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Student Voices on Multiculturality:

A Qualitative Study with Fifth and Sixth Graders in Two Finnish Classrooms

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Student Voices on Multiculturalism: A Qualitative Study with Fifth and Sixth Graders in Two Finnish Classrooms (Iida Jääskö & Roosa Lindholm)

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Tämä kvalitatiivinen pro-gradu tutkielma pyrkii nostamaan esiin oppilaiden äänen monikulttuurisuutta tutkittaessa. Tutkielma toteutettiin kahdessa suomalaisessa luokassa viides- ja kuudesluokkalaisten kanssa. Aiempi kasvatustieteellinen tutkimus ei ole juurikaan huomionnut oppilaiden näkökulmaa monikulttuurisuudesta, mikä motivoi meitä etsimään vastauksia tutkimuskysymyksiimme: ”*Kuinka oppilaat käsittävät monikulttuurisia tilanteita?*” sekä ”*Minkälaisia havaintoja oppilaille on monikulttuurisuudesta suomalaisissa kouluissa?*”. Tavoitteenamme on antaa ääni niille henkilöille, jotka ensisijaisesti kokevat ja havaitsevat monikulttuurisuuskasvatuksen toteutuksen kouluissa. Oppilaan ääni tarjoaa uniikin näkökulman kasvatukseen, ja sille tulisi antaa tilaa arvioitaessa ja kehitettäessä monikulttuurisuuskasvatusta koulussa. Monikulttuurisuuskasvatusta käsitellään tässä tutkielmassa kriittisestä näkökulmasta kasvatuksena, joka tavoittelee oikeudenmukaisuutta.

Tutkimuksen aineisto koostuu oppilaiden kirjoitelmista. Tutkimukseen osallistuville oppilaille annettiin kuvauksia erilaisista koulun monikulttuurisista tilanteista. Näiden kuvasten pohjalta osallistujat kirjoittivat käsityksistään ja näkemyksistään monikulttuurisuudesta. Vastaukset analysoitiin kvalitatiivisen sisällönanalyysin keinoin. Tulokset osoittavat, että oppilaat liittävät monikulttuurisiin tilanteisiin myötätunnon, oikeudenmukaisuuden sekä kulttuuritaustan merkityksiä. Osallistujien havainnot heidän omista kouluistaan osoittivat, että oppilaat havaitsivat kouluissaan moninaisuutta kielen, kansallisuuden sekä muun näkyvän moninaisuuden, kuten ihon värin kautta. Oppilaat havaitsivat monikulttuurisuutta myös heidän koulujensa käytänteissä, kuten keskusteluissa moninaisuudesta, kielten käytössä sekä koulun arvoissa.

Tutkimuksen tulokset kuvaavat tarvetta kuunnella oppilaita ja antaa tilaa oppilaan äänille monikulttuurisuuskasvatuksessa. Analyysin myötä havaitsimme oppilailta saadun aineiston tuovan ilmi näkökantoja, jotka ovat merkityksellisiä käynnistettäessä keskustelua oppilaiden äänestä monikulttuurisuuskasvatuksessa.

Avainsanat: monikulttuurisuus, monikulttuurisuuskasvatus, monikulttuurinen koulu, oppilaan ääni

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This thesis examines student voice on multiculturalism in a qualitative study through the voices of students from two Finnish classrooms of fifth and sixth graders. The missing perspective of students and children in educational research on multiculturalism motivated us to set out to answer the research questions of “*How do students perceive multicultural situations?*” and “*What observations do students have about multiculturalism in Finnish schools?*”. Our aim is to give a voice to the ones who experience and perceive the implementation of multicultural education in schools firsthand. Student voice offers a unique view of education and should be given the space to bring forth student ideas and opinions in assessing, evaluating, and developing multicultural education. Multicultural education in this thesis is examined from a critical perspective as education that aims for equity.

By using vignette stories and a written task, the participants expressed their perceptions and observations related to multiculturalism, which were then analyzed using the method of qualitative content analysis. It was discovered that students perceive multicultural situations through compassionate feelings, through a sense of justice, and perceive the effects of one's cultural background in these situations. The participant's observations of their own schools showed that the students observed diversity in their schools and classrooms to be related to language, nationality, and other visible diversity, such as one's skin color. The students also observed multiculturalism in the actions of the school through discussions of diversity, use of languages, and the values of acceptance, equality, and respect.

The findings of our thesis illustrate the need for listening and giving a platform to student voice on educational issues. Through the analysis, we found that the data received from the students provided significant viewpoints to begin a larger discussion on insights student voice can offer to research on multicultural education.

