and promote transformation.

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