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Are Finnish Schools Equal for All? Finnish Comprehensive School Teachers' Perceptions  
about the Role of Parental Socioeconomic Status on a Child's Schooling

Master's Thesis  
FACULTY OF EDUCATION  
Intercultural Teacher Education  
2020

Oulun yliopisto

Kasvatustieteiden tiedekunta

Onko suomalainen koulu tasa-arvoinen kaikille? Peruskoulun opettajien käsityksiä vanhempien sosioekonomisen aseman vaikutuksesta lapsen koulunkäyntiin (Hannah Nicolson)

Pro gradu -tutkielma, 76 sivua, 2 liitesivua

Helmikuu 2020

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Tämä laadullinen pro gradu -tutkielma tarkastelee peruskoulun opettajien käsityksiä vanhempien sosioekonomisen aseman vaikutuksesta lapsen koulunkäyntiin sekä opettajien näkemyksiä koulutuksellisen tasa-arvon toteutumisesta koulussa ja opettajan mahdollisuuksista tukea erilaisista sosioekonomisista taustoista tulevia oppilaita. Tutkimus on toteutettu fenomenografisesti ja empiirinen aineisto on kerätty avoimella kyselylomakkeella. Tutkimuksen osallistajat ovat 36 peruskoulun opettajaa eri puolilta Suomea.

Tutkielman teoreettisessa viitekehyksessä käsitellään sosioekonomisen aseman merkitystä lapsen koulussa menestymiselle ja koulunkäynnille. Viitekehyksessä perehdytään eri tapoihin, miten vanhempien sosioekonominen asema voi vaikuttaa lapsen koulumenestykseen, sekä siihen millaiset suojaavat ja poikkeavat tekijät voivat auttaa lasta pärjäämään niistä huolimatta. Lisäksi viitekehyksessä tarkastellaan Suomen koulutusjärjestelmää PISA-menestyksen näkökulmasta sekä suomalaista peruskoulua tasa-arvoisuuden ja oikeudenmukaisuuden edistäjänä. Lopuksi pohditaan, miten opettaja voisi edistää sosiaalisen oikeudenmukaisuuden toteutumista koulussa ja yhteiskunnassa.

Aineiston analyysin kautta muodostettiin kolme kuvauskategoriaa: vanhempien sosioekonomisen aseman näkyvyys koulussa, koulun ja opettajan oppilaille tarjoama tuki sekä näkemykset koulutuksellisesta tasa-arvosta. Tulosten mukaan suurin osa tutkimukseen osallistuneista opettajista näkee vanhempien sosioekonomisen aseman vaikuttavan jollain tapaa lapsen koulunkäyntiin, kuten oppimiseen/oppimisvalmiuksiin ja vanhempien resursseihin ja tukeen. Opettajien käsitysten mukaan opettajat ja/tai koulu voivat tukea oppilasta esimerkiksi tasa-arvoisella ja sensitiivisellä kohtelulla ja tiedostamalla omat asenteensa. Opettajien käsitykset suomalaisen peruskoulun tasa-arvoisuudesta jakaantuivat tasaisesti kolmeen eri kategoriaan: koulu on tasa-arvoinen, koulu on osittain tasa-arvoinen ja koulu ei ole tasa-arvoinen.

Avainsanat: sosioekonominen asema, koulumenestys, opettajat, peruskoulu



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Master's Thesis, 76 pages, 2 appendices

February 2020

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This qualitative master's thesis explores the perceptions of Finnish comprehensive school teachers about the role of parental socioeconomic status (SES) on a child's schooling, and teachers' perceptions about how educational equality is implemented in schools, and teachers' opportunities to support students of different socioeconomic backgrounds. The thesis is a phenomenographic research and data was collected through an open-ended narrative style online questionnaire. The participants are 36 comprehensive school teachers (grades 1-9) from all over Finland.

The theoretical framework of the thesis discusses the role of parental socioeconomic status on a child's school success and schooling in general. The theory also provides insight into exceptional and protective factors that allow children of low SES to succeed despite these factors. Additionally, the Finnish education system is examined in relation to success in PISA and the comprehensive school as a means for promoting educational equality. Lastly, teachers as agents of social justice is discussed.

Three descriptive categories were formed through the phenomenographic analysis; the visibility of parental SES in school, the ways that the school/teacher can support the student, and teachers' views on the equality of schools. The results indicate that most teachers perceive parental SES to have a role on a child's schooling, such as learning/readiness for learning and parents' resources and support, while a few borderline cases indicated that there is no effect at all. According to the teachers, teachers and/or the school can support the child for example through equal and sensitive treatment and being aware of one's attitudes. Perceptions about the equality of Finnish schools were very divided very equally between schools being equal, schools being partially equal, and schools not being equal.

Keywords: socioeconomic status, school achievement, teachers, comprehensive school, Finland

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# 1 Introduction

In my bachelor's thesis I researched the role of parents' socioeconomic status on a child's school achievement. The literature review (Nicolson, 2018) found that the role is manifold, as parental socioeconomic status (SES) can affect a child's school achievement in many ways, from parental attitudes towards education, to parental resources and time, to even how SES may affect parenting styles and how this may affect the child (Okado et al., 2014; Hartas, 2011; Fan, 2012; Önder & Uyar, 2017; Jæger, 2009). Despite all the detrimental effects low parental SES may have, there are also protective factors, thanks to which, children of low SES can and do succeed at school (Watkins & Howard, 2015; Kuba, 2015).

In this master's thesis, I will dive deeper into this topic, focusing on the context of Finland and perceptions of Finnish comprehensive schoolteachers regarding the role of parental SES on a child's schooling and the equality of Finnish schools. My bachelor's thesis will provide the foundations for the theoretical framework. This topic is particularly interesting, since Finland is known for its successful education system and equal society (Sahlberg, 2015, 19-22), yet societal changes are slowly taking place in regard to income inequality. Although, the role of parental socioeconomic status on a child's school success has been a popular topic of research globally, the topic has not been widely researched in Finland. In this thesis, I will answer the following research question: *What are the perceptions of Finnish comprehensive school teachers regarding the role of parental socioeconomic status on a child's schooling?* And the sub questions: *How is SES visible in schools? How can teachers support students? Is school equal according to teachers?*

Finland has long had a relatively low level of income inequality compared to other countries, in 2017 the result was 0.27, where 0 equals complete equality and 1 equals complete inequality (OECD, 2019). According to statistics, the percentage of children living in poverty in 1994 was 4.1 percent but this percentage has been growing steadily since then and in 2016 the percentage of children living in poverty in Finland was 10.1 percent (Statistics Finland, 2019). The topic of this thesis is interesting for a couple of reasons, firstly Finnish society has low levels of income inequality in comparison to other countries, but now the levels are growing. Additionally, Finland is known for having a successful and equal education system, where one's socioeconomic status should not affect their access to education or their educational attainment. Recently, there have been several news articles regarding the increasing role of parental SES

on a child's school success in Finland (Yrjö, 2015; Salmela-Aro, 2019). To the best of my knowledge, this topic has not been researched in Finland, with regard to the perceptions of Finnish teachers. A similar study has been carried out in Greece (Georgiou, 2008) studying the beliefs of experienced and novice teachers with regard to student achievement.

This thesis topic is important on a societal level, but also on a personal level for me as a future teacher. It is important for me as an educator to understand how the socioeconomic backgrounds of my students may affect their learning and academic achievement, to be able to support them and alleviate the effects. I find it interesting to research how teachers with differing teaching backgrounds understand this issue and how they possibly combat it in their work. I am also interested to find out how the teachers view the implementation of educational equality in Finnish comprehensive schools.

The research participants of the study are 36 Finnish comprehensive school teachers from around Finland. The participants were collected through public Facebook groups aimed at teachers, to ensure that participants were from around Finland and from different schools. The data collection was done through online questionnaires. The topic is researched through a phenomenographic research method, aiming to study how the topic is conceptualised by the research participants. The data is analysed using phenomenographic analysis, forming three descriptive categories from the data that are presented and discussed as the findings of this study.

The theoretical framework focuses on socioeconomic factors affecting school achievement, the Finnish education system in relation to society, and teachers as agents of social justice. The central concepts of socioeconomic status and school achievement are defined. Although the focus of the research is on schooling in general, school achievement is defined, as it is the most central part of schooling that it focused on. The Finnish education system in relation to educational equality is researched through Finland's success in PISA, and the Finnish comprehensive school as a means of equality.

Although this thesis uses the term 'parent' instead of guardian, I acknowledge that guardian is a more appropriate and inclusive term, which is also used in the Finnish core curriculum (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016), and that these factors apply just as much to guardians as they do to parents, but I have chosen to use the term 'parents', as this is what is used in the majority of research on the subject. And, although it is important to highlight that there are often several factors in addition to parental SES that may affect a child's school

achievement, and although parental SES does not always have either a positive or negative effect on a child's school achievement, this thesis will focus on the typical effects of SES as suggested by previous research.



## **2 Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Defining the Central Concepts**

#### 2.1.1 Socioeconomic Status

There are numerous factors that determine one's socioeconomic status (SES), and there is no universally accepted definition for it. Inglebret, Bailey, Clothiaux, Skinder-Meredith, Monson and Cleveland (2017) explain that it does not have a universally agreed upon definition, as it is a complex multidimensional phenomenon. They have formulated three approaches to define it; the examining of access to resources, gaps between groups along a continuum, meaning identifying the disparities and gaps between the position of individuals and groups in relation to access to resources, and power and privilege associated with social standing (Inglebret et al., 2017). Educational background, income and occupation (Netten, Luyten, Droop & Verhoeven, 2016) are some of the most significant determinants of one's socioeconomic status. SES can also be viewed simply as the social class one belongs to, grouped into high, average or low (Fan, 2012). This definition is much simpler than the latter ones, and one's social class cannot be defined without considering the factors mentioned above.

According to Almquist, Modin & Ösberg (2010) one's cultural capital, which is defined by one's education, social background and cultural taste, is perceived to influence one's socioeconomic status. The cultural capital of the parents is transferred to the child through upbringing. Parental SES determines the SES of the child and it is perceived as the resources distributed at the macro-level of society. (Almquist, Modin & Ösberg, 2010.) Jerrim et al. (2015) explain that SES is defined by the occupation of the parents, which are allocated into five classes: unskilled, semi-skilled, technical, and professional. The SES of the child is defined by the higher of the parents' occupations. This classification is commonly used in research on social stratification (Jerrim et al., 2015).

In this thesis, socioeconomic status is understood as the income, educational background, and occupation of parents. It is discussed through the definitions provided in previous research about the topic. Factors such as race and immigrant background in relation to SES will not be discussed.

### 2.1.2 School Achievement

Although this research focuses on a child's schooling in general, school achievement is often heavily associated with it, and thus I will provide a definition for it. There is no simple definition of school achievement and the meaning of it has been a topic of dispute for many years. Hartas (2011), defines school achievement as the cognitive and linguistic development, and literacy and reading skills of a child. Although highly criticized, standardised tests are often used as indicators of a child's school achievement. Some of the main factors that define a child's school achievement in research are cognitive development, literacy and reading skills, and social-emotional skills. (Hartas, 2011.)

Hartas' (2011) definition of school achievement is somewhat restrictive and does not include all of the aspects that the Finnish national core curriculum mentions. The Finnish curriculum lists aspects that teachers must assess students on. Learning is assessed through a thorough evaluation of a students' knowledge and skills in relation to the learning objectives that are set for each subject. In addition to learning, these include behaviour and working skills. Working skills include planning, regulating, and evaluating one's own skills. Behaviour skills are based on appropriate, situationally aware behaviour and good manners. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016.)

According to Fitzpatrick (2014), poor educational achievement affects the child on both the individual and societal level. On an individual level, poor educational achievement can negatively impact one's personal success, health, well-being, and reinvestment in society. On a societal level, poor educational achievement in large numbers is believed to reduce a country's formation of human capital. Individuals who drop out of high school are found to use more social services and pay three times less taxes on average. One explanation for this is that people with low academic achievement may engage in more health-risky behaviours and as a result have more health issues. (Fitzpatrick, 2014.) This indicates that the school success of an individual is important not only on an individual level, but also on a societal level.

This research views school achievement as one significant factor affecting a child's schooling. School achievement is seen as a broad concept that embodies cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioural dimensions. While it is not the only factor related to a child's schooling, it is the concept that is most discussed and used.

## **2.2 Socioeconomic Factors Affecting School Achievement**

### **2.2.1 School Achievement and Resources**

Hartas (2011) remarks that the way in which parents choose to allocate their resources, such as time, money, and energy, explains the effects that parental SES has on a child's school achievement. The amount of money that parents spend on different resources for the child, such as books and toys, and the amount of time they spend with them on different activities, such as reading, are believed to have the potential to improve the cognitive and linguistic development of the child. Several studies point towards a strong link between parental investment in home learning and the development of the child's cognitive and literacy skills, which are indicators of a child's school success. (Hartas, 2011.)

Hartas (2011) explains that when children grow up in literacy-rich environments, where they have access to books and where parents engage with them in learning opportunities, it has a positive influence not only on the literacy and language skills of the child, but also on behavioural and emotional regulation skills. Soininen and Merisuo-Storm (2015) also support this argument and acknowledge that the reading culture of the home affects the child's linguistic development and reading skills. Hartas (2011) implies that the educational attainment of parents influences their financial resources and human capital and these in turn influence how they interact with their children, what kind of activities they favour, what skills they want to develop in their children, and their attitudes and beliefs towards education. However, in contrast, studies have found that parental involvement with their child's homework has been linked to poor academic performance. The reason for this is unclear, but it is believed that it may be due to the students who tend to need assistance with homework may be academically lower to begin with. (Hartas, 2011.)

Almquist et al. (2010), suggest that in addition to children being influenced by their parents' SES, they also form their own social position in a classroom. Children enter the classroom with embodied social structures and a set of standards through which they view and navigate through life. The child's educational opportunities are influenced by how the child is positioned in the social structure of the class, and how the child positions himself/herself in the social structure of the class. The child's position in the classroom, also known as their peer status, can be shaped by their socioeconomic status and plays a role in their school success. (Almquist et al., 2010.)

According to Önder and Uyar (2017), although it is commonly accepted, that parental SES affects the school success of the child, the extent of its effects varies between countries. The researchers explain that OECD reports show that the effect of socioeconomic status explains 23% of students' school success in Germany, yet only 12% in Japan, and 9% in Finland (OECD, 2018). Not only does the individual country affect the role of the SES, but also the development level of the country. The more developed the country is, the greater effect parental SES has on the students, and the less developed a country is, the more the individual school can affect the students' school success. (Önder & Uyar, 2017.)

Önder and Uyar (2017) also found that the number of siblings in a family affects the school achievement of children and even access to education in some countries. Children with many siblings may be given fewer opportunities and thus their school achievement may consequently suffer. Studies show that in general children with no siblings are the most successful and children with up to seven or more siblings display the lowest achievement. This also influences access to education, since the existing resources are divided among many siblings, the opportunity to attend school is poorer. The birth order of siblings also plays a role in school achievement in developing countries, as older children are expected to help out domestically and financially at home and are therefore more likely to succeed academically. (Önder & Uyar, 2017.)

Okado, Bierman and Welsh (2014) propose that parental SES plays a role in a child's school readiness. They advocate the view that delays in school readiness are more prevalent in low-income families, which are mainly caused by the numerous stressors that low-income families face without the essential social support needed to cope with them. Additionally, maternal depression, which is more common in low SES families, can result in mothers that are less responsive and more irritable. Maternal depression has been linked to low scores on measures of cognitive and motor development in preschool children. (Okado, Bierman & Welsh, 2014.)