Keywords: multiculturalism, multicultural education, multicultural school, student voice

# Contents

<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2 Theoretical Framework</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1 Multicultural Education	10
2.2 Multicultural Education in Finland	15
2.2.1 <i>The Curriculum and Multiculturality</i>	16
2.2.2 <i>Multiculturality in Finnish Schools</i>	17
2.2.3 <i>Antiracist Education in Finland</i>	21
2.3 Student Voice and its Inclusion in Education	22
2.3.1 <i>Student Voice</i>	22
2.3.2 <i>The Role of Power in Reaching Student Voice</i>	24
2.3.3 <i>Inclusion and Participation</i>	25
<b>3 Methodology</b>	<b>28</b>
3.1 Qualitative Research and Generic Qualitative Research	28
3.2 Data Collection	29
3.2.1 <i>Data Collection in our Research</i>	29
3.2.2 <i>Research with Children</i>	31
3.2.3 <i>The Use of Vignettes in Data Collection</i>	32
3.3 Qualitative Content Analysis as the Data Analysis Method	35
3.4 Our Data Analysis	37
<b>4 Findings</b>	<b>41</b>
4.1 How Do Students Perceive Multicultural Situations?	41
4.1.1 <i>Perception Through Feelings of Compassion</i>	42
4.1.2 <i>Perception Through Sense of Justice</i>	45
4.1.3 <i>Perception of the Effects of Cultural Background</i>	47
4.2 What Observations Do Students Have about Multiculturality in Finnish Schools?	49
4.2.1 <i>Observations Related to Diversity</i>	50
4.2.2 <i>Observations Related to School Actions</i>	52
<b>5 Discussion</b>	<b>57</b>
5.1 What Does Student Voice on Multiculturality Tell us about Multicultural Education in Finnish Schools?	57
5.2 Ethics	61
5.3 Validity and Reliability	62
5.4 Further Research	64
<b>References</b>	<b>66</b>

# 1 Introduction

Talking about culture is not new in the world of education. Multicultural education has been a part of the dominant educational discourse already since the 1980s and its roots trace back all the way to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s (Sleeter and McLaren, 2000). The field of multicultural education underlies the role of schools as institutions that can sustain and even reinforce inequalities permeating society, or, on the contrary, challenge them (Mikander et al., 2018). Although researchers have continuously argued that this should be the core of multicultural education and multicultural programs, a vast majority of programs offer only surface-level multicultural education (Gorski, 2006). In practice, this reflects a failure to implement holistic changes and difficulty to go past superficial discussions about diversity (Mikander et al., 2018). On a theoretical level, multicultural education is about the criticism of essentialism and emphasis on similarities rather than differences, the focus on agency associated with the use of culture, and a focus on the historical and structural power relations that permeate representations of culture (Roiha and Sommier, 2021, p.448). Multicultural education is also about the importance of individuals' efforts to reflect on their positionality in society and interpersonal interactions, and on the frames of references they use to assess the social realities they are part of (Roiha and Sommier, 2021, p. 448). In practice, however, we often see simple lessons on getting along with each other or units on ethnic food festivals. This contradiction was already highlighted by researchers in the field more than 20 years ago. For example, Nieto pointed out that most approaches to multicultural education avoided asking difficult questions related to access, equity, and social justice (Nieto, 2000). She called into question how future educators could start to approach diversity with a social justice orientation (Nieto, 2000).

From a Nordic perspective, education is viewed as serving the common good, and values of social justice, equality, and equity are deeply integrated into the educational philosophy (Mikander et al., 2018). These values are also at the heart of critically oriented multicultural education (Mikander et al., 2018). As future teachers in Finland, we see how Finnish education highlights equity. The Finnish National Core Curriculum (2014) states that the social task of basic education is to promote equity, equality, and justice (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016, para. 3.1). The Finnish National Core Curriculum includes 7 aims for transversal competence: transversal competence refers to an entity consisting of knowledge, skills, values,

attitudes and will, as well as the ability to apply knowledge and skills in a given situation (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016, para. 3.3). Cultural competence is highlighted as one of the transversal competences aims - it is described as the following: *“the pupils are growing up in a world where cultural, linguistic, religious and philosophical diversity is part of life. Preconditions for a culturally sustainable way of living and acting in a diverse environment are possessing cultural competence based on respect for human rights, skills in appreciative interaction and means for expressing oneself and one’s view”* (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016, para. 3.3). Therefore, multicultural education is at least on paper, something implemented in every school across the country. Furthermore, we have seen different initiatives supporting the development and establishment of school’s cultural competence e.g MOKU, a program developed in 2007 as a part of school-wellbeing, which strives to develop cultural competence in schools with the aim of supporting the implementation of the educational aims described in the Finnish National Core Curriculum (Immonen-Oikkonen and Leino, 2010). Yet, how does this all reflect in schools? Do these educational aims actualize?