Another resource related factor that is determined by parental SES is the living environment of the family. D'houst (2008) concludes that parents of low SES are limited to what neighbourhoods they can afford to live in and thus what schools they have access to. Underprivileged neighbourhoods tend to have poor social cohesion, social disorganization, and inadequate resources for children, such as playgrounds and libraries. Children of low SES who attend large urban schools with concentrated poverty have lower academic achievement than low SES children who attend small rural schools or schools without concentrated poverty.

(D'houst, 2008.) Similarly, Burgness, McConnell, Propper and Wilson (2007) explain that the selection of available schools contributes to social stratification of children. Neighbourhood schooling leads to large income differences between neighbourhood schools, and the quality of schools being influenced by peer group differences (Burgness, McConnell, Propper & Wilson, 2007; Ouakrim-Soivio et al., 2018).

### 2.2.2 Parental Involvement and Support

Watkins and Howard (2015) believe parental SES influences the parenting style of parents, which can impact the child in a way that affects their school achievement. The researchers advocate that parents of low SES are more likely to adopt authoritarian parenting styles, which tend to have little support and warmth and a lot of monitoring and structure. It is also more likely that low SES children have single parents that may adopt harsh and inconsistent parenting styles. Parents of low SES are less likely to devote time to assertiveness and reasoning-based parent-child communication. These parenting styles have been associated with discrepancies in school readiness, results on achievement tests, grade retention, early school performance, and promotion to talented and gifted programmes. (Watkins & Howard, 2015.) D'aoust (2008) also explains that scarce income of parents can cause psychological distress, which in turn can reduce the amount of sensitive and responsive parenting the parents can offer, usually resulting in more disciplinary and tough parenting styles. These harsh and inconsistent parenting styles are more likely to result in behavioural problems than consistent and strict parenting styles (D'aoust, 2008).

According to Okado et al. (2014), a lot of single mothers are found to have low income. It has been found that they may provide their children with less support with learning due to the life stress they face. This stress can be in the form of poor living conditions, financial strain, single parent status, and social isolation, which in turn causes daily stress and reduced psychosocial support. These factors can cause a learning environment that is less predictable, less stimulating and less responsive than the learning environments of socioeconomically advantaged children. Additionally, low-income mothers are also at a higher risk for depression, as the prevalence rate is 40-60% compared to a prevalence rate of 5-25% among the general population. This can have a strong impact on the child, as depressed parents can be less responsive, more withdrawn, inconsistent, and more negative and critical when interacting with their child. It may also affect how they perceive themselves as a parent, as they are more likely to suffer from feelings of

inadequacy in their role as a parent. Depression and low self-efficacy cause the feeling of helplessness, and these are likely interconnected, as they both stem from the overwhelmingness of one's life situation. Both of these issues have been connected to laidback and inconsistent parenting. These can delay the development of the child's self-regulatory skills, which are needed at school. (Okado et al., 2014.)

In addition to the actions of parents having an effect on a child's cognitive development, their attitudes and beliefs about their responsibility to be involved in the process also have a great impact on the child's cognitive development. Hill and Taylor (2004) suggest that parental SES affects parents' involvement at school through several factors. Firstly, parents with higher educational backgrounds are more likely to manage their child's education and actively advocate for their child to be enrolled in honour programmes. Parents of low SES face more problems regarding involvement with their child's school. They may have less flexible work schedules, lack access to transportation, have less resources and be under more stress from living in restless neighbourhoods. Furthermore, they often possess lower educational backgrounds and may have had negative experiences with school during their childhood, which can result in them being less willing to question the teacher or school. In addition to this, the self-perceptions and the mental state of parents, such as anxiety and depression, affect their involvement at school. Unfortunately, the families that find it most challenging to become and stay involved, are often the ones who would benefit from it the most. (Hill & Taylor, 2004.)

Fan (2012) suggests that the SES of the parents determines the feelings they have towards their child's education. Parents of high SES are more likely to highly value education than parents of low SES. Okado et al. (2014) explain that concerted cultivation, meaning parental involvement in forms of verbal interaction with children and providing children with structured learning opportunities, such as music lessons, was found to positively impact the development of general knowledge in kindergarten, and math and reading achievements in the first and second grade. Similarly, Heath et al. (2014) have found that children of low socioeconomic status are exposed less to print, the opportunities to engage in reading-related tasks and the availability of reading related material at home. This can result in inadequate performance on print knowledge tasks, being at risk for developing reading difficulties, displaying delayed phonological awareness, and a tendency to have a smaller vocabulary than children of higher SES. (Heath et al., 2014.)

Okado et al. (2014) advocate that research has found a relation between regular parent-child reading, conversation and learning activities at home with a child's school readiness. Parents who actively discuss with their children, remark on feeling and thoughts, and point out and explain things around them help develop the child's attention skills and improve their oral language skills. The researchers continue to explain that a child's literacy skills are improved when parents teach the child to recognise letters and how to write their own name. Additionally, parents that spend a significant amount of time reading books with their children boost the child's vocabulary growth. On the contrary, the child's language development is negatively impacted by parents who do not provide a cognitively stimulating home environment and who exhibit low levels of parental involvement. (Okado et al., 2014.) Similarly, Lee and Bowen (2006) propose that teachers' reports about children's reading and mathematics achievements are positively impacted by parental reports on educational activities at home. Yet, in the US, educational activities at home have had more positive results with European-American families, than with families of minority backgrounds, such as Hispanic and African American, single-parent families, and low SES families. (Lee & Bowen, 2006.)

Smith (2006) advocated that parents of low SES exhibit less parental involvement in their child's education than parents of medium and high SES, and that parental involvement has a positive impact on high academic achievement. This indicates that low SES students are set back from their peers of higher socioeconomic standing. An issue that exasperates the problem, is that teachers and school staff request parental involvement while failing to acknowledge the impact parental SES has on it. Most understandings of parental involvement are based on behaviours that are easily accomplished by parents of middle and high SES. They consequently neglect the needs of parents of low SES and make it harder for them to get involved. (Smith, 2006.)

Kuru Cetin and Taskin's (2016) confirm the involvement of parents in their child's education is as important of a factor in determining school success as the school itself, as both environments have a significant effect on the cognitive development of the child. Parental involvement at schools can be categorised into six categories; communicating, learning at home, parenting, decision making, volunteering, and collaborating with the school. Communication between the parent and the school enables information regarding the child and the curriculum to be passed along. In schools with parents of low SES, it is usually crucial to explain to the parents why it is important to be involved and what steps they can take to achieve this. Private schools tend to encourage parents to be involved more than public schools. The

study by Kuru Cetin and Taskin found, that out of the six categories, most of the parents participate in ‘learning at home’ by helping their child with homework, whereas the decision-making category was practiced the least, as parents tend to voice their opinion only when it is asked for. It seems that parents feel it is easier to communicate with private school teachers than with public school teachers, and this is most likely explained by parents paying for private school and feeling they have the right to be involved. And understandably, children of low SES do not have the same access to private schools as children of high SES. (Kuru Cetin & Taskin, 2016.)

Another way that parental involvement and support affects the child, is through speech. Bodovski (2007) explains that a child’s linguistic development is influenced by how their parents speak to them. The speech patterns and ways of speaking that parents use are shaped by their socioeconomic standing. Parents of low SES tend to use more restricted vocabulary, speak less in general, use short sentences, and a lot of directives when speaking to their child. On the contrary, parents of high SES speak more in general, use elaborate language, use more complex vocabulary, sentences and explanations, and interrogatories when speaking to their child. The social standing of child can be visible from a very young age, since at the age of 12-36 months, during the period of child development, parents of high SES typically use more complex vocabulary with their children and speak more in general, meaning their children have twice as great vocabularies as children of low SES parents. (Bodovski, 2007.)

### 2.2.3 The Role of Parents’ Educational Background

According to Önder and Uyar (2017) the educational background of parents is believed to have a greater effect on a child’s academic achievements than their income does. Parents with high educational backgrounds are typically more equipped to provide their child with academic support and provide the child with better social and economic resources. These findings were supported by the PISA test, as it found that children of university graduates obtain better results at school than children of non-university graduates. The study also demonstrated that whether the mother is a high school graduate or not, influences the results. (Önder & Uyar, 2017.)

Cogner, Cogner and Martin (2010) hold the view that the level of parental education is the most important determinant of one’s socioeconomic status, as it has great influence on later occupation and income. Dubow, Boxer and Huesmann (2010) support this view and advocate that it is also a unique predictor of a child’s academic attainment. Maternal education has been



found to be a significant determinant of a child's school attainment, even after controlling other SES variables. They also found that the child's occupational status as an adult was determined by the educational background of the parents. Parental education influences the developing academic achievement and achievement-oriented attitudes of the child. (Dubow, Boxer & Huesmann, 2010.)

Dubow and Boxer (2009) support this finding and suggest there is a solid link between parental educational background and income on a child's educational attainment, with emphasis on the importance of the mother's educational background. When studying results of American standardised tests, it was found that parental education affected the achievement-fostering behaviour and educational expectations of the parents, and thus the test results of the child. The child learns behavioural models from their parents, based on how they interact with the child, which is influenced by the parents' educational attainment. (Dubow & Boxer, 2009.) In line with this, Heath et al. (2014) emphasise that several studies indicate that there is a strong connection between the educational attainment of the mother and the literacy development of the child, while other studies contradict this finding and suggest that the amount of literacy activities done at home is the only factor that affects the child, not the SES or educational level of the parents. Yet, Dubow and Boxer (2009), argue that parental SES and amount of literacy or other academic activities are interconnected.

Wamala, Kizito and Jjemba (2013) advocate that having gone through the formal education system enables parents to be desirably involved in their child's education and have a positive influence on their learning and academic achievement. It was found, that the educational background of mothers was of great significance, as mothers with higher educational backgrounds are more able to help their children with problem-solving tasks and be more involved in their child's education, than mothers with low educational backgrounds. Wamala et al. (2013) continue to explain that this is also applicable to fathers, but the educational backgrounds of mothers were found to be more significant in this respect. This may be explained by traditional family roles, as fathers may be more likely to take care of the financial aspects of the family, and the mother of the home. Nonetheless, a link between the educational background of the father and the educational attainment of the child has been established. However, the impact of the father's education on the child was positive as long as it was at least primary education, whereas for the mother's education to have a positive impact it had to be at least secondary education, thus the influence of the mother's education is still greater. On a general level, children of highly educated parents tend to be more confident and self-reliant,

and less likely to suffer from anxiety and other psychological issues. (Wamala, Kizito & Jjemba, 2013.)

Davis-Kean (2005) suggests that parental educational background affects the expectations and attitudes the parents have towards their child's education. It appears that parents of moderate to high SES typically have beliefs and expectations that are closer to the real performance of their child, whereas parents of low SES may have an unrealistic view. The capability to form realistic expectations and beliefs about the child's abilities is important when forming the home and school environment in ways that allow the child to succeed in after-school activities. Highly educated mothers are found to have higher expectations for their child's school achievement compared to mothers with low educational attainment, which results in achievement-favouring behaviours from the mother and positive perceptions of achievement from the child. Highly educated parents, especially mothers, tend to create warm social climates at home and possess parental warmth. The researcher confirms that maternal education has the strongest connection to the behavioural and cognitive developments of the child. (Davis-Kean, 2005.)

Similarly, Netten et al. (2016) argue that a child's reading proficiency is related to the educational attainment of parents. Highly educated parents' children acquire better reading results and have up to five times better vocabulary than children of poorly educated parents. Highly educated parents may have a better understanding of the language and culture of the school and thus may have better home-school involvement and cooperation. Their findings suggested that children in the Netherlands of highly educated parents had better academic achievement in elementary school than parents with low educational backgrounds. (Netten et al., 2016.)

#### 2.2.4 Cultural and Social Capital in Relation to SES

Jæger (2009) defines cultural capital, in the context of education, as how cultural traits, knowledge, and behaviour, in addition to socioeconomic and family background characteristics affect educational results. Jæger leans on Bordieu's theory of cultural reproduction. Bordieu suggests that the family and individual cultural resources form an intangible 'capital' that is perceived as equally important to economic resources and social networks. It is crucial in relation to education and is one of the most important factors in the reproduction of social inequality over time. Cultural capital is like understanding the rules of the game, and in the context of education it means that students who possess static SES and academic capability,

and have high cultural capital, will likely get preferential treatment from teachers, obtain better grades and perform higher academically. Generally, children from families that are culturally advantaged possess high cultural capital. Bourdieu suggests that in order for cultural capital to be transmitted, parents must possess it, then devote time and effort to transmitting it to the child, and the child must actively take in the cultural capital and utilise it to gain academic success. (Jæger, 2009.)

According to Lee and Bowen (2006), Bourdieu defines social capital as relationships and social networks that grant access to resources and need regular maintenance. There is a lot on inequality involved in social capital, as not all people are able to obtain the same volumes of social capital. This is exemplified by which degree the culture of the individual sits with the culture of the greater society. This is explained by the terms 'habitus' and 'field', habitus meaning the type of social training and past experiences which affect how the individual acts and thinks in different situation, and field meaning a structured system of social relationships. The individual gains social advantage when their habitus is similar to the field they are operating in. (Lee & Bowen, 2006.)

Lee and Bowen (2006) continue to advocate that children gain social and cultural capital through the involvement and interactions of their parents in the school community and this can influence their school achievement. Parents can support their child's school achievement through social capital, and it is thus seen as a means to an end. Visiting the child's school increases social capital, as it provides information on school events and enrichment activities, and how to get access to resources, skills such as how to support the child with homework, and social control, such as home-school agreements on educational values and expectations for behaviour. Tramonte and Wilms (2010) support this argument and explain that cultural interactions of parents and strategic communication gives children the upper hand at school. By visiting the school, parents can meet other parents and teachers, which expands their social network and they can gain information that is beneficial to helping their children through these relationships. Nevertheless, this will only benefit the child if the parents dedicate time to supporting the child. (Lee & Bowen, 2006.)

Hill and Taylor (2004) suggest that a child's school achievement is benefitted by parental involvement, as it increases social capital. Parents' involvement in school increases their skills and information related to the school. Parents gain first-hand knowledge on how the school is operated and can learn strategies to successfully handle challenging situations related to the

child and the school. Social control is another important method through which social capital promotes school achievement. When teachers and parents work together, they can mutually agree on what behaviour is appropriate at school and at home. Furthermore, when parents meet other parents and learn how their children behave, the child is likely to receive similar instructions as their peers, which makes it clearer and more effective. Social control sends children the message that education is valuable, which can improve the child's competence, motivation, and involvement at school. (Hill & Taylor, 2004.)

Cultural capital in the context of parents' involvement in their child's schooling is divided into three categories by Lee and Bowen (2006); access to educational objects, such as books and digital devices, knowledge and outlooks gained from experiences, and access to educational institutions, such as schools and libraries. The inequalities related to cultural capital stem from how easily accessible it is. The more cultural capital an individual has, the easier it is to gain more of it, which will then benefit the whole family. This will depend on the access one has to resources and relationships of interest. (Lee & Bowen, 2006.)

## 2.2.5 The Role of SES, Personality and Genetics in Relation to School Achievement

### *Personality*

Deckers, Falk, Kosse and Schildberg-Hörisch (2015) suggest that parental SES and a child's personality traits are interrelated, and certain traits are more favourable in relation to school achievement. Parental SES affects the cognitive and economic resources parents provide their children with, and such parental involvement can shape a child's personality. The trait of being patient is linked to high achieving children. Children with altruistic characteristics are more prone to be good team-players. However, this topic has not been researched extensively. (Deckers et al., 2015.)