We were interested to research how the strategies translate into practice. Furthermore, overall, as teacher students studying intercultural education, we find ourselves interested in the knowledge, skills, and awareness teachers must advocate for multicultural education within their classrooms and together with their students. However, soon we realized that an important viewpoint, the perspective of the students, was missing from the conversation of assessing, evaluating, and developing multicultural education in Finland. Hajisoteriou and Angelides argue that the perspective of students is significant in terms of informing developments in policy and practice with respect to interculturalism (Hajisoteriou and Angelides, 2014). Furthermore, Ainscow et al. state that overall in education, *“without listening to the often hidden voices of students it is impossible to understand fully the policies and practices of individual schools”* (Ainscow et al., 1999, p. 39). Even in the international context, previous research has scarcely addressed students and the previous research focuses more so on other perspectives: the perspective of parents (e.g Dewilde et. al, 2021), teachers (e.g Kiel et al., 2017), and principals (e.g Vasallo, 2022). Therefore, with this research, we aim to discover how students themselves understand multiculturalism and how they see multicultural education happening at their schools. The data for this thesis was collected from two classrooms of fifth and sixth graders in the Northern Ostrobothnia of Finland. The limited scope of this research cannot highlight the

perspectives of all students in this country, but it can illustrate the need for listening and giving a platform to the much-marginalized group at the center of education.

The research questions we set out to answer are as follows: “*How do students perceive multicultural situations?*” and “*What observations do students have about multiculturalism in Finnish schools?*”. With these research questions, first, we intend to reach the knowledge of the student about their perceptions of culturally challenging situations, second, we inquire about more concrete observations students have about multiculturalism in their school, and finally, referring to the perceptions and observations of students, we want to discuss what can be said on a more general level about multicultural education in Finnish schools based on the findings.

The thesis will proceed first by discussing the central concepts related to our research questions in the theoretical framework. These central concepts are defining multiculturalism and presenting a model through which multiculturalism in schools can be examined. Afterward, we will examine multicultural education in the Finnish context in more detail, with a focus on the Finnish National Core Curriculum. Another central concept in our research is student voice - a part of the theoretical framework is dedicated to defining student voice and discussing the role student voice, power, and inclusion play in educational decision-making. After discussing the framework, we will introduce our generic qualitative research as the methodological approach of our research and describe the research design and the data collection process of our thesis. The analysis process is then described and illustrated according to the steps of qualitative content analysis. Finally, we will present the findings of our research and discuss the implications of the research in the broader context of multicultural education in Finland.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Multicultural Education

As a response to the growing diversity of the student body, multicultural and intercultural education have become increasingly important concepts in Nordic educational policies and practices. (Horst and Pihl, 2010). This trend is not only seen in Nordic education, but it is common throughout the western education world. Educational research seems to be obsessed with culture as it talks about “*cultural* competence, *cultural* proficiency, *culturally* relevant teaching, *culturally* responsive teaching, *multicultural* education, *intercultural* education, *cross-cultural* education, and *intercultural* communication” (Gorski, 2016, p.222). The multitude of terminology, research, policies, and practices make this field a challenging one. The understanding of culture itself is so debated, that no one seems to be clear about what it means (Gorski, 2016). According to Wright, twenty years ago there were already more than 150 distinct definitions of culture (Wright, 1998). It has been questioned how a term with such weak analytical development is in such a central role in conversations about educational equity (Park, 2005).

Terms such as multicultural and intercultural are often just as vague and polysemic (Colombo, 2015). Both multicultural and intercultural represent a broad field of solutions that cannot clearly be distinguished from each other (Mikander et al., 2018). Moreover, both terms include superficial, as well as more critical versions (Mikander et al., 2018). Therefore, first, we want to present a clear definition of culture which we in this thesis abide by, and second, define and discuss multicultural education as a means of critical and social justice focused education.

The issue with the so-called “obsession” over culture (Gorski, 2016) is not only the ambiguity of the term but more so the change we want to see might not have anything to do with culture (Dervin, 2017). Culture, in a sense, is just easy to put forward (Dervin, 2017). When culture is used as an explanation for what some people do or say it can very easily lead to essentialism (Dervin, 2017). And unfortunately, “*the most known models and toolboxes often draw on essentialist views that revolve around cultural-differentialist approaches*” (Roiha and Sommier, 2021, p. 446). Cultural essentialism or culturalism can too easily “*hide unequal power relations, including poverty, violence, structural inequalities such as racism and the possibilities of multiple identities.*” (Dervin, 2017, p. 57). In other words, should problems



between “us” and “them” arise, it is not “our” fault but the fault of their culture (Dervin, 2017). Culturalism also sets up artificial boundaries between “us” and “them” by overemphasizing generic cultural differences (Dervin, 2017).

Culture is often a part of conversations about educational equity, but there is a proneness to give culture disproportionate and even stereotype-laden space in these conversations (Gorski, 2016). The problem with emphasizing culture is that it may easily lead us to neglect questions of inequity. In its essence, questions of multiculturalism are questions of equity, and the field of multicultural education has the aim of underlying the role played by schools as institutions that can sustain and even reinforce inequalities permeating society, or, on the contrary, challenge them (Roiha and Sommier, 2021). In a study done by Beach et al. (2005) analyzing 34 cultural competence initiatives designed in medical education contexts in the United States, they found most were silent on matters of justice (Beach et al., 2005). Of all the initiatives, only two integrated conversations about racism into their approaches to cultural competence (Beach et al., 2005). Gorski thus places forth the argument that inequity is not a problem of culture and cannot be resolved with cultural solutions (Gorski, 2016). He justifies the argument by pointing out that *“race, socioeconomic status, gender, and other identity markers around which people are marginalized are not cultural identities...nor are racism, economic injustice, and sexism simply the outcomes of cultural clashes”* (Gorski, 2016, p. 224). These are matters of power, and to whom is power, opportunity, or material resource distributed to (Gorski, 2016). Therefore, when discussing multiculturalism in schools, it is important for questions of power to be at the center and for the understanding of multiculturalism to support efforts of equity. Although culture has been defined through social dimensions such as race, class, and gender and the intersection of these dimensions (Roiha and Sommier, 2021), in this thesis, we address culture similar to Hall’s (1997) view of it as a discursive construction and interactional resource that is used to support, challenge and contradict existing representations (Hall, 1997).

We chose to use multicultural as a term because most of the research on the field in Finland is written under the term of multiculturalism, although the articles and other literature often present a framework where interculturalism is talked about as well (see e.g Immonen-Oikkonen and Leino, 2010). Multiculturalism is also one of the terms the Finnish National Core Curriculum refers to, alongside cultural diversity (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). It has been argued that the prefix “inter” is more active and focuses on dynamic relationships between many groups (Mikander et al., 2018). Thus, research should shift the use of terminology, but

this has proved to be an inconsistent distinction in multicultural and intercultural studies (Mikander et al., 2018). Critical multicultural education can be more active and dynamic than superficial intercultural education (Mikander et al., 2018).

In our research, we refer to critical multicultural education. For comparison, superficial multicultural education in practice often looks like celebrating cultural diversity whilst sidestepping matters of equity altogether (Gorski, 2016). From this perspective, multicultural education is either a superficial addition of content to the curriculum, or the magical solution to all educational problems (Nieto, 2018).

In contrast, critical multicultural education aims for equity. We use Sonia Nieto's (1996) definition of multicultural education in this research. She is a member of the National Academy of Education and a Professor Emerita of Language, Literacy, and Culture at the College of Education at the University of Massachusetts. Nieto's *"conceptions of multicultural education remain grounded centrally and explicitly in commitments to educational equity, social justice, and critical pedagogy"* (Gorski, 2016, p.224). As defined by Sonia Nieto, *"multicultural education is antiracist basic education for all students that permeates all areas of schooling, characterized by a commitment to social justice and critical approaches to learning"* (Nieto, 1996 as cited in Cumming-McCann, 2003).

Nieto views multicultural education as a process of comprehensive school reform, in which multicultural education pervades the school curriculum; interactions among teachers, students, staff, and families; and the way the school conceptualizes the nature of teaching and learning (Nieto, 2018). She outlines the twofold nature of multicultural education and describes it as rejecting racism and other forms of discrimination in school whilst affirming pluralism (e.g ethnic, linguistic, racial, religious, and gender pluralism) (Nieto, 2018). Nieto understands that this definition is complex and is of the opinion that in fact, *"no definition of multicultural education can truly capture all its complexities"* (Nieto, 2018, p. 30).

To further understand multicultural education in schools and to differentiate between monocultural education and different levels/extents of multicultural education in school, for our thesis, we will use Nieto's model of multicultural support to aid us in constructing our methodological approach, as well as, in discussing the findings of our research. Through this model, Nieto aims to clarify how various levels of multicultural education support may actually

be apparent in schools (Nieto, 2018). She states that the levels of the model should be viewed as dynamic and interactive levels (Nieto, 2018).

The model presents five levels: monocultural education, tolerance, acceptance, respect, and affirmation, solidarity and critique (Nieto, 2018). Nieto describes these levels in a narrative story-like manner, but we will proceed to describe them by condensing the main concepts and characteristics each level depicts.