Deckers et al.'s (2015) findings suggest that children with highly educated parents have a tendency to be more patient and are not as likely to make risk-seeking decisions. Children from high income and highly educated families were found to have higher IQ. Parental SES shapes a child's personality through the time parents are able to spend with the child, and what they do with this time. Parents of high SES are more likely to participate in interactive activities with the child, whereas parents of low SES are more likely to participate in activities involving media-consumption. Additionally, SES can affect parenting styles, which can affect the child's

personality. Parents of high SES may have warm and consistent parenting styles, whereas parents of low SES may have parenting styles that rely on psychological control, such as ignoring the child for a period of time if they misbehave. (Deckers et al., 2015.)

### *Genetics*

Jerrim et al. (2015) propose an unpopular view on the effects of SES on children. Most research on social stratification emphasises the environmental aspect of it but ignore the biological aspect. The researchers found that children of high SES parents often end up in more esteemed places than children of low SES parents due to the passing of genes that allow this to happen. Although this is not a popular stance, it has been a part of social research for around fifty years. Jerrim et al. explain that twin studies, that are usually used to determine genetic factors, have found the heritability of reading skills to be high. Dyslexia has a 40% rate of heritability and reading in general is up to 75% heritable, which indicates that reading and genetics are strongly connected. (Jerrim et al., 2015.)

Similarly, Heath et al. (2014) indicate that reading difficulties are hereditary. The rate of heritability from parents with reading disorders to their children is around 38%. Children with parents and siblings with reading disorders have a greater risk of possessing one too. In addition to the genetic connection, the home environment can also affect having a reading disorder, depending on whether or not the child has a genetic risk for it or not. Despite this strong connection, Jerrim et al. (2015) found that only two percent of the socioeconomic gap in children's reading skills can be accredited to genetics, as it is unlikely that the effects of genetics are distributed unevenly between socioeconomic groups. These results indicate that the greatest contributor to the socioeconomic gap in reading is environmental, not genetic. (Jerrim et al., 2015.)

Another biological factor that plays a role is nutrition. Fan (2012) notes that in addition to academic and financial resources that parents are able to provide their child with, nutritional resources can also affect school achievement. Parents who can provide their child with a balanced diet and wholesome feeding habits will nurture the child's brain, whereas a child who is malnourished may be thinking about food during class. This understandably affects a child's concentration, and thus the academic performance of the child. A malnourished child can also have a delayed development and growth rate, which can affect learning. (Fan, 2012).

### 2.2.6 Exceptional and Protective Factors

Despite all of the issues mentioned above, it is important to highlight that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds can and do succeed academically. Watkins and Howard (2015) emphasise that it is critical to not only identify factors that may cause children of low SES to perform inadequately academically, but also to identify the protective factors that allow them to succeed despite them. These protective factors are opportunities and forms of support that alleviate the effects of adversity and facilitate development. They can be internal and external resources that can help guide an individual from risk to resilience. Internal characteristics that can support a child of low SES include average to high IQ, high self-esteem, social competence, and a strong internal locus of control. External resources can include effective parenting and a good neighbourhood. Low SES parents can affect their child's schooling in a positive way just as much as they can affect it in a negative way. A low socioeconomic status is most harmful to children's development in the primary years of development. (Watkins & Howard, 2015.)

Kuba (2015) holds the position that parents of low SES value education and want their children to succeed at school just as much as parents of higher SES do. They just may support their child in more unconventional ways, due to the social context they must operate in. The theory of resilience suggests that protective factors can help people succeed in life who have lived in high stress situations in their early development, such as family poverty. These factors include possessing at least average intelligence, being active, sociable and healthy, being curious about and interacting with the surrounding environment, for example through receiving unconditional love from family and non-family members, having hobbies, having assigned responsibilities at home, and the development of a locus of control and a positive self-image. When a child has high expectations for themselves, and have parents who have high expectations for them, they are more likely to overcome adversities. Resiliency is a natural part of our genetics that thrives when provided with fruitful circumstances. (Kuba, 2015.)

Another protective factor, according to Kuba (2015), that is connected to resiliency and that helps children overcome adversities, is the theory of growth mindset. The theory of growth mindset suggest that the learning and motivation of a child are positively influenced by perseverance and hard work. Qualities of the growth mindset include being determined, being a hard worker, finding learning enjoyable, and persevering. Possessing these qualities can help a child of low SES prosper at school, despite facing a lot of hardship. The growth mindset has more to do with the process of learning than with the end product of it. Having a fixed mindset

means that you believe that intelligence is stable and cannot be developed, whereas having a growth mindset means seeing intelligence as something that can be developed through motivation and perseverance (Kuba, 2015). A growth mindset boosts school success. Robinson (2017) confirms these findings and suggests that the mindset of the child affects their learning practices. Children with growth mindsets tend to be more willing to put in extra time and effort into their studying, as they believe it can be improved, whereas children with fixed mindsets are more likely to give up and less likely to challenge themselves, because they do not think they can develop their intelligence (Robinson, 2017).

## **2.3 The Finnish Education System in relation to Educational Equity**

### **2.3.1 Finland's Success in PISA**

The Finnish education system is known world-wide for being equal and successful (Ustun & Ali, 2018; Sahlberg, 2015, 17). Ahtee et al. (as cited by Ustun & Ali, 2018) explain that one of the three principles of the Finnish educational policy is promoting educational equality. All levels of education in Finland are free of charge, from pre-primary school to higher education. In addition to this, most children go to public schools nearest to their home and schools do not get to choose their students on the basis of merit. All parts of comprehensive school are free; learning materials, health and welfare services, a meal, and even transport if needed. (Ustun & Ali, 2018.)

Finland has a relatively low level of income inequality compared to other countries, the result in 2017 being 0.27, where 0 equals complete equality and 1 equals complete inequality (OECD, 2019). According to statistics, the percentage of children living in poverty in 1994 was 4.1 percent but this percentage has been growing steadily since then and in 2016 the percentage of children living in poverty in Finland was 10.1 percent (Statistics Finland, 2019). Although Finland as a society and the Finnish education system have been regarded as very equal in comparison to other countries, and although this is still true, it is important to note that this is changing at a steady pace, and the income gap and percentage of people living in poverty has been increasing over the past couple of decades.

Additionally, the latest PISA scores from 2015, conducted by the OECD show that social equity in Finnish schools is decreasing. PISA measures countries on impact of social background, performance gap and resilience. Resilient students are students who score well despite coming

from low SES backgrounds. Measures for impact of social background and performance gap in Finland have been increasing since 2006, and the performance gap has almost doubled. The number of resilient students has decreased since 2006. Compared to other OECD countries, Finland is slightly below average for impact of social background, slightly above average for resilient students, and significantly above average for performance gap. (OECD, 2015.)

Simola (2005) explains that since the 2000 PISA test, Finland has been enjoying the educational glory it has attained from the results. Not only did Finland score well in mathematics, science literacy, and reading, the subjects measured in the test, they also scored one of the lowest scores for variations in school and student performance. Thus, it has been concluded that Finland is able to achieve high levels of academic achievement along with high levels of educational equality. The researcher also highlights that teachers in Finland enjoy a higher social status than most teachers in Western countries and in addition to this, their work is valued by both ends of the social spectrum. In addition to these factors, Finland also has very high numbers of applicants for teacher training as seen in university entrance examinations. (Simola, 2005.) So not only is Finland's educational success affected by high equality and low variations between schools, but also by the teachers themselves, the respect they are given and the popularity of the profession.

Finland poses an interesting case in regard to the impact of SES on school achievement. Finland has set educational equity high up on the educational agenda and has taken several measures to ensure the education system is equal to all, including all the factors that are free to all. Yet despite all of these measures, the impact of students' SES on their education is increasing. PISA scores are showing a negative trend of a decrease in scores of educational equities.

### 2.3.2 The Finnish Comprehensive School as a Means of Equality

Finland's efforts towards having an equal education system date far back in its history. According to Sahlberg (2015, 19-20) these efforts started during the post-war period in Finland, starting with efforts to enhance equal educational opportunities by moving from an agricultural society to an industrialized society from 1945-1970. This was followed by the transition to a comprehensive school system from 1965-1990 following the Nordic welfare system model. The most recent development of the education system is developing the education systems and higher education systems to be in line with Finland's identity of being a high-tech knowledge-



based society (Sahlberg, 2015, 19-20). So, since the year 1945, educational equality has been part of Finland's educational agenda and continues to be to this day.

According to Sahlberg (2015, 19-22) there was an urgent need for changes to the national education system after world war II, as Finnish children did not have equal access to education, based on where they lived. There were only 6-7 years of compulsory education available to all, and after this the opportunities depended on where children lived, and most options were private grammar schools. Pekkarinen, Uusitalo and Kerr (2009) state that prior to the educational reform, most schools were private and 55% of students attended these, 30% attended state schools, and 15% attended municipality-run schools. The content in these schools differed a lot, as foreign languages were compulsory in general secondary schools and advanced mathematics and science was taught, whereas civic schools focused more on practical skills. This pushed for the need for an equal public-school system, and a desire to modernise the Finnish education system resulted in the formation of the comprehensive school system. The goal of the comprehensive school was to combine all primary, grammar and civic schools into a 9-year comprehensive school, that all students would attend regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds and it would be governed by local education authorities. (Sahlberg, 2015, 19-27.)

Pekkarinen et al. (2009) suggest that the development of the comprehensive school in Finland, which abolished school tracking at the age of 11 and changed it to the age of 16, has increased the intergenerational mobility in Finland. This is especially true for children from lower SES, as they would have been more likely to choose a vocational path, and now undergo nine years on the academic track. The reform has thus increased the academic content of the curriculum and the quality of the peer group for underprivileged students. However, this reform meant that the content and style of teaching had to be modified to fit a more heterogenous group of students, and teachers were vocally against the reform, as they argued that having such a heterogenous group of students would worsen the quality of teaching. The main results of the school reform to a comprehensive school system were postponing tracking from the age of 11 to the age of 16, improving the academic content of schools, and centralising teaching at a national level and moving private schools to the ownership of municipalities. (Pekkarinen et al., 2009.) Ouakrim-Soivio, Rautapuro and Hildén (2018) also state that one of the most important parts of the Finnish comprehensive school is that they do not choose their students, students attend the school nearest to them.

Sahlberg (2015, 48-49) explains that the current Finnish education system, unlike most countries, has not been affected by market-based education reform models. Such reforms include standardised testing, standardising of teaching and learning, and competitiveness between enrolment in schools. The Finnish educational community has been sceptical about how beneficial these measures would be for student learning, and teachers have felt that standardised testing would not be beneficial for the learning of students. (Sahlberg, 2015, 48-49.)

So, where does the Finnish education system stand today in regard to equality? Ouakrim-Soivio et al. (2018) studied whether educational equality is realized and whether students are treated equally at the end of comprehensive school. They looked at how educational outcomes were related to certain background variable, such as parental educational level. The finding showed that even though equal opportunities is mentioned in the curriculum, it is not reached in the everyday lives of students. The study found that today 12-15% of students entering basic education in Finland are of low SES backgrounds. This percentage is three times greater than it was 15 years ago. The latest PISA results indicate that for the first time in recent decades, Finland's score for the link between parental SES and children's educational outcomes was above the OECD average. These differences are to some degree explained by parental SES affecting the neighbourhood school that the child attends, thus increasing the differences between schools. Especially in metropolitan areas, the wealth gap between areas is growing, and parents of high SES may avoid moving to certain areas so that the child does not need to enter the neighbourhood school. (Ouakrim-Soivio et al., 2018.) This is a worrying trend that seems to be growing.

## **2.4 Teachers as Agents of Social Justice**

Teachers can have a strong influence on their students. They spend most of each weekday with students and thus have the potential to make an impact on the students. Pantić and Florian (2015) suggest that there is a growing demand for teachers to become agents of social change, in the context of social justice and inclusion. This need has risen from concern in the educational community towards growing inequality and a desire to improve student attainment for everyone. Since teachers have the greatest influence on student achievement in schools, teachers are seen as the most important agents for educational and social change. Teachers must acknowledge that their views on students' capacities to learn, how they work with others, and

the pedagogical choices they make have the potential to affect students' outcomes. An important competence that teachers need in order to be agents of change, is the ability to reflect on one's own beliefs and values. (Pantić & Florian, 2015.)

The most commonly accepted competencies, according to Pantić and Florian (2015), that teachers should have as agents of social change are; developing a pedagogy that is inclusive towards everyone, integrating theoretical knowledge with practical skills, collaborative attitudes and skills, understanding the significance of the home environment and working with diverse families, a broader understanding of educational change and how it affects the circumstances for learning for disadvantaged students, and a commitment to education for all. It is crucial that teachers build relationships with students and other agents that can help support the diverse needs of students (Pantić & Florian, 2015). Francis and le Roux (2011) suggest that agency is an essential part of a teacher's identity and this implies that teachers need to be active in the process of professional development.

Biesta, Priestley and Robinson's (2015) findings suggest that teacher agency is heavily affected by teachers' beliefs. Their findings insinuate that teachers feel a strong sense of professional responsibility towards their students and wish to maximise their potential. This sort of thinking indicates that teacher's view education mainly through its qualification function. In this context, the inclusion of less able children may be seen as unhelpful or problematic. In the research by Biesta et al., teachers used words such as "bright", "poor" and "able". The researchers conclude that teacher agency is heavily affected by the personal qualities, beliefs, and values that teachers bring to their work. (Biesta et al., 2015.) According to Freire (1970, 52) careful analysis into the teacher-student relationship, at any level, uncovers a narrative relationship, where the teacher is the narrative subject and the student is the listening object.

Giroux (1989, 141-142), in the context of critical pedagogy, explains that school can be viewed as a form of cultural politics, and thus teachers are seen as agents that can elaborate and implement empowering cultural practices. Giroux continues to explain that it is important to understand that schools are cultural and historical institutions that represent political and ideological interests that are not in line with those of various individuals and groups. In this sense, schools can be seen as political and ideological spheres, where the dominant culture often tries to create knowledge and subjectivities in line with its own interests. (Giroux, 1989, 141-142.)

Giroux (1989, 142-143) proposes the need for pedagogy of difference and pedagogy for difference. In the first case, educators need to theoretically understand how difference is constructed through multiple representations and practices that marginalise, name, legitimate, and exclude the voices and cultural capital of different groups in society. A pedagogy for difference needs to address the issue of how the representations and practices of difference is internalised, learned, challenged, or transformed. Only through this understanding can teachers create a pedagogy that is formed of a continuous effort to create new forms of discourse, to reform cultural narratives, and to define the terms of another perspective. This kind of pedagogy criticises the ways in which teachers and students sustain, resist or accommodate discourse, ideologies, and social processes that position them within standing relations of power and dependency. (Giroux, 1989, 142-143.)

Goodman (2001, 169-171) similarly advocates that the behaviours, attitudes, and perspectives of educators affect their educational effectiveness. First and foremost, teachers need to be seen as human beings in relation to their students and their commitment to educational equity. Children need to feel that teachers genuinely do care about them and about helping them throughout the learning process. Additionally, Goodman advocates that students need to feel that teachers are genuinely interested in issues of equity and promoting it. If teachers express valuing individuals and cultural differences, it is imperative that they demonstrate this in their actions. On the contrary, teachers may promote dominant power relationships in the classroom, if they treat students in a demeaning manner and overpower their voices. Self-awareness is essential to any good teacher, and once teachers become aware of their own issues and reactions, they can work towards transforming them. (Goodman, 2001, 169-171.)

### **3 Data Collection and Analysis**

#### **3.1 Phenomenography as an Approach**

The methodological approach that is used in this research is phenomenography. Marton (1986, 144) explains that phenomenography researches the qualitatively different ways in which people experience or understand various phenomena. As explained by Given (2008), phenomenography is the study of the varying human experiences of a phenomenon in the world. Phenomenography is interested in capturing various dimensions of a phenomenon as it is understood by a number of people and has a focus on human individuals (Given, 2008). Marton (1986, 155) adds that phenomenographic research was developed within the field of education.

Johansson, Marton and Svensson (as cited by Sin, 2010) explain that phenomenography is concerned with describing how a phenomenon is conceptualised by people. Conceptualising is defined as a way of understanding or seeing something, or the meaning it has to someone. People's conceptualisations are seen to be relational, as they are internally constituted by the individual and the surrounding world (Johansson, Marton and Svensson as cited by Sin, 2010). Marton (1986, 145-146) discusses that researchers in the field of phenomenography do not make statements about the world as such, but rather people's perceptions of the world. Phenomenography aims to place these perceptions into conceptual categories. These results, the descriptions of the subjects and the categorisations made from these, are the primary outcomes of phenomenographic research.

There are no exact techniques when it comes to phenomenographic research. Marton (1986, 154-155) suggests that the first phase of analysis is a process of selection based on criteria of relevance. The researcher must find utterances of interest in relation to the research question. The phenomenon is then narrowed down and investigated through selected quotes of interest. The selected quotes thus make up the data pool. This shifts the focus from the individual research subjects to the meaning embedded in the quotes themselves. The quote then has two contexts relating to how it has been interpreted; the interview from which it was chosen and the 'pool of meanings' to which it goes to. Eventually, categories are formed based on the core meaning assigned to them. Borderline cases are also of importance and are investigated (Marton, 1986, 154-155).

Phenomenography has been criticised for some of its problems. Hasselgren and Beach (1997) explain that these problems include a lack of ontological reflexivity and content and construct validity. There is a concern that the results and interpretations may be strongly influenced by the researcher's own ideas or may result from interaction with the participants (Hasselgren and Beach, 1997). In response to this, researchers of phenomenography have attempted to define human experience as non-dualistic to explain what phenomenography can actually comment on (Hasselgren and Beach, 1997). On the other hand, Marton (1986, 148) explains that people often question whether another researcher would arrive at the same set of categories in phenomenographical research. However, this is mainly irrelevant, since the original set of categories are findings and findings do not need to be replicable. Yet once these categories have been formed, it must be possible to achieve a high level of intersubjective agreement regarding them (Marton, 1986, 148).

### **3.2 Ideological and Philosophical Assumptions**

The philosophical assumption that will guide the research is a social constructivist ontological assumption. Creswell (1998, 76) explains that the researcher acknowledges that there are multiple realities, such as that of the researcher, the participant and the reader. The researcher must report these realities. In phenomenography, the researcher reports a variety of perspectives on the phenomenon. The philosophical perspective that will be used is the social constructivist perspective.

According to Creswell (2007, 24-25), in social constructivism, the researcher seeks an understanding of the world they live in. The researcher seeks meaning directed towards certain things or objects and is interested in varied and multiple views, and the goal of the research is then to find out the participants' views of the phenomena. Questions that are asked from the participants must be open ended, so that the participants can construct meaning. The researcher's aim is to make sense of the meanings generated by the participants (Creswell, 2007, 24-25).

I must thus acknowledge my own assumptions going into the study. Niikko (2003, 35) explains that in phenomenographic research, the researcher must shut out their own prejudices, in this case their own knowledge and beliefs about the subject. I have researched the topic of the role of parents' socioeconomic status on a child's school achievement in the form of a literature review for my bachelor's thesis. By doing this, I now have a strong knowledge basis of what

kind of role parental socioeconomic status may have on a child's schooling. Although I have an assumption of the role it may play and thus what my participants may answer, it is important that I approach the research with an open-mind and analyse the data without implying my own assumptions to it. I must accept the findings as they are and make sense of them through the data itself, not with underlying presumptions.

### **3.3 Research Participants**

In phenomenographic research the research participants are chosen based on an interest to gain insightful material about the phenomenon at hand and the varying perceptions about this phenomenon (Given, 2008). Given (2008) continues to explain that most data in the field of phenomenography is collected through interviews, but other methods are also used. The most common number of participants is between 15-30. Interview questions should be open-ended and allow participants to express their own views (Given, 2008).

The topic of the research; the phenomenon at hand, was chosen before the group of participants was selected. I knew that I wanted the phenomenon to be the socioeconomic background of children and thus I deduced that teachers would be the best subjects for researching this phenomenon. I was interested to find out how teachers in Finland, who are all highly educated and must hold master's degrees and who work within an education system known for providing equal opportunity to all students, conceptualise the role the phenomenon of socioeconomic status plays in the schooling of children.

It was important that the teachers were from around Finland and from different kinds of schools. For this reason, I sent out my questionnaire to two Facebook groups; "Alakoulun aarreaitta" and "Suomen opettajien ja kasvattajien foorumi #SOKF". The first group has 36,8 thousand members, consisting of teachers, student teachers, and parents interested in primary school issues. The second group has 14,6 thousand members, consisting of teachers and people in the field of education aiming at opening a forum for discussion. In addition to this, I also sent the questionnaire to two teachers I know. I felt that this was a good way to reach comprehensive school teachers around Finland working in different school settings. The topic of the research should be familiar to all teachers, seen as it is a common societal topic and something that should be apparent in the classroom. The questionnaire was made in Finnish, since the target group of participants were Finnish or working in Finnish schools.

The participants consisted of 36 comprehensive school teachers. Of these participants (n=36) 32 identified as women, 3 identified as men and 1 identified as other. Figure 1 demonstrates the distribution of grades in which the teachers taught. One quarter of the participants taught upper level grades 7-9. Figure 2 demonstrated the distribution of number of years participants have worked as teachers.

Figure 1: Grade taught by teachers (N=36)

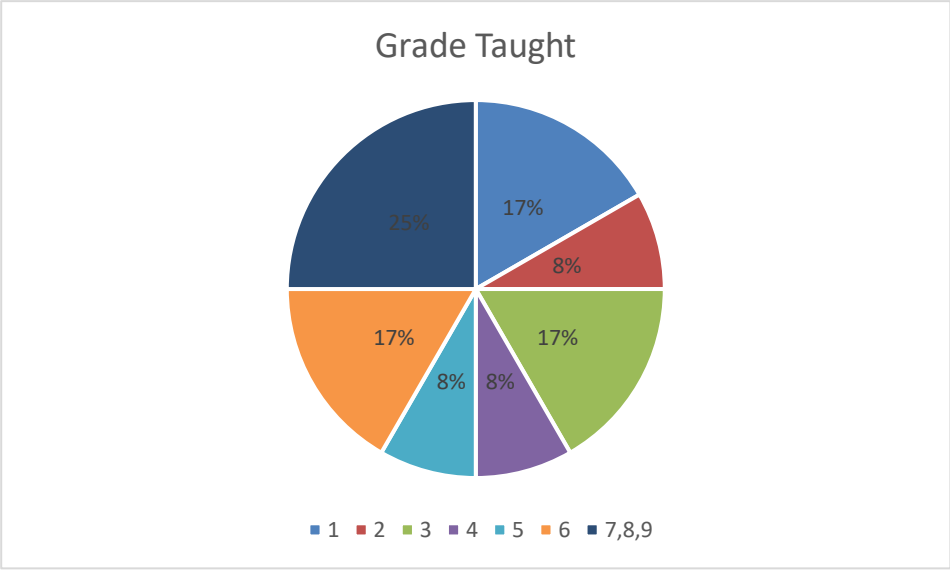


Figure 2: The number of years participants have worked as a teacher (N=36)

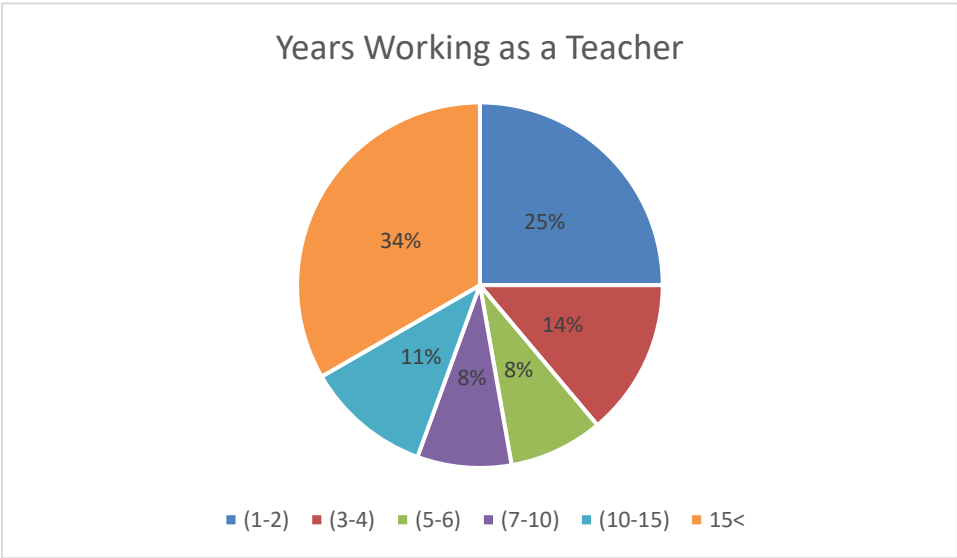
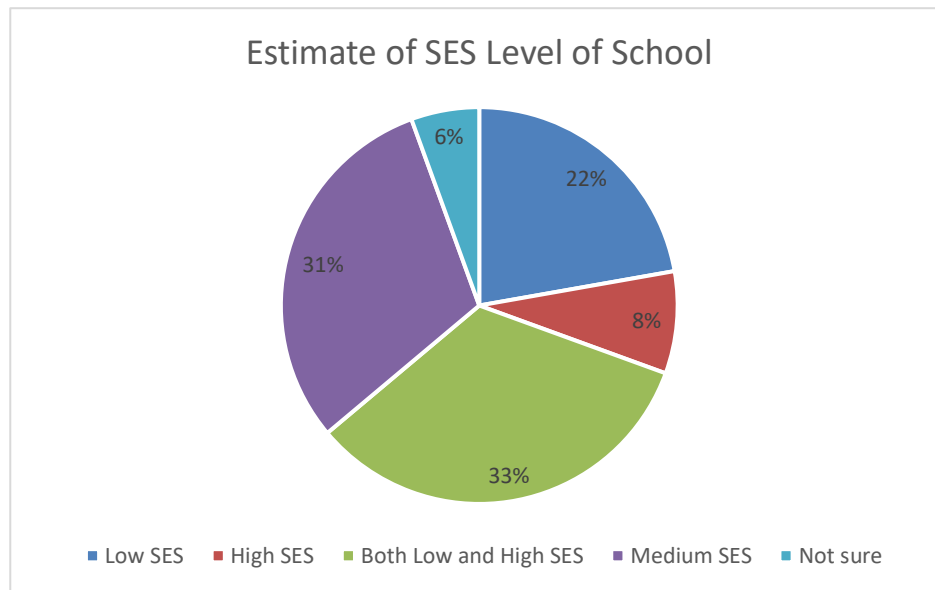


Figure 3 demonstrates the distribution of the estimates participants gave of the SES level of the pupils at their school. The participants were given five options to choose from, ranging from



low SES, medium SES, high SES, a combination of low and high SES, as well as an option for 'not sure'. Two teachers answered that they were not sure about the level of SES of their school. Only 3 teachers reported working at a school with high SES, whereas 8 teachers reported working at a school with low SES. The majority of teachers (n=12) reported working at a school with students with both high and low SES.

Figure 3: The estimate the participants gave of the SES of the school they currently work at (N=36)



### 3.4 Data Collection through an Online Questionnaire

The data collection method chosen for this research is an open narrative style questionnaire. The method of an open narrative style questionnaire can be compared to Given's (2010) description of an online interview. Given (2010) explains that the main differences compared to face-to-face interviews include unaccountability, anonymity, and reduced cues. Online interviews have been seen to have a lot of benefits, such as both the researcher and the participants being able to answer at a time of their choosing and in a setting of their choice. Although online interviews lack cues that face-to-face interviews have and have been criticised for lacking in rapport, recent studies have disputed this. The anonymity that online interviews allow can help participants feel more open and comfortable. Online interviews can be very time-efficient and economic (Given, 2010).

Andres (2012, 36, 45) explains that the success of survey research in regard to response rate depends on several factors. These factors include the chosen sampling strategy, the wording

and sequence of questions, how much the participant trusts that the data will be kept anonymous, and how easy it is to participate. Open-ended survey questions only require the stem part of a question, because participants provide their own responses (Andres, 2012, 36, 45). In the case of this study, participants were contacted through social media platforms, targeting the specific target group. The link to the online questionnaire was provided in the post, as well as the research topic and purpose. Participants were not required to give their name, location or age.

The fact that the questionnaire was online, made it possible for participants to answer it wherever they happened to be or to choose to answer it later at a better time. Andres (2012, 47) suggests that a self-administered questionnaire, one that is given to participants to fill out by themselves, has the advantage that participants can complete the questionnaire in the own time, and this may result in the responses being more thoughtful and reflective. At the beginning of the questionnaire, participants were assured that all data would be handled confidentially respecting the anonymity of participants. Participants were encouraged to answer the questions in a narrative form but were told that all answers are valuable to the study. The questionnaire [see appendix 1] has some background questions in the first part of it, relating to years of work experience as a teacher, grade the participant is teaching currently, sex of participant and an estimate of the socioeconomic background of the school they work at. These questions were multiple-choice and easy to answer. The second part of the questionnaire was for the open-ended questions. There were five compulsory questions and one optional question. Since there were not that many questions, it made it more enticing for participants to answer and encouraged them to provide longer and more in-depth answers.

The use of a self-administered questionnaire poses some disadvantages. Andres explains that since the researcher is not present when participants respond to it, the questionnaire must be very clear and well formatted. In addition to this, since the researcher does not meet the participants in person, there is no guarantee that the participant is for certain of the intended target group. The author also continues to explain that there are contradictory findings on whether self-administered studies provide detailed answers to open-ended questions, some researchers finding that participants respond better face-to-face, whereas others find that the self-administered factor is beneficial (Andres, 2012, 47).

### **3.5 Steps in Data Analysis**

My data analysis is based on Niikko's (2003) four stages of phenomenographic analysis. Niikko (2003, 33) describes the phenomenographic analysis process as being similar to many other types of qualitative analysis and that the data always acts as the basis for the analysis. Phenomenographic analysis is not very structured. The analysis process can be divided into four phases (Niikko, 2003, 33).

In the first phase of analysis, according to Niikko (2003, 33-34), the researcher reads through the data several times in order to gain a complete picture of it. The purpose of reading it is to find meaningful expressions relating to the research problem. It is important to focus on the expressions themselves, not the people who said them. These expressions will be used in later phases (Niikko, 2003, 33-34).

In the second phase of analysis, according to Niikko (2003, 34-36), the researcher starts to group the meaningful expressions into groups or themes. It is important to compare the expressions to each other and find both similarities and differences but also exceptions and borderline cases. The researcher may also find some expressions to be more significant than others. The analysis must be done based on the data and cannot be placed into existing categories or theory (Niikko, 2003, 34-36).

In the third phase of analysis, according to Niikko (2003, 36), the groups or themes formed in the previous stage are now made into categories. Each category should relate to the phenomenon at hand in the sense that they all describe a different conception of the same phenomenon. Each expression should fit into a category and the categories should not overlap with each other. Usually the categories have sub-categories (Niikko, 2003, 36).