Level 0, or the antithesis of multicultural education is monocultural education. In monocultural education, school structures, policies, curricula, instructional materials, and even pedagogical strategies are primarily representative of only the dominant culture (Nieto, 2018). Monocultural education is characterized by: ignorance to difference/color blindness; other languages than Finnish (in the context of this thesis) being viewed as a handicap to learning; topics of racism, homophobia, or sexism not being discussed; teachers having no training in multicultural approaches; ability grouping and tracking being a big part of the school system; holidays and food reflecting the dominant culture only; and children learning nothing about the contributions of those outside the cultural mainstream (Nieto, 2018).

Level 1, tolerance, has the viewpoint that differences are accepted only if they can be modified (Nieto, 2018). The aim is assimilation, and thus differences in language and culture are replaced as quickly as possible (Nieto, 2018). Multicultural education is understood as being sensitive to the students and not as overhauling the curriculum (Nieto, 2018). A school with tolerant multicultural education is characterized by the following: students being encouraged to study foreign languages except for the ones who already speak one; student's native languages being seen as a hindrance to learning; discouraging the use of overtly racist material; students learning about the opportunities given to everyone regardless of one's gender, race or ethnicity; staff only being able to communicate in Finnish (in the context of this research); some structural changes being made e.g a multicultural teacher seeing a group once a week to teach about festivities around the world; and most teachers having little preparation on how to deal with the growing multicultural student body (Nieto, 2018).

Level 2, acceptance, has the viewpoint that differences are acknowledged, and their importance is neither denied nor belittled (Nieto, 2018). The aim is not assimilation anymore, instead, the aim is like a "salad bowl": *"all students bring something special that need not be reconstituted"*

*or done away with*” (Nieto, 2018, p.172). A school with acceptive multicultural education is characterized by: elimination of tracking from all but the top levels; racism and discrimination being dealt with seriously; all students being encouraged to study a foreign language; students who are still learning the national language only having PE, art, and music together and are otherwise being segregated from their peers; learning of festivals from all around the world; and the school devoting a day to diversity by hosting e.g a Multicultural Fair (Nieto, 2018).

Level 3, respect, holds diversity in high esteem. As differences are respected, they are used as the basis for much of what goes on in school (Nieto, 2018). A school with respective multicultural education is characterized by: multiculturalism being integrated into the subjects; the curriculum having been through major changes and now being antiracist and honest; school staff being reflective of the diverse community; students' accomplishments in a variety of subjects and interests all being celebrated; and teachers and other staff all being encouraged to take courses and keep up with the literature of the field (Nieto, 2018).

Level 4 is named affirmation, solidarity, and critique (Nieto, 2018). The assumption at this level is that “*the many differences that students and their families represent are embraced and seen as legitimate vehicles for learning*” (Nieto, 2018, p. 174). Different from the other levels, in level 4, conflict is not avoided and is instead accepted as an inevitable part of learning (Nieto, 2018). The belief is, that the most powerful learning results come from students working and struggling with one another (Nieto, 2018). Culture is subject to critique as it is understood as something not fixed nor unchangeable (Nieto, 2018). A school with level 4 multicultural education can be characterized by the following: a spirit of collaboration and struggle; participation; special coaching sessions being available for many subjects; all children being considered talented; special classes being organized; students working in bilingual settings instead of being segregated by language; the curriculum being interdisciplinary and team-teaching often taking place; teachers taking teaching complexity very seriously; students being encouraged to be critical of every book, news article, and the curriculum; students being given responsibility through a student council; not being tracked; and all education being multicultural by its nature (Nieto, 2018).

This framework presented will guide us in methodological decisions and the discussion of our research results. Furthermore, this framework helps us conceptualize multicultural education to a practical, action and attitude-based level. To summarize, in this thesis we define multicultural

education as antiracist basic education for all students that pervades all areas of school (Nieto, 1996 as cited in Cumming-McCann, 2003). We view social justice strongly tied to multicultural education and understand that multicultural education is more than just a superficial addition to school lessons.

As the study is set in the Finnish context and we are interested in researching student voices on multiculturalism in Finnish schools, it is important to discuss and introduce the Finnish context of multicultural education. Without the context, the usefulness of the research becomes limited, as the reader is then unable to assess to what extent the results may be relevant in another setting (Coulby, 2006).

## **2.2 Multicultural Education in Finland**

Due to increasing immigration to Finland, especially within the last decades, multiculturalism and co-existing cultures in Finland have been increasingly talked about. The need to integrate children of foreign cultures into Finnish society naturally reflects schools and education. However, it is often forgotten that Finland is not and never has been a monocultural nation, as it is argued that the main elements of Finnish culture have formed in the creolization between Swedish and Russian relations (Talib, 2002). Cultures mix constantly in societies, and therefore, cultural identities are not simple or unambiguous anymore if they ever have been (Talib, 2002). Even though this is not a new phenomenon, the rapidly increasing volume of all kinds of different cultures and traditions has strengthened the emphasis on multiculturalism in Finnish education. In this chapter, we will look at the Finnish National Core Curriculum (2014) aims of multiculturalism, present more practical views on multiculturalism in Finnish schools from the perspectives of various researchers and discuss the role of antiracist education in Finnish multicultural education.