In the fourth and final stage of analysis, according to Niikko (2003, 36-37) the categories are combined from a theoretic standpoint to even broader higher categories called descriptive categories. The descriptive categories are abstract constructs and entail the characteristics of the experiences. The descriptive categories represent the central meanings of the experiences and conceptions (Niikko, 2003, 36-37).

Following these steps, the first thing I did, was read through the data several times to familiarise myself with the data and begin to notice patterns and exceptions in it. I focused on what the participants had said in relation to my research question without focusing on the participants themselves. I then reread the data again and highlighted meaningful expressions from the data

in relation to my research question. The meaningful expressions were coded according to their content, in order to be able to proceed with the next steps. The analysis was done in Finnish, as the data was in Finnish, but I have translated all excerpts that will be used in this thesis. Each participant was coded by the letter 'T' for 'teacher' and the number of their response (e.g. T20).

In the second phase of analysis, I began to group the meaningful expressions into themes, or first level categories, according to the codes given to the meaningful expressions. I compared the similarities and differences of the expressions and also focused on anomalies. This meant that some themes only had one meaningful expression under it, if it was seen as being deviant from the rest of the data and valuable in relation to my research question. The themes were formed purely based on the data.

In the third phase I began to create categories based on the themes from the previous stage. I made sure that the categories did not overlap and that they all described how the phenomenon was experienced in a different way. The final stage of the analysis consisted of forming the descriptive categories. I formed three of these that all relate to my research questions directly.

Especially stages two and three required me to reread the data several times and change the categories to find the most fitting categories and make sure there was no overlapping. At first, I had too many first level categories and I had to go through them all and really look at the similarities and category borders, to ensure that the categories worked in relation to my research question.

The research questions were developed throughout the research process. I initially had one main research question, *what are the perceptions of Finnish comprehensive schoolteachers regarding the role of parental socioeconomic status on a child's schooling*, and as the data analysis progressed and the third level description categories were formed, I created my sub questions, *how is SES visible in schools, how can teachers support students, and is school equal according to teachers*. The research questions arose from the data itself.

Figure 4. Third level description categories in relation to the research question

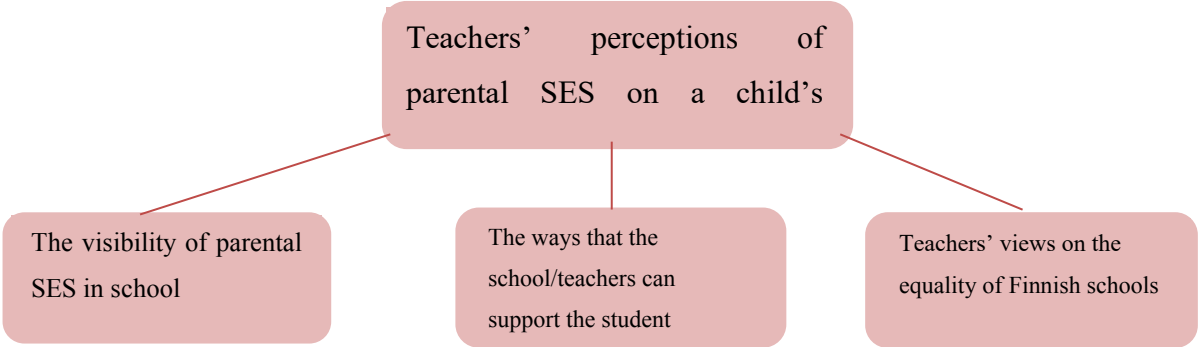


Figure 5. First, second, and third level categories. Number in brackets is the number of mentions.

Stage II	Stage III	Stage IV
Self-confidence (1)	Student's behaviour/presence (15)	The visibility of parental SES in school (65)
Attitudes towards school (2)		
Distress and fatigue (2)		
Care received at home (2)		
Equipment and material things (7)		
Concern about money (1)		
Readiness to learn and resources (7)	Learning/readiness for learning (8)	
Perseverance towards learning (1)	Parent-school cooperation (23)	
Parents' emotional wellbeing and resources (3)		
Successful cooperation (7)		
Parents' attitudes towards the school (11)		
Accepting help (2)		
Parents' unemployment and/or mental health issues (4)		

Resources (4)	Parents' resources and support (18)	
Lack of parents' support (10)		
Presence of parents' support (3)		
How parents value education and its effect on the child (2)		
Parental SES does not have an effect (3)	SES is not visible (3)	
Teachers can help with equal treatment of students (6)	Equal treatment (13)	The ways that the school/teachers can support the student (27)
The teacher does not let parents pay (1)		
Differentiating teaching in a way that is not labelling (1)		
Supporting and advising (5)	Support (7)	
Encountering students as individuals (1)		
Cooperation with the families (1)		
Teachers need to face their own attitudes (1)	Sensitivity and being aware of one's attitudes (3)	
By not asking about the student's background and free time (1)		
By being sensitive and not juxtaposing students (1)		
There is little a teacher can do (1)	They cannot support the student (1)	
Everyone has the same resources (6)	School is equal (13)	Teachers' views on the equality of school (35)
It is equal (7)		
Not all schools have enough resources (3)	School is not equal (12)	

The resources of the home play a role (4)		
At school yes, at home no (5)	School is partially equal (10)	
It is sought, but more resources are needed (3)		
Schools are, but not all teachers understand poverty (2)		

Figure 6. Examples of how meaningful expressions from phase I where grouped into level I categories.

Meaningful Expressions	Level I Categories
<i>Less educated [parents] do not value school and talk about it in a negative way. This is seen in the child, when in school the child might say “Dad said that this is not important, and I don’t need to know it”. (T17).</i>	Attitudes towards education
<i>Children from “low” SES are usually more tired. Their attention drifts and they do homework as much as they are up to doing. (T13).</i>	Readiness to learn and resources
<i>You need to be alert and sensitive to what is going on in the classroom. The students’ own environment and things arising from it need to be at the centre of teaching. Juxtaposing needs to be avoided. It is pointless to knowingly cause situations that will upset students. (T16).</i>	By not asking about the student’s background and free time
<i>No, it’s not! The Finnish comprehensive school in the Helsinki metropolitan region is a place where there are an abundance of</i>	Not all schools have enough resources

<p><i>students needing support and the teacher's time is taken up by helping them. A regular or even the slightest bit of a smarter child will not receive anything special from comprehensive school. Differentiating upwards does not work because all of the time and resources go to the weak students. (T19)</i></p>	
<p><i>Yes! Children are treated equally at school despite their home backgrounds. (T24).</i></p>	<p>School is equal</p>



## 4 Findings

The results of the study are the descriptive categories formed from the descriptions of the research subjects produced in the data analysis phase (Marton, 1988, 146). The three descriptive categories that were formed from the data are the visibility of parental SES in school, the ways that the school/teachers can support the student, and teachers' views on the equality of schools. These will be discussed in detail and in relation to the theoretical framework in parts 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3. The descriptive categories arose from the data itself but were guided by the questions asked in the questionnaire from the research participants.

### 4.1 The Visibility of Parental SES in School

One of the third level descriptive categories that arose from the perceptions of the teachers was the visibility of parental SES in school. This was the largest category of the three descriptive categories as it was discussed the most. This descriptive category was formed of five second level categories: student's behaviour/presence, learning/readiness for learning, parent-school cooperation, parents' resources and support, and SES is not visible.

#### 4.1.1 Student's Behaviour/Presence

*There is a greater risk of having a negative attitude towards school and dropping out of school for children from low SES. (T30)*

*Less educated [parents] do not value school and talk about it in a negative way. This is seen in the child, when in school the child might say "Dad said that this is not important, and I don't need to know it". (T7).*

These expressions demonstrate that the attitude parents have towards school and education have a direct effect on the child. Teacher 30 even believes dropping out of school can be attributed to low parental SES and the negative attitudes towards school that are connected to it. Teacher 7 expresses how parents' attitudes are passed on at home to the child and the child then repeats these at school. This demonstrates how much the child values their parents' opinions, as even though the teacher has clearly said that something needs to be learned, for the child, their father's opinion is more important than the teacher's and thus the teacher's instructions can be dismissed.

This in line with Dubow and Boxer's (2009) theory that the educational attainment of parents has an indirect effect on the achievement-fostering behaviour of parents. This affects the school achievement of the child due to the educational expectations demonstrated by the parents. Similarly, Davis-Kean (2005) explains that parental educational background affects the attitudes and beliefs of the parents towards the educational achievement of the child. Thus, it seems that the teachers' perceptions about how the educational background of the parents can affect the child's school achievement is in line with current research.

The following expressions demonstrate how the teachers feel parental SES affects the monetary resources children have and what kind of experiences they receive.

*Children from families of higher SES backgrounds have all the facilities and equipment they need, they get experiences of culture, hobbies, the world, which broadens their perspective and creates the experience of coping anywhere. (T1).*

*Children [from high SES] always have appropriate clothing in all weather. Students share their experiences from holidays. The students are neat, and their hygiene is in order. The students know basic manners. Many have been to restaurants/know how to behave in a restaurant. Several students have an expensive hobby (ice hockey, gymnastics, horseback riding). (T34).*

Interestingly none of the things the teachers mentioned directly affect the child's schooling, yet they affect the child's world view and self-image. Both teachers mention children having appropriate equipment and clothing, which would be especially visible during physical education lessons and break times. Interestingly T1 mentions that the experiences children of higher SES gain, gives them the feeling that they can cope anywhere. This indicates that a variety of positive experiences at home and in the child's free time have a positive effect on their self-image and self-efficacy. Hartas (2011) suggests that parental SES affects how parents allocate resources such as money and time, which in turn can affect the development of a child's cognitive skills. Based on the teacher's responses it seems that they feel that parents of higher SES are able to provide the child with a more stimulating environment in all respects.

The teacher's comments relating to students experiencing culture and social practices, such as how to behave in different situations, is related to social and cultural capital. Jæger (2009) explains that cultural capital is gained through cultural experiences of the parents and is like understanding the rules of the game. In this case, the 'game' is school culture and understanding how to appropriately act in it. Teacher 34 mentions children of high SES having good manners, and teacher 1 implies that students of high SES experience culture and the world in ways that

gives them the feeling of coping anywhere. This form of cultural and social capital is unequally distributed, often according to socioeconomic status. Lee and Bowen (2006) explain that social capital, is composed of the social networks the individual or family possesses. The child learns how to act in situations based on these relationships, and the more similar the home environment is to the school environment, the easier it is for the child to adapt and fit in. (Lee & Bowen, 2006). The teachers mention being hygienic, neat and having good manners. These are all learned at home, and any differences will be easily noticeable at school.

#### 4.1.2 Learning/Readiness for Learning

*[Children] from low SES backgrounds may have a low learner self-esteem, so they stop trying because they believe they are too stupid. Due to this, there may be gaps from elementary school, which are difficult to fill. You usually need to work on improving their self-esteem with them. [Children] from higher SES backgrounds may become exhausted, because too much is expected of them. (T11).*

*Students from low SES families are generally more tired and withdrawn. Their ability to throw themselves into something, daringness, and improvisation skills are weaker. Hunger is also something that affects their coping. (T1)*

*Children of lower SES are visibly tired in class, they may have more behavior challenges, they talk about how “social services will pay”, so they also lack the ability to dream, better children lack empathy. (T12)*

These quotes demonstrate how the teachers feel that parental SES may affect the self-esteem children have towards learning and how they feel about their future prospects. Teacher 11 talks about how children of low SES may think they are too stupid to learn something. Tiredness and exhaustion were mentioned in all three quotes, indicating that the teachers notice children of low SES being visibly more tired in class. Believing oneself is too stupid to learn, lacking the ability to dream, not being able to throw oneself into something at school, and lacking ambition by talking about receiving benefits from social services all indicate students having low self-esteem regarding learning and school. Interestingly, teacher 12 refers to children of higher SES as ‘better’ children and explains that they tend to lack empathy. It is unclear what the teacher means by this term, whether the teacher considers students of high SES to be better than students of low SES, or whether it was meant in an ironic tone.

Dubow and Huesmann (2010) found that the educational level of parents, affects not only the academic achievement of the child, but also the achievement-oriented attitudes of the child. Dubow and Boxer (2009) found that parental educational attainment affects how parents interact with their child, which in turn influences the behaviour patterns of the child. If parents do not display achievement-fostering attitudes at home, this may hurt the child's learning self-esteem, and if they discuss how you can receive money from social services instead of focusing on education, the child is likely to adopt these views and behaviours. Teacher 1 mentions that students of low SES may face hunger, which affects how well they concentrate in class. Fan (2012) suggests that a child of low SES may be malnourished and feel hungry in class, which affects their concentration and thus school achievement. Malnourishment can even cause delays in growth and development.

#### 4.1.3 Parent-School Cooperation

*Low SES is not a barrier for fruitful home-school cooperation in itself. However, sometimes parents have a critical attitude towards school and anti-school attitudes, and school is not necessarily considered important in regard to the child's future. (T25).*

*If there are a lot of social and financial concerns at home, the attitude towards school may be indifferent or even hostile. (T23).*

*Some of the parents are shy about reaching out, with others there is never time for discussions, on the other hand we are educational experts, our own negative and positive experiences have a large effect. Backgrounds and one's own experiences play a significant role. (T24).*

*Guardians are unable to attend a school meeting until at the end of the month, when they can afford to pay for bus fare. (T2).*

In regard to home-school cooperation it seems that a lot of teachers felt that low SES may, due to several factors, cause less fruitful cooperation. Teacher 25 felt that although it cannot always be attributed to SES, often parents of lower SES may not want to cooperate or may be more difficult to cooperate with because of their own attitudes towards school. As mentioned before, the parents may not value education in general. Teacher 23 brings up that parents of lower SES may be so occupied with financial burdens, that they do not have time to put in the effort for school-home cooperation, which could lead to feeling indifferent or even hostile towards the school.

This is very much in line with Hill and Taylor's (2004) findings that parents of low SES may have bad memories and experiences of school and teachers from their own childhood and thus may feel reluctant to cooperate with teachers. They found that parents of higher SES are more likely to be actively involved in the school community, whereas low SES parents may be unwilling to question the teacher. They also found that parents of low SES may not be able to cooperate because of a lack of access to transportation (Hill & Taylor, 2004), just as teacher 2 mentioned.

Teacher 24 discusses how parents of low SES may feel shy about reaching out to the school or teachers and also acknowledges that the teacher's own prejudice may affect how well the cooperation works from the teacher's end. It seems that the teacher is acknowledging that sometimes their own prejudices may negatively impact cooperation with some parents. This is in line with Pantić and Florian's (2015) description of the abilities a teacher needs in order to promote social change. Teachers need to be aware of their own beliefs and values (Pantić & Florian, 2015).

#### 4.1.4 Parents' Resources and Support

*There is more unemployment, fatigue, alcoholism, and mental health problems than usual in the [low SES] children's families. (T11).*

*There are differences in the participation of parents. Often parents of low SES are not up to or are not able to help their child sufficiently, parents of high SES may not have enough time and thus are not up to helping their child. (T11).*

*There is a lack of structure in the child's life, the child has to take responsibility for their schooling too early, other things go above school. (T24).*

*Backgrounds matter: educated people are interested in their children and are able to think about what's best for the child. They do things together at home, effort is put into reading and hobbies, homework is done, going to school is regular.... All in all, parents' interest in a child's schooling helps the child succeed at school. Educated parents know how to get help for their child and know more about things in general. (T19).*

The quotes describe problems that may prevent parents of low SES from providing their child with the best support and resources towards their schooling. Teacher 11 discusses problems that may be associated with low SES, such as alcoholism and mental health issues. These could understandably have an effect on how much support the parent is able to provide the child with.