### **2.2.1 The Curriculum and Multiculturalism**

The Finnish National Core Curriculum (FNCC, 2014) has defined the basis of teaching with the values of equality, human rights, democracy, and accepting multiculturalism (Finnish

National Board of Education, 2016) The FNCC strictly states that it is not acceptable to discriminate against anyone because of their gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, or cultural background (Laaksonen-Tervaoja et al., 2021). The FNCC defines multiculturalism in a way that avoids the term “multicultural” appearing as othering or differentiating (Mikander et al., 2018). Multiculturalism, according to the use of the term in the FNCC, is something that all students are and will be supported to become in school (Mikander et al., 2018). More specific sections of the FNCC refer to traditionally “multicultural” or “immigrant” students as e.g., “students with other linguistic backgrounds” (Mikander et al., 2018). It could be said that the FNCC strives for a broader and a more critical view of what it means to be multicultural or have a multicultural school than in previous curricula.

The FNCC, as well as other Nordic national curriculums, have shifted the focus from cultural differences in student identities to differences in language identities (Mikander et al., 2018). The use of multiple different languages is seen by the FNCC as natural and expresses that it is important to discuss attitudes and meanings of languages in teaching and learning (Laaksonen-Tervaoja et al., 2021). The curriculum focuses on questions of languages and culture, especially regarding the major language minorities in Finland, such as the Sami people, the Romani people, and sign language speakers (Laaksonen-Tervaoja et al., 2021).

The FNCC (2014), presents multiple aims for multicultural education for teachers and schools to build towards. For instance, the transversal competence of cultural competence, interaction, and self-expression (T2) addresses the aims of multiculturalism from various perspectives (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). The FNCC states that the world is diverse in culture, language, religion, and worldview, and the students should learn to appreciate these differences in others and themselves (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). In teaching, the students are supported in fluency in their mother tongue, as well as, other languages, by encouraging students to interact with others and express themselves even with little skills in a language (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). The teacher also guides the students to see cultural diversity as a strength (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016).

The themes of multiculturalism in the FNCC (2014) are linked with sustainable development (Laaksonen-Tervaoja et al., 2021). Sustainable development entails the dimensions of ecology and economy, as well as the social and cultural dimensions - the ecosocial aims are to develop a culture and lifestyle which protect human rights and the diversity of ecosystems (Laaksonen-

Tervaoja et al., 2021). The students are supported towards global responsibility: comprehensive education must create a foundation for global citizenship based on human rights and advocating for positive change (Laaksonen-Tervaoja et al., 2021). The FNCC expresses that culturally sustainable development is defined by considering creative and cultural diversity, protecting cultural heritage, and treating all in a just manner (Laaksonen-Tervaoja et al., 2021). To summarize, the FNCC sees multiculturalism in school as the aims of: understanding and advocating for human rights; advocating for equity, equality, and democracy; respecting diverse identities; developing language awareness; understanding the perspective of others; and developing communication skills respectful of others and oneself (Laaksonen-Tervaoja et al., 2021).

### 2.2.2 Multiculturalism in Finnish Schools

Although the FNCC (2014) defines multiculturalism as something one is or becomes, educational researchers have their own definitions of what it means to have a multicultural, Finnish school.

Nissilä defines multiculturalism in schools as only a pit stop on the journey - not a destination (Nissilä, 2010). Nissilä states that in a multicultural school, different nationalities are grouped in their own groups in the school, separate from others (Nissilä, 2010). The aim, according to Nissilä, is to reach the destination in which different languages and cultures are a part of everyday life, and that communication between individuals and groups is natural and obvious (Nissilä, 2010). Nissilä explains that in Finland the journey is tough, as schools in different parts of Finland are in different stages of the journey, some even being only very recently multicultural (Nissilä, 2010).

Talib, 2002, however, sees multiculturalism in Finnish schools differently (Talib, 2002). She states, similarly to the FNCC, that multiculturalism is something that we all naturally have and also have in common (Talib, 2002). According to Talib, no one is purely Finnish but everyone has ancestors of different nationalities and ethnicities (Talib, 2002). Multicultural identity in Finnish schools thus refers to the opportunity for a student to embrace multiple cultural identities by creating an environment that appreciates multiple ways of living (Talib, 2002). According to Talib, in Finnish schools the opportunity to embrace one's multicultural identity is influenced by preconceptions and hierarchies among cultural backgrounds - for example,

Arabic, Somali, and Russian ethnicities are at the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy in Finnish society, which could lead to an even more compromised opportunity for multicultural identity (Talib, 2002). Multicultural education is a philosophical and educational process that aims to advocate for justice, equity, and integrity (Talib, 2002).