Several teachers mention parents of low SES not being able or willing to put in the effort. Teacher 24 mentions a lack of structure in the child's life, which could be down to issues mentioned by teacher 11. Not only do the teachers mention parents helping the child, but also the parents' ability to seek help for the child, and how this is more likely to be done by parents of higher SES. The educational level of the parents is also associated with the SES by the teachers.

Teacher 19's views about the significance of parental education are quite definitive. The teacher uses words such as "are interested" and "are able", implying that perhaps parents that are not highly educated are not able. The teacher does not say that highly educated parents *may* be more able to do something but states the issues more as facts. The teacher implies that only highly educated parents are interested in their child's education, but Kuba (2015) highlights the important point that parents of low SES value their child's education just as much as parents of high SES, they just may support their child's education in more unconventional ways, due to their social context.

Hartas (2011) explains that parents that spend time reading with their children, and doing other similar activities, are likely to increase their child's cognitive and literacy skills. Okado, Bierman and Welsh (2014) suggest that parents of low SES are likely to face multiple stressors associated with low-income, which in turn can make parents less responsive, more irritable, and even lead to depression. The time and effort allocated to parents helping their child with reading and learning was mentioned by several teachers. Strains such as mental health issues were brought up by a few teachers, who felt that they are associated with low SES.

#### 4.1.5 SES is Not Visible

*In my opinion, SES is not really visible. (T16).*

*As a teacher, I don't really know anything about the SES of the children's parents. It can only really be guessed. (T18).*

*I have one year left of my career, and I noticed that while I was thinking about my answers, I felt that this kind of thinking is old-fashioned at least in the primary school context. Everyone is supported and helped so much during basic education, that everyone can keep up if they want to. (T4).*

These three quotes were all the meaningful expressions from the second level category of 'SES is not visible', referring to how parental SES is visible in schools. These were chosen for being deviations from most other responses, as they all expressed that SES is not visible in schools. So, although there were far less responses in this category than other categories, I found these significant because of their exceptional nature. One teacher felt that parental SES is not visible at all, one felt that it can only be guessed, and the third teacher felt that it does not have an effect on schooling and such thinking is even old fashioned.

It is interesting to note, that the last quote was from a teacher who has had a long career in teaching. The teacher also indicates that school achievement is down to the student themselves, as the teacher says that everyone is supported enough that they can keep up if they want to. This implies that the school and teachers provide all the necessary support, and it is down to the individual student whether they then succeed. It also implies that factors outside of school do not play a role in the child's schooling, as the help and support received from the school is sufficient enough.

## **4.2 The Ways that the School/Teachers can Support the Student**

The second third level category that arose from the analysis is the ways that the school/teachers can support the students. This category is made up of the following second level categories: equal treatment, support, sensitivity and being aware of one's own attitudes, and they cannot support the student. These will be explored in more detail below.

### **4.2.1 Equal Treatment**

*With equal treatment and by informing. The teacher cannot assume parents know how or know of e.g. forms of support or how to get them. (T30).*

*Aim to be equal with how you speak. "What did you do during your holiday"-questions can be done by e.g. everyone who slept well during the holiday jump with one leg. Everyone, who hugged someone during the holiday etc. so you come up with free and easily accessible things and do not ask about airplane trips. (T29).*

*Differentiating in a way that is not labelling (e.g. not just homework that can be done online if you know that not everyone has access to the internet/a computer). Providing options, expanding their world view, creating different kinds of experiences, so that the children could be even slightly on the same line with their world of experiences. (T1).*

The teachers mention treating the students equally with regard to different things. Teacher 29 suggests asking about immaterial things students have done during holidays, as to avoid discussing trips abroad that would highlight the inequality within the class. Teacher 30 suggests equal treatment of students and informing parents of different forms of support available to them, as the teacher cannot assume the parents know how to seek it. This also implies that the support is available, as long as it is sought. Teacher 1 suggests equal treatment through differentiating in a way that is not labelling. In addition to this, the teacher can provide experiences for the children, so that the experiences gained at home are not the only form of experience the child comes across. Equal treatment of students appears to mean different things to different teachers, but the belief that the treatment is equal is important to the teachers.

Treating all students equally and acting in ways that does not label anyone was mentioned by each teacher. This is in line with Goodman's (2001, 169-171) interpretation of critical pedagogy, where teachers must act in ways that promote educational equity and students must feel that teachers genuinely care about issues of equity. If teachers did not display this equal treatment, and instead acted dominantly towards certain students, this would reproduce societal inequalities in the classroom (Goodman, 2001, 169-171). It seems that by treating students equally, the teachers are perhaps trying to uphold educational equity in the classroom. It appears that it is important for the teachers to feel that they are treating everyone equally.

#### 4.2.2 Support

*To direct support and resources to students and parents that need them through multi-professional cooperation. I also think the teacher needs to be an easily approachable "man of the people", so that all families can easily reach out. (T25).*

*By preventing bullying, by bringing out the child's strengths, by cheering on the child, by facing the child on many levels on a daily basis, helping with homework after school, secretly giving snacks to the child on field trips, by talking to the child, staying in touch with social services. (T2).*

*Support and advise. Societal help would also be important. If teachers are required to use IT tools and are not provided any resources in the form of tablets etc., then it is difficult for the teacher to act according to the curriculum. (T9).*

The teachers brought up that they can support the student with different forms of support. Teacher 2 mentions bringing snacks for the child on field trips in a way that other students do



not notice. This requires the teacher to use their own money to bring food for the child, so that the child has food and does not stand out for not having any. The same teacher also mentions helping with homework after school. This shows a great deal of dedication and caring from the teacher, as they are willing to spend their own money and use their own time to help the student and support them. Teacher 25 discusses how teachers should be “men of the people”, meaning that it is easy for all families to reach out to them and not that feel that they are authority figures. This supports Hill and Taylor’s (2004) findings that parents of low SES may feel threatened by the authority of teachers due to their own history with them and may feel scared to question the teacher. The teacher understands this and wants to avoid it.

Teacher 9 also emphasises supporting the student and brings up the importance of the child receiving societal help. Similarly, teacher 25 discusses the significance of multiprofessional cooperation. This supports Pantić and Florian’s (2015) findings, that in order for teachers to be agents of social justice, they should build professional relationships with students and other agents to ensure the diverse learning needs of students are met. Multi-professional cooperation is important to ensure that the student receives all the help they can get. The teachers also discuss doing things that show that they care about their students, such as cheering the child and helping with homework, which is in line with Goodman’s (2001, 169-171) theory that students need to feel like teachers genuinely care about them and are their peers throughout the learning process. It appears as though the teachers do genuinely care about their students and are willing to put in the time and effort to help them succeed.

#### 4.2.3 Sensitivity and being Aware of One’s Attitudes

*You need to be alert and sensitive to what is going on in the classroom. The students’ own environment and things arising from it need to be at the centre of teaching. Juxtaposing needs to be avoided. It is pointless to knowingly cause situations that will upset students. (T16).*

*You don’t ask about holidays much, you openly and open-mindedly talk about your life and the child’s life, you don’t “sniff” around about the child’s background or gossip in the staffroom. (T13).*

The teachers bring up being sensitive and careful about what you talk about in the classroom. Teacher 13 mentions not “sniffing” around about the background of the students, indicating that it would be negative to purposefully find out about the students’ backgrounds and that teachers must not gossip about these in the staffroom. Nonetheless, the teacher encourages

talking openly about their own life and the child's life. Teacher 16 encourages setting the child's own environment and context at the centre of teaching and avoiding juxtaposing students and comparing their contexts. The teacher continues to explain that this would upset students. Teacher 16 suggests that by being alert to what is going on in the classroom, the teacher can gain knowledge about the students' own environment, whereas in part 4.1.5 teacher 18 suggested that as a teacher they do not know anything about the students' backgrounds and can only guess.

The theme arising from these excerpts of being sensitive and aware of one's attitudes are in line with Pantić and Florian's (2015) findings about how teachers can act as agents of social change. An important part of this agency, that they brought up, was professional development and evaluating one's attitudes and values. Creating relationships with students is also highlighted, and this is present in both teachers' excerpts.

Interestingly, teacher 13 also mentions not "sniffing around" about students' backgrounds. The choice of words here is interesting, as it implies that asking about the students' background would be negative and wrong of the teacher, and it should only be discussed if the student chooses to bring it up in discussion. Goodman (2001, 169-171) explains that students need to feel that teachers genuinely care about them, and in this light it is interesting to ponder if avoiding the topic is the best approach or could it even result in students feeling like the teacher is indifferent about them.

#### 4.2.4 They Cannot Support the Student

*Quite little can be done because I have too many students and too many students who need special and enhanced support. It's the cold truth. (T17).*

This category only has one meaningful expression, as it was found to be deviant from the rest of the categories. Whereas the other categories under 'how can the school/teachers support the student' described different ways the school/teachers could support the students, this teacher expresses that not much can be done. The teacher explains that they have too many students with learning difficulties, needing special and enhanced support and due to this there is not enough time to support other students. The teacher remarks that this is 'the cold truth', which could imply that they are not satisfied with the situation.

It appears as though the teacher feels overwhelmed by the workload they have and the diverse need of their students. Biesta, Priestley and Robinson's (2015) findings suggest that when teachers view education through its qualification function, students who are less able may be seen as unhelpful or problematic. It seems that teacher 17 feels burdened by the students that require special and enhanced support.

### **4.3 Teachers' Views on the Equality of School**

The final third level category that emerged from the data is teachers' views on the equality of school. This category is made up of the following second level categories: school is equal, school is not equal, and school is partially equal. This descriptive category has almost equal amounts of responses under each second level category. These will be discussed below.

#### **4.3.1 School is Equal**

*Yes, it is. Everyone can participate in everything and the school pays for it. We do not organise anything that costs. The school provides the equipment needed for school. The differences between children's growth and development is not only determined by one's SES. (T15).*

*In principle, based on the [school's] values, yes. In practice, every principle and teacher create their own school/class working culture, so there can be local differences. (T1).*

*In my opinion it is equitable. Support is offered to every student regardless of their background. (T27).*

*I can only speak for my own school, where we strive to be as equal as possible. ...We aim to be flexible with families, take different backgrounds and life situations into consideration, we do close-knit multi-professional cooperation, and we stay in touch with the families in various ways, always looking out for the student's best interest. (T16).*

One of the main reasonings behind why teachers felt that Finnish schools are equal is school being free and the equipment that the school provides the students with. Teacher 15 brings up that the differences between students' growth and development in Finnish schools cannot be solely attributed to socioeconomic status. The teacher also emphasises that every student can participate in everything thanks to the resources and organisation of the school. Similarly, teacher 27 mentions that support is offered to all students regardless of their background. Not only does this imply that students from both high and low SES are offered support if needed, it

also implies that there is enough support to be offered to all students if needed. Teacher 1 mentions that schools are equal in principle, but each teacher can create their own classroom setting, and thus there may be differences between classrooms and teachers. Teacher 16 also acknowledges that there may be differences between schools as they mention that they can only speak on behalf of their own school. The teacher mentions that they do a lot of multi-professional cooperation and cooperation with the families of the students. The school tries to be flexible and understanding towards families and it appears as though they are willing to put in extra effort to support the students' learning.

These findings are in line with Ustun and Ali's (2018) findings that the Finnish comprehensive school is free in all aspects, from learning materials to school meals and even transportation to the school, if needed. Simola (2005) explains that Finnish teachers enjoy respect from the public, as they have high levels of autonomy. This explains teacher 16's answer regarding how teachers and schools can create their own working culture. Teachers have a lot of freedom and choice. While teachers 15, 1, and 27 mainly discussed reasons related to the Finnish comprehensive school in general and policies related to it, teacher 16 discusses the efforts of the staff at the school to ensure equality, such as taking family backgrounds into consideration and being flexible with different families. This response is more related to what teachers and other staff members can actively do, than to what school policies in general result in.

#### 4.3.2 School is not Equal

*No. There are not enough resources in so called 'poor' areas. It is rarely the case in so called 'rich' areas that there could be a whole special education class integrated into a regular class. There is violence and restlessness in classrooms and schools, that are not so called 'regular'. (T10).*

*No, it's not! The Finnish comprehensive school in the Helsinki metropolitan region is a place where there are an abundance of students needing support and the teacher's time is taken up by helping them. A regular or even a slightly smarter child will not receive anything special from comprehensive school. Differentiating upwards does not work because all the time and resources go to the weak students. (T19)*

*The differences increase especially with children that are not helped at home. Without help from home, the child cannot succeed in a large group because schoolwork needs to be done at home too and children often need help with homework and if they are difficult, then they may be left undone, if there is no help at home. (T17).*

*No, it is not. Not all children can afford to have hobbies and go on trips during their free time, and school should offer even these experiences in these kinds of areas. (T3).*

Almost as many teachers found the Finnish school system to be unequal as found it to be equal. Teacher 10 brings up that there are ‘poor’ and ‘rich’ areas and the schools in these areas have different resources. The teacher brings up that there may be a whole special education class integrated into the regular class, unlike in schools in wealthier areas. It can be assumed that the teacher means that the special education students, in this case, are integrated into a regular class without extra support. Similarly, teacher 19 discusses the situation in the Helsinki metropolitan area, where there are a lot of students who require special support but do not receive it due to lack of resources. Thus, the teacher needs to spend their time helping them and other students are left without support or attention.

Teacher 17 discusses the importance of children receiving help and support from home with their schoolwork, and how the lack of it causes inequalities in the classroom. Schoolwork needs to be done at home and the teacher is unable to help the student in this regard. The teacher remarks that without help from home, the child cannot succeed in a large group. If the homework is too difficult for the child and they do not receive help at home, the child may leave it undone, which may place the child at a disadvantage at school. Teacher 3 rationalises that school is not equal due to the inequalities outside of school. Hobbies and trips that students can or cannot afford increases the divide between students and this is visible at school. The teacher believes schools should provide students with these experiences to minimise this divide.

A lot of the issues discussed in this section are in line with the latest Pisa findings regarding the growing inequality in Finland. Ouakrim-Soivio et al. (2018) found that the number of school age children of low SES is growing, and the role SES plays in determining the neighbourhood school the child attends is increasing. Parents of high SES may avoid moving to certain areas to avoid certain neighbourhood schools.

There seems

#### 4.3.3 School is Partially Equal

*At school, during the school day, yes. Unfortunately, parents cannot be forced to help their child at home. (T6).*

*In my opinion it is, in the sense that the school aims to help and teach everyone as well as possible. On the other hand, it seems that in some schools, everything is not taught well enough, so that the topic could be internalised without the help of guardians. For this reason, I think there should be more support in elementary school, so that no one would be left behind. (T11).*

*I think that the free comprehensive school guarantees an equal and just basis for families of different socioeconomic backgrounds. The problem can be caused by teachers who do not understand absolute poverty or who demand the use of digital devices for doing homework and assume that these are found at home. (T34).*

*In principle it is, but not always in practice. If someone who has gone through life as a 'princess', who has never faced any adversity if their life, goes through teacher training school, they may treat students of higher SES better. This is an unfortunate thing I have noticed in working life! New teaching methods may favour children of high SES families. For example, exercises are done on students' own digital devices, that everyone does not have, or at least not the latest model. (T26).*

There were a lot of teachers who felt that the Finnish school system is somewhat equal, but there are problematic factors. Teacher 6 believes the school itself is equal, but the support received at home is not and parents cannot be forced to help the child. Teacher 11 feels that there are differences between schools, since some schools and teachers do not teach the content well enough for the child to understand it without any additional help from home or the school. This highlights the level of autonomy teachers have in Finland. The teacher feels there should be more help available in schools to avoid this from happening. This is interesting in comparison to part 4.3.1 where teachers expressed feeling that there is enough support available to all students. It seems that the teachers are not in agreement about the amount of support available to students.

Teacher 34 feels that the Finnish comprehensive school provides children with an equal starting point despite their socioeconomic background but feels that teachers may be the ones to cause problems, if they do not understand poverty and may thus demand that students use digital devices that they may not have. Teacher 26 also feels that teachers can be the ones that cause problems, as some teachers may go through life without facing any hardship and may then treat students of high SES better. The teacher says that they have witnessed this in their own work. These factors could be explained by Simola's (2005) findings that Finnish teachers possess higher social standing than in most other countries. The teacher's comment is interesting, as it implies that teachers of high SES are not necessarily able to understand or support students of

low SES, yet should this understanding come from teachers' personal backgrounds or teacher training? The teacher also brings up the use of digital devices and the problems related to this. They also bring up how new teaching methods, that favour digital devices, do not favour students of low SES.

## 5 Discussion

The aim of this research was to find out the perceptions of Finnish comprehensive school teachers regarding educational equity and the role of parental SES on a child's schooling, and to answer the sub questions how is SES visible in school, how can teachers support the student, and is school equal according to teachers? The research participants were from schools of differing socioeconomic backgrounds and had work experience backgrounds varying from 1-2 years up to over 15 years. Three descriptive categories were formed based on these: the visibility of parental SES in school, the ways that the school/teachers can support the student, and teachers' views on the equality of school.

Most of the teachers felt that parental SES does have a role on a child's schooling at least in some way, yet a few responses stuck out for expressing that SES has no effect on a child's schooling. The first descriptive category formed is the visibility of SES in school. One of the ways in which the teachers described how SES is visible in schools is how it affects a student's behaviour and presence. Some teachers had strong polarised views on these effects and expressed that parents of low SES do not value school. A lot of these opinions were presented in a matter-of-fact way, indicating that the teacher feels that all parents of low SES do not value education. Yet, other teachers expressed their views as "there is a greater risk that...", acknowledging that it is possible that children of low SES may feel negatively towards their education, but that this is not always the case. A lot of teachers also mentioned the visible equipment children may have at school, such as appropriate outdoor clothing or sports equipment. They also referred to social and cultural capital, without using the terms, when referring to social and cultural knowledge such as how to act in a restaurant or receiving experiences that create the feeling of coping anywhere. It seems that these visible aspects were a good indicator for teachers of the socioeconomic status of students.

The teachers also conveyed that parental SES affects the child's learning and readiness for learning. This was visible through self-esteem related to learning, self-efficacy, exhaustion and hunger. The teachers expressed that students of low SES may not believe they are capable of learning or may feel they are not intelligent enough. One teacher expressed that students of low SES may be more tired in class and lack the ability to dream and "better children", referring to students of high SES, lack empathy. This choice of words is very fascinating, and it is unclear whether this was expressed in a serious or ironic tone. It still nonetheless poses the question of whether the teacher views children of high SES as superior to children of low SES. It is also



possible that it was meant in an ironic tone, indicating that this is how society views children of high SES. But even if this was the case, there may be bitterness or resentment towards the children of both high and low SES and is it possible for these views to not affect how the teacher treats the students, or the expectations they have for them. Pantić and Florian (2015) suggest that teachers' views and attitudes affect their agency.

Parent-school cooperation and parents' resources were also stated as visible factors of how SES is visible in school. It seems that the teachers felt that low SES may be a barrier for fruitful cooperation due to unwillingness, stress from financial burdens, and difficulties getting to the school. However, it was also expressed that cooperation with parents of high SES may be challenging due to the demandingness of parents. Interestingly, one teacher acknowledged that teachers' own positive and negative experiences affect how they interact with parents. Perhaps teachers do not always provide the best basis for fruitful cooperation if they have pre-existing assumptions about some parents. In regard to parents' resources and support, the teachers expressed quite polarised opinions. The responses expressed that parents of low SES face more alcoholism and mental health problems and children of low SES parents have less structure in their lives. One teacher expressed that backgrounds matter, as parents of high SES are interested in their child's schooling. The formation of this statement indicates that parents of low SES are not interested in their child's schooling.

A total of three teachers expressed that the SES of students is not visible in schools. These expressions deviated from other responses, and thus are important results. In phenomenographic research, any deviating results are valuable. One teacher expressed that SES is simply not visible, while one expressed that they do not know anything about the SES of their students, and can only guess, whereas the third teacher expressed that they have had a long career in teaching and find it old fashioned to think about the SES of students, as it is irrelevant in primary school, as everyone is provided the resources they need to succeed. These responses are interesting, especially when compared to the various responses that indicated multiple ways in which parental SES is visible in schools. It is especially interesting to note the teacher who mentioned that they are only able to guess the SES of their students as a teacher. While this is understandable, as it is not disclosed to teachers as such, it is fascinating that almost all the other teachers seemed to think they did know the SES of their students.

The next descriptive category is the ways that the teachers/school can support the child. One way in which the teachers felt they could support the child was through equal treatment. The

teachers demonstrated awareness about the children not having equal resources and opportunities. One teacher suggested discussing what students did during their holiday by only asking about immaterial things. This shows that the teacher is aware that some students may go on expensive trips, while others are at home because they cannot afford to go anywhere and understands that bringing attention to this could be labelling. Each teacher mentioned treating all students equally and acting in a way that does not label anyone.

Support in different forms was also mentioned regarding how teachers or the school can support the students. This referred to support in the form of directing the family to the resources available, taking part in multi-professional cooperation, and even support in the form of food for the child. One teacher mentioned secretly bringing snacks for the child on field trips, if the teacher knows that the child will not have any with them. This shows that the teacher is willing to use their own free time and money to help the child, make sure they are not hungry, and at the same time making sure no one notices that they do not have snacks with them. The teachers also brought up the importance of multi-professional and societal help for the learning of the child, which is in line with Pantić and Florian's (2015) characteristics a teacher must have in order to act as an agent of social justice. The teacher must reach out to other professionals to support the child.

Being sensitive and aware of one's own attitudes was highlighted as a form of supporting the child. The teachers discussed not prying about the child's home life, but also being open about their own lives and creating an open environment. The teachers suggest placing the child's life at the centre of teaching and avoiding juxtaposing students. It seems that some of the teachers are very aware about not wanting to make students feel uncomfortable about their social position in comparison to others. It also seems that the teachers would like the child to feel safe enough to discuss their personal and family life with the teacher, but the teacher wants it to happen out of the child's initiative and not the teacher's. This requires a safe environment, and the teacher wishes to accomplish this by talking openly about their own life.

This category also had a deviant response that was found significant for this reason. Only one teacher expressed that not much can be done to support the child, since the teacher's time is taken up by students needing special and enhanced support, and that this is the cold truth. It is interesting and meaningful to the research, that only one teacher felt this way. It seems that this teacher feels overwhelmed by their workload. It does seem that the teacher wishes the situation

was different, since they remark that it is the cold truth, implying that it is disappointing that the situation is what it is.

The final descriptive category that was formed is teachers' views on the equality of school. This category is interesting, since each sub-category has almost an equal amount of responses, meaning the views on this were very split. The first category, school is equal, consists of responses that discuss how Finnish schools are completely free and schools provide all the necessary equipment, and support is provided to everyone who needs it, regardless of their socioeconomic background. One teacher acknowledges that school is equal in principle, but since teachers and schools have a lot of freedom, there may be differences between schools. Similarly, another teacher mentions that they can only speak for their own school, which indicates that there could be significant differences with regard to other Finnish schools. It seems that the justification the teachers present for why school is equal, are the things the Finnish education system is well known for.

The next category, school is not equal, is formed of responses that really highlight the inequalities between schools and areas. There also seems to be more emotion attached to these responses, one of them starting with "no, they are not!", the exclamation mark indicating that the teacher feels strongly about the matter and is perhaps frustrated with it. Another teacher remarks that a whole special education class is rarely integrated into a regular class in wealthier areas, yet this is the case in underprivileged areas. The teacher continues to remark that there is a lot of violence and restlessness in these schools. Both of these responses sound like they are based on personal experience, although this is not made explicit. This may be why it seems that they are more emotionally charged, than responses in the previous category. Two teachers also mention the effects of the home situation on the equality of schools, as some students may not receive any help at home, which places them at a disadvantage in the classroom, and some cannot afford to have hobbies or go on trips and that the school should provide these experiences, to make it equal.

The final category in this section was schools are partially equal. The responses in this category highlight that the Finnish comprehensive school should be equal in practice, but there may be great differences between schools. One response discusses how schools are equal, but parents cannot be forced to help their child at home. Another response explains that the problem is that in some schools, things are not taught well enough to be comprehended without additional studying at home. This emphasises the differences between schools, and how the quality of

teaching may not be the same everywhere. Two teachers mention teachers as reasons for why schools may not be equal. One teacher explains that teachers who do not understand absolute poverty may cause problems. They may demand the use of digital devices and not recognise that not all students have access to them. Another teacher mentions that some teachers go through life and teacher training without facing any adversity and then favour students of high SES. The teacher explains that this is something they have witnessed during their career. They also mention that new teaching methods may increase inequality because of the focus placed on digital technology.

These findings indicate that the perceptions of teachers regarding the role of parental SES of a child's schooling are quite varying and there are perceptions that are polar opposites. While some teachers feel that parental SES has no effect on a child's schooling, others feel that backgrounds matter a lot and determine whether a parent is interested in their child's education or not. A lot of teachers focused on material visible aspects, while others discussed issues relating to social and cultural capital. It also seems that there are very divided views on whether the Finnish comprehensive school is equal or not, which could be seen as a typical result in a time of change. As a whole, the perceptions of the teachers were mainly in line with previous findings (Hartas, 2011; Davis-Kean, 2015; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Dubow & Huesmann, 2010; Jæger, 2009) regarding the role parental SES has on a child's schooling. The perceptions of the teacher focused on the role of parental resources, attitudes, and education.

Even though the teachers discussed and brought up a lot of aspects that tied to the theoretical framework, there were important aspects that they did not discuss at all. Pantić and Florian (2015) discussed the need for teachers, as agents of social justice, to develop an inclusive pedagogy and have a commitment towards education for all. Developing an inclusive pedagogy was not discussed at all by any of the teachers, yet it seems that this is an essential part of a teacher's agency in regard to social justice. Giroux (1989, 142-143) proposed that schools should be viewed as political and historical spheres that reproduce societal power relationships, where the dominant culture produces the knowledge and subjectivities according to its own objectives. These power relationships and reproduction of biased knowledge was not acknowledged by the teachers. This is definitely a greater societal and political issue, but it would be important for teachers to understand this dynamic and to be aware of it when teaching. Teacher-student power relations were not discussed at all, in any regard. While it seems that the teachers were quite aware of the ways in which parental SES may affect a child's schooling,

they seemed to be less aware of the structural and pedagogical ways the school and teachers may alleviate or aggravate these effects.

Seppänen, Kosunen and Rinne (2018, 65-70) comment on the current discussion regarding the inequality of schools based on neighbourhood selection. One of the main arguments that is discussed in relation to this is parents choosing neighbourhoods because of certain schools, or certain schools having homogenous socioeconomic populations due to the neighbourhood they are situated in. Seppänen, Kosunen and Rinne (2018, 65-70) acknowledge that neighbourhoods in Finland are becoming more socioeconomically divided but explain that the situation is not quite what it appears to be. The law states that the child must have the right to attend a school that they have a short distance to. Yet, often there may be several schools close to where a child lives, and thus the municipality will end up deciding which school the child will attend, which means that parents cannot choose the school based on where they live. However, Seppänen, Kosunen and Rinne (2018, 65-70) discuss the role that other choices play, such as subject selection. Families that choose uncommon foreign languages for their child to study are able to influence the school the child gets into, as only certain schools will be able to provide certain subjects. Research has found that parents of high SES are more likely to choose uncommon languages for their child to study, resulting in disproportions of students of high SES studying certain languages (Seppänen, Kosunen & Rinne, 2018, 65-92.)

In this regard, it is particularly interesting that some teachers felt they were unable to identify the SES of their students, when it seems that it should be so clear in a lot of schools. Seppänen, Kosunen and Rinne's (2018) findings also indicate that current discussions in the media regarding educational equity and the role parental SES plays in school allocations illustrates that certain societal changes are being perceived by the media, but the full extent of them and reasons behind the changes are not fully understood or acknowledged. If even teachers are unaware of the varying ways in which SES can affect a child's schooling, how can they take these into consideration in the classroom?

It also seems that the Finnish comprehensive school may no longer be a means for promoting educational equity. Perhaps it is time for major reforms to make the comprehensive school more equitable in today's society. Seppänen, Kosunen and Rinne (2018) and Sahlberg (2015) seem to question the effectiveness of the current comprehensive school in regard to educational equity, and it based on the findings of this thesis, it seems that teachers are uncertain as well. Sahlberg (2015, 191) indicates that Finland has not made many improvements to its education

system since the initial PISA results since 2001, and fears that policy makers will be more concerned with maintaining the status quo than researching what changes need to be made to answer to future needs. Seppänen, Kosunen and Rinne (2018, 104) explain that the effects of SES on school achievement in Finland now equal the difference of two school years.

Teacher education programmes should educate teachers on the varying ways parental SES can affect a child's schooling, what kind of societal and political factors may influence this, and how they can combat these issues in the classroom. Teacher training is one mode for policy changes to be implemented and to educate future teachers to be able to tackle the problems of the future. Additionally, teachers already working in the field should receive training, to be aware of current research and trends.

### **5.1 Suggestions for Further Research**

Based on these findings, it seems that there is room for a lot of further research on the topic. Research on how these perceptions of teachers may affect a child's self-efficacy or school achievement, could be important. It seems that some teachers had very strong views on the role of SES and one can only wonder how this may affect the treatment and support they provide students with. Research into how teacher training addresses the role of SES would also be important, since this is what provides all teachers with the basis of their knowledge, and since there can be such significant differences between schools, the education teachers receive could level the playing field.

Since, it appears that the Finnish society is going through changes in regard to income inequality and poverty levels, and thus also the Finnish comprehensive school is changing, I propose that further research on this is essential to alleviate the future effects of SES on a child's schooling. As seen in the theoretical framework, the role that SES has on a child's school achievement is very significant in certain countries, and while the situation in Finland may not be as bad, it seems that it may be heading in that direction.

### **5.2 Evaluating the Research Process**

Since this research is a master's thesis, it cannot dive as deeply into the subject as a more extensive piece of research could. However, the goal of a master's thesis is not to provide new findings as such, but to carry out research appropriately. As this research is phenomenographic,

the goal is not to comment on the world as such, but rather how people perceive it and these perceptions are described through descriptive categories (Marton, 1986, 145-146). My thesis aimed to describe the perceptions of Finnish comprehensive school teacher on the role of parental SES on child's schooling, and I believe it accomplished this goal.

One of the main criticisms phenomenographic research receives is whether another researcher would form the same categories as have now been formed, but Marton (1986, 148) explains that this is irrelevant in phenomenographic research, as the findings do not need to be replicable, instead what is important, is that once these categories are formed, a high level of intersubjective agreement in regard to them should be possible. For this reason, I have made my analysis process as transparent as possible, by displaying examples of how each category was formed. I also kept the data in its original language for as long as possible, to ensure that nothing was lost or changed in translation, and to make the process of translation transparent, I attached the original untranslated meaningful expressions as an appendix [see appendix 2]. I read through the data multiple times and reformed the categories several times, to make sure there was no overlapping of categories (Niikko, 2013, 33-34), and kept the meaningful expression separate from the participant that wrote them, in order to focus on what was said and not who said it.