In a similar tone, Koskela, emphasizes that Finland has never been monocultural and that being Finnish cannot be traced back to being white, heterosexual, or Christian (Koskela, 2018). According to Koskela, as education and schools are often described as miniature societies, the importance of education keeping up with increasing diversity is an essential action within society (Koskela, 2018). Finnish comprehensive education has the means as an institution and a constant in every child's life to, at its best, narrow the gaps between different socioeconomic backgrounds of students, thus increasing equality and equity in society (Koskela, 2018).

According to Paavola and Talib, the school atmosphere is meaningful in defining a multicultural school, as it reflects the values, attitudes, and cultures of the surrounding society - school actions may either uplift the meaning of the majority culture of the surrounding society or advocate for minorities based on these values (Paavola and Talib, 2010). It is essential that Finnish schools guarantee equal opportunities to learn and grow for children regardless of their ethnic, linguistic, or socioeconomic background (Paavola and Talib, 2010). Paavola and Talib state conditions for multicultural schools in Finland to include, for example: multicultural education aimed at all students, not only minority students; teachers having good expectations and positive attitudes about every student; the core curriculum representing all ethnic and religious minorities, gender cultures, and worldviews; school materials representing the diversity in school; mother tongues of students being respected and taught; cultural and linguistic background appreciated in planning testing and evaluation; active cooperation with parents; and striving for justice for all (Paavola and Talib, 2010). Multicultural schools aim to produce multicultural education that offers quality education in a multiethnic and multicultural society and ensures that all children are treated with justice (Paavola and Talib, 2010).

According to Paksuniemi, the idea of multicultural education in Finland is before all else in cultural sensitivity (Paksuniemi, 2019). Finnish educators may not recognize the influence of cultural background or traditions on teaching and learning, leading to the homogenization of students (Paksuniemi, 2019). Educators must be aware of the different backgrounds of students and develop their skills to be able to plan and teach in a way that recognizes cultures and



students as individuals (Paksuniemi, 2019). According to Paksuniemi, the lack of cultural sensitivity works against preventing the risk of underachieving students from different cultural and educational backgrounds (Paksuniemi, 2019). Thus, educators must navigate between school and home daily and accept that classrooms are always heterogeneous (Paksuniemi, 2019). At the same time, they must recognize their own cultural backgrounds which may be different from the students and reflect on how the educator's background influences planning (Paksuniemi, 2019). Cultural sensitivity can be seen as a condition for multicultural education.

From a more critical point of view, Riitaoja (2013) discusses that in the findings of her research, she found that (in educational talks and the previous curricula) multiculturalism as a term and a concept is more often than not used to refer to immigrants or having an immigrant background (Riitaoja, 2013). Those named as immigrants also included people who were seen as different from the majority population: white, European, and secular Christian people - meaning that discussions about multiculturalism were centered around the racialized, religionized, and culturally essentialized colonial other (Riitaoja, 2013). What was left out of the discussions of multiculturalism, according to Riitaoja's research, were differences in social class, gender, and sexuality, as well as discussions of historical minorities in Finland (Riitaoja, 2013). The one who is multicultural is seen as "the other" (Riitaoja, 2013). This view of multiculturalism focuses on one's body and sees the body as "the other", thus enabling one to experience the existence and presence of their own body as something others fear (Riitaoja, 2013).

To summarize and find common ground in these perspectives on multicultural education in Finland, it seems that many researchers think about multiculturalism from a more critical perspective, which we outlined in this thesis before (2.1. Multicultural education). These perspectives align with the FNCC (2014) in that multiculturalism is a part of every school. From these perspectives, one can observe the societal, individual, and communal importance of multicultural education. Furthermore, it seems that researchers are questioning the contents of teacher education in providing the needed skills and preparedness for teachers to implement multicultural education. For example, in Räsänen et al. (2018), it is noted that educators have concerns about whether all teachers have access to support in questions about multicultural education, and that it seems that training for multicultural education for teachers only focuses on immigrants and dismisses the fact that immigrant children are a diverse group (Räsänen et al., 2018, para 6.3). Thus, it seems that there is still a lot of work that needs to be done on a practical level, even when the aims behind multicultural education are good. For example,

multicultural education requires critical reflection on one's position as a teacher and as an authoritative figure for guiding the development of a respectful and just school environment for all, and this reflection must be supported by teacher education, training, and tools.

Many programs and projects have been made to support teachers and schools to develop their multicultural skills and action plans, as well as provide tools for multicultural education. One example of this is the MOKU-program (multicultural skills development program for schools, started in 2007), which aims to develop multicultural skills of the school society holistically to meet the needs of students, parents, and school staff in multicultural education (Immonen-Oikkonen and Laine, 2010). The MOKU-program actions have resulted in an increase in cultural knowledge by organizing culture-themed events, an increase in resources for immigrant education, the appointing of responsible teachers for immigrant education in schools, and improved integration efforts of immigrants through e.g., "support students" and "support families" in the Finnish school communities (Immonen-Oikkonen and Laine, 2010). Other examples include the PELIMO-project, which aims to further multicultural education in Finnish schools through a game on understanding diversity (Luoto, 2020), and the Cultural, Worldview, and Language Awareness in Basic Education project, KUPERA, which evaluates learning and assessment materials of different subjects for cultural, worldview, and language awareness, as well as, surveys teachers and principals on their views on the themes (Tamm et al., 2021). Based on the research, KUPERA produces guidelines for teachers, principals, learning material authors, and publishers to develop equity in Finnish education (Tamm et al., 2021).

### 2.2.3 Antiracist Education in Finland

In implementing critical multicultural education and developing a respectful and just multicultural school environment, the effects of racism cannot be ignored. The Finnish comprehensive school is regarded as a place of equality and equity as each student is seen to be on the same starting point (Ahmed and Eid, 2020). However, decades ago, the oldest currently living generations learned racist and discriminative ideologies as a part of official education in Finland - the sanctity of a nation has been deeply rooted in the curriculum and schools for a long time (Paasi, 1998). Finland has a long history of assimilating ethnic minorities, such as Romani people, Jewish people, Sami people, and Tatars - even still, the myth of a Finnish monocultural and monoethnic society prevails (Ahmed and Eid, 2020). The Finnish school system is thus based on the white, middle-class, native-Finnish child (Ahmed and Eid, 2020).

Ahmed and Eid claim that racial minorities do not receive equal, anti-racist, secure, and caring education in Finland - the student is rather seen as a representation of one's ethnic group which hinders individual guidance on one's education (Ahmed and Eid, 2020). Ahmed and Eid also question whether the values portrayed in the FNCC (2014) ensure anti-racist educators (Ahmed and Eid, 2020). Teachers reacting and intervening to instances of racist actions or racist speech is seen as key to affecting the actions and attitudes of the whole school environment (Laaksonen-Tervaoja et al., 2021). Racism is prohibited in Finnish schools and is listed as one of the school rules in most schools, however, this may mean that teachers only react to bullying that is seen as racist from the point of view of the teacher (Rastas, 2010). Racism is often defined by teachers as a conscious action, thus ignoring that racism can also be a mindset or an attitude, or an unconscious action (Rastas, 2010).

Teaching has a significant role in society and requires teachers to use power (Ahmed and Eid, 2020). This power and understanding of a teacher's position of power should be discussed more in teacher education (Ahmed and Eid, 2020). Teachers must reflect on their understanding of racism to recognize it and intervene actively against racist speech, images, segregation, harassment, violence, and bullying, to strictly prohibit any racism in their classroom and school, as well as show support to the ones affected by racism (Rastas, 2010). Rastas questions, whether quality antiracist education (and thus multicultural education) can even be reached in Finland since teacher education does not yet give enough tools for recognizing different forms of racism or guide teachers in handling questions of racism (Rastas, 2010). Too often antiracism only appears as passive tolerance, rather than interventions against racist actions and mindsets in school (Rastas, 2010). Teaching must emphasize, in an antiracist manner, that other people should be always respected and treated with integrity based on human rights, and the values of Finnish society, such as equity for all (Laaksonen-Tervaoja et al., 2021).

### **2.3 Student Voice and its Inclusion in Education**

Learning and hearing from students is not an obvious route to finding answers to questions in educational research. As we reflected in our introduction, we found it surprising that the views of children and students were, in our view, greatly unexplored, even though issues of education and the school environment affect students perhaps the most. Especially at the elementary school level, student voice is not explored extensively in literature, as elementary school students rarely have opportunities to participate in informing decisions in their school

community (Mitra and Serriere, 2012). This is why it is important to recognize the meaning and importance of student voice in educational research and decision-making in school. Student voice is also an integral part of our research, as we are looking to find what kind of perceptions and observations students have. By respecting and authorizing student voice in our research, we are looking to gain new perspectives and observations of multiculturalism that are meaningful for the students and their school life. With this in mind, in this chapter, we look into the meaning of student voice, the power relations that affect student voice, as well as the importance and protection of the rights of students to be heard.

### 2.3.1 Student Voice

To truly appreciate the voice of students in research and in the classroom, one must acknowledge children as experts in their own life and well-being (Kallinen and Pirskainen, 2022). According to Kallinen and Pirskainen, the perspective of the child has been seen as secondary, as the social status of children is marginalized, and the cognitive, biological, and psychosocial developmental phase of especially young children sets