The data was collected through online questionnaires, instead of interviews, which is more common in phenomenographic research. I chose this method as it was less time consuming and allowed me to reach more participants. The limitations of questionnaires are that you do not meet the participants and the responses are rarely as in depth as they might be in interviews. (Andres, 2012, 47) You are also unable to ask any further questions from the participants. However, there are also benefits to questionnaires, as they are less burdening on the participant and thus participants may be more willing to answer them. As my participants were teachers, who tend to be very busy, choosing a questionnaire as a data collection method was thus a valid choice. A strength of the research was that the participants had very differing backgrounds, as they were from schools with differing SES, they were from different parts of the country, they had varying levels of experience, and they taught different grades. This is valuable in phenomenographic research, as the aim is to capture varying ways in which the phenomena is perceived, so thus the participants have varying backgrounds.

In regard to ethical aspects of this research, steps were taken to make sure it was conducted according to ethical standards. The identity and anonymity of participants was protected at all

times, and the original data was handled only by me, and will be destroyed afterwards. No harm can come to the participants from this study. The participants were informed about the purpose and use of the data and had the possibility to contact me with any questions or concerns. By having all the information about the purpose of the study and choosing to answer the questionnaire, the participant gave their consent.



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## Appendix 1

The Questionnaire used in the study:

### Pro Gradu kyselylomake

Tutkin Pro Gradu-tutkielmassani peruskoulun opettajien käsityksiä oppilaan vanhempien sosioekonomisen taustan merkityksestä oppilaan koulunkäyntiin ja koulumenestykseen. Toivon, että voisit auttaa tutkimuksessani.

Kaikkia vastauksia käsitellään luottamuksellisesti eikä osallistujia voida tunnistaa tutkimuksesta millään tavalla.

Kysymykset ovat vain ohjaavia kysymyksiä ja voit vastata kysymyksiin kirjoitelmatyylisesti. Kaikki näkemykset ja kokemukset ovat arvokkaita tutkimukseni näkökulmasta.

Tässä tutkimuksessa sosioekonominen asema määrittyy lapsen vanhempien tulotasosta, koulutustaustasta sekä ammatista.

Taustakysymykset:

Mitä luokka-astetta opetat?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7-9

Kuinka kauan olet työskennellyt opettajana?

- 1-2 vuotta
- 3-4 vuotta
- 5-6 vuotta

- 7-10 vuotta
- 10-15 vuotta
- Yli 15 vuotta

Mikä on sukupuolesi?

- Nainen
- Mies
- Muu

Miten kuvailisit koulusi oppilaiden yleistä sosioekonomista taustaa?

- Matala sosioekonominen tausta
- Keskivertainen sosioekonominen tausta
- Korkea sosioekonominen tausta
- Sekä matala että korkea sosioekonominen tausta
- En osaa sanoa

Tutkimus

1. Miten oppilaiden vanhempien sosioekonominen tausta näkyy luokassa omien kokemustesi perusteella? Anna esimerkkejä.
2. Millä tavalla olet huomannut oppilaiden vanhempien sosioekonomisen taustan vaikuttaneen oppilaiden voimavaroihin?
3. Mikä on kokemuksesi mukaan sosioekonomisen taustan merkitys vanhempien kanssa tehtävässä yhteistyössä ja vanhempien osallisuudessa lasten koulunkäynnin tukemiseen?
4. Onko peruskoulu kokemuksesi mukaan tasa-arvoinen ja oikeudenmukainen erilaisista sosioekonomisista taustoista tuleville lapsille? Perustele vastauksesi.
5. Miten opettaja voi toimia luokassa minimoidakseen oppilaiden vanhempien sosioekonomisen taustan vaikutusta koulunkäyntiin?



6. Onko vielä jotain mitä haluaisit lisätä?

Jos olet kiinnostunut osallistumaan aiheeseen liittyvään haastatteluun, jätä tähän yhteystietosi (esim. sähköpostiosoitteesi).

## Appendix 2

The original Finnish quotes appearing in the order that they appear above. The quotes are direct quotes.

Kielteisen kouluasenteen ja koukukupudokkuuden riski on suurempi matalasta sos.ekonom. taustasta tulevilla lapsilla (T30)

Vähemmän koulutetut eivät arvosta koulua ja puhuvat koulunkäynnistä negatiivisesti. Lapsista näkyy niin, että saattavat koulussa sanoa "iskä sano et tää ei tärkeää eikä tarvi osata" (T7)

Korkeamman sosioekonomisen taustan perheistä tulevilla lapsilla kaikki fasilitetit ja välineet on kunnossa, he saavat kokemuksia kulttuurista, harrastuksista, maailmasta, mikä toki sekä avartaa näkemystä että luo kokemuksen pärjäämisestä missä vaan. (T1)

Oppilailla on päällään aina asianmukaiset varusteet säällä kuin säällä. Oppilaat jakavat kokemuksiaan lomamatkoista. Oppilaat ovat siistejä ja hygiena on kunnossa. Oppilaat osaavat peruskäytöstavat. Moni on käynyt ravintolassa/taitaa ravintolakäyttäytymisen. Usealla oppilaalla on kallis harrastus (lätkä, voimistelu, ratsastus). (T34)

Alhaisen sosioekonomisen taustan omaavilla saattaa olla huono oppijan itsetunto, jolloin he lopettavat yrittämisen, kun pitävät itseään liian tyhminä. Tämän vuoksi heillä saattaa olla alakoulusta jääneitä aukkoja, joita on haastava paikata. Heidän kanssaan pitää usein tehdä töitä itsetunnon kohentamiseksi. Korkeamman sosioekonomisen taustan omaavat saattavat uupua, kun heiltä vaaditaan liikaa. (T11)

Pääsääntöisesti matalan sosioekonomisen taustan perheistä tulevat oppilaat ovat väsyneempiä ja sulkeutuneempia. Heittäytymiskyky ja -uskallus sekä improvisoinnin taidot ovat heikompia. Myös nälkä on asia, joka vaikuttaa selvästi jaksamiseen. (T1)

Heikoimmassa asemassa olevien lasten väsymys näkyy luokassa, heillä saattaa enemmän olla käytöshaastetta, on "sossu maksaa" - puhetta, jolloin kyky unelmoida puuttuu myös, parempien lasten käytöksestä puuttuu empatiakyky (T12)

Matala sosioekonominen tausta ei sinällään ole este hedelmälliselle yhteistyölle kodin ja koulun välillä. Joskus vanhemmilla on kuitenkin koulua kritisoivia tai kouluvastaisia mielipiteitä eikä koulun merkitystä pidetä välttämättä tärkeänä lapsen tulevaisuuden kannalta. (T25)

Jos kodilla on paljon sosiaalisia ja taloudellisia huolia, asenne koulua kohtaan voi olla välinpitämätön tai jopa vihamielinen. (T23)

Osa vanhemmista on arkoja ottamaan yhteyttä, toisille esim. keskustelut ei sovi koskaan, toisaalta ollaan opetuksen asiantuntijoita, omat kokemukset vaikuttavat paljon sekä negatiivisesti. Taustoilla ja omilla kokemuksilla on todella iso merkitys. (T24)

Selkeä merkitys. Perhe, jolla menee huonosti ei jaksa/osa tukea lasta juuri ollenkaan. Häpeän takia myös avun vastaanottaminen on hyvin hankalaa. (T2)

Lasten perheissä ja lähipiirissä on tavallista enemmän työttömyyttä, väsymystä, alkoholismia ja mielenterveysongelmia. (T11)

Vanhempien osallisuudessa on eroja. Usein alemman sosioekonomisen taustan omaavat eivät jaksa tai osaa auttaa lastaan riittävästi, korkeamman sosioekonomisen taustan omaavilla saattaa puuttua aikaa ja sitä kautta jaksamista auttaa lastaan. (T11)

Lapsen arjesta puuttuu struktuuri, lapset joutuvat liian varhain ottamaan vastuun omasta koulunkäynnistä, muut asiat menevät koulun ohi. (T24)

Tausta vaikuttaa: koulutetut ihmiset ovat kiinnostuneita lapsestaan ja osaavat ajatella lapsen parasta. Kotona tehdään asioita yhdessä, lukemiseen ja harrastuksiin panostetaan, läksyt tehdään, koulunkäynti on säännöllistä.... Kaiken kaikkiaan vanhempien kiinnostus oman lapsen asioista auttaa lasta menestymään koulussa. Koulutetut vanhemmat osaavat hakea lapselleen apua ja tietävät ylipäättään asioista enemmän. (T19)

Mielestäni sosioekonominen tausta ei juurikaan näy. (T16)

Opettajana en oikeastaan tiedä mitään lasten vanhempien sosioekonomisesta taustasta. Asiaa voi oikeastaan arvailla. (T18)

Minulla on viimeinen vuosi työuraa jäljellä ja huomasin vastauksia miettiessäni, kuinka tällainen ajattelu taustasta tuntuu nykyään vanhanaikaisena ainakin alakoulun puolella. Perusopetuksessa tuetaan ja autetaan niin paljon, että kaikki kyllä halutessaan pysyvät mukana. (T4)

Tasapuolisella käytöksellä ja informoinnilla. Opettaja ei voi olettaa vanhempien osaavan tai tietävän esim. tukimuodoista tai niiden hakemisesta (T30)

Pyrkiä tasapuolisuuteen myös puheissaan. Mitä teit lomalla -kyselyn voi toteuttaa esim. näin: Kaikki, jotka nukkuivat hyvin lomalla, hyppivät yhdellä jalalla. Kaikki, jotka halusivat jota kuta jne... eli kekeksitään ilmaisia ja helposti toteutettavia juttuja eikä uudella lentokonematkoista. (T29)

Eriyttäminen niin, ettei se ole leimaavaa (esim. ei pelkästään netissä tehtäviä läksyjä, jos tiedetään, että kaikilla ei ole mahdollista käyttää nettiä/konetta). Vaihtoehtojen antaminen,

maailman avartaminen, erilaisten kokemusten ja elämysten luominen, jotta lapset olisivat kokemusmaailman suhteen edes jollakin tasolla samalla viivalla. (T1)

Ohjata tukea ja resursseja niitä tarvitseville oppilaille ja perheille moniammatillisen yhteistyön avulla. Opettajan pitää minusta olla myös helposti lähestyttävä "kansanihminen", jolloin kaikkien perheiden on helppo ottaa yhteyttä (T25)

Ehkäisemällä kiusaamista, tuomalla vahvasti esiin lapsen vahvuuksia, tsemppaamalla, kohtaamalla lapsi monella tasolla päivittäin, auttamalla läksyissä koulun jälkeen, antamalla retkellä eväitä lapselle vaivihkaa, puhumalla lapsen kanssa, pitämällä tiivistä yhteyttä sosiaalitoimeen (T2)

Tukea ja neuvoa. Tärkeää olisi myös yhteiskunnan tuki. Jos tieto- ja viestintätekniikkaa vaaditaan käyttämään opetuksessa, eikä anneta lainkaan resursseja tablettien ym muodossa, on opettajan vaikea toimia opsin edellyttämällä tavalla. (T9)

Pitää olla kuulolla ja herkkänä, aistia mitä luokassa on meneillään. Opetuksen lähtökohtana on oltava oppilaiden oma elämänpiiri, sieltä nousevat asiat. On varottava vastakkainasetteluja. On turha tietien tahtoen järjestää tilanteita, joissa syntyy pahaa mieltä. (T16)

Ei kysellä lomista sen suuremmin, jutellaan omasta ja oppilaan elämästä avoimesti ja ennakkoluulottomasti, ei "nuuskita" taustoja tai juoruilla opehuoneessa. (T13)

Aika vähän voin tehdä koska minulla on liikaa oppilaita ja liikaa erityisen ja tehostetun tuen oppilaita. Kylmä totuus. (T17)

Kyllä on. Jokainen saa osallistua kaikkeen ja koulu kustantaa. Emme järjestä mitään omakustanteista. Koulu tarjoaa koulunkäyntiin tarjottavat välineet. Erot lapsen kasvun ja kehityksen tukemisessa eivät määriy vain sosioekonomisen taustan perusteella. (T15)

Lähtökohtaisesti arvoperustaltaan kyllä. Käytännössä jokainen rehtori ja jokainen opettaja luo oman koulunsa/luokkansa työskentelykulttuurin, joten psykallisia eroja voi olla. (T1)

Mielestäni on oikeudenmukainen. Jokaiselle oppilaalle tarjotaan tarvittavaa tukea taustoihin katsomatta. (T27)

Tässä voin puhua vain oman koulun puolesta, jossa yritämme olla mahdollisimman tasa-arvoisia. ...Perheiden kanssa pyritään olemaan joustavia, ottamaan huomioon niiden erilaiset lähtökohdat ja elämäntilanteet, tehdään tiivistä moniammatillista yhteistyötä ja pidetään yhteyttä perheisiin moninaisin tavoin, oppilaan parasta silmällä pitäen. (T16)

Ei. Resursseja ns. Köyhillä alueilla ei ole tarpeeksi. Harvemmin ns rikkailla alueilla on tilanteita, että luokassa voi olla integroituna kokonainen erityisluokka tavallisen luokan sisällä. Luokissa ja koulussa esiintyy väkivaltaa ja levottomuuksia, jotka eivät ole ns. Tavallisia. (T10)

Ei ole! Suomalainen peruskoulu pääkaupunkiseudulla on paikka, jossa tuen tarvitsijoita riittää ja opettajan aika menee heidän auttamiseensa. Tavallinen tai vähänkään fiksumpi lapsi ei saa peruskoulusta mitään erityistä. Ylöspäin eriyttäminen ei onnistu, koska kaikki aika ja resurssit menevät heikoille oppilaille (T19)

Erot kasvaa etenkin niiden lasten kanssa, joita ei kotona auteta. Ilman kodin apua ei suuressa ryhmässä pärjää, koska koulujuttuja täytyy tehdä myös kotona ja lapset usein tarvitsevat apua myös läksyihin ja jos niitä on vaikea tehdä ne saattaa jäädä tekemättä jos apua ei kotona ole. (T17)

Ei ole. Kaikilla lapsilla ei ole varaa harrastaa tai retkeillä omalla ajalle, koulun tulisi tällaisilla alueilla pystyä tarjoamaan lapsille näitäkin elämyksiä (T3)

Koulussa koulupäivän aikana kyllä. Valitettavasti vanhempia ei voi pakottaa auttamaan omaa lasta kotona. (T6)

Mielestäni on siinä mielessä, että kaikkia pyritään auttamaan ja opettamaan mahdollisimman hyvin. Toisaalta, tuntuu, että joissain kouluissa ei kaikkea opeteta riittävän hyvin, että asia tulee sisäistetyksi ilman huoltajan tukea. Tukea pitäisi mielestäni tästä syystä olla alakoulussa enemmän, jottei kukaan jää hirveästi muita jälkeen. (T11)

Mielestäni maksuton perusopetus takaa tasa-arvoisen ja oikeudenmukaisen perustan eri sosioekonomisista taustoista tuleville perheille. Ongelman voi tuoda opettajat, jotka eivät ymmärrä absoluuttista köyhyyttä tai jotka vaativat kotitehtävien tekoon digilaitteen käyttöä, jonka olettavat kotoa löytyvän. (T34)

Periaatteessa on, käytännössä ei aina. Jos opekoulutuksen on läpikäynyt ns. Elämän prinsessa, joka ei itse kokenut mitään vastoinkäymisiä elämässään, saattaa kohdella paremmin korkean statuksen omaavien lapsia. Valitettava havaintoni työelämässä tämä! Uudet opetusmenetelmät saattavat suosia hyvin pärjäävien perheiden lapsia. Esim. Koulussa tehdään tehtäviä omilla digilaitteilla, joita kailla ei ole, tai ei ainakaan sitä uusinta mallia. (T26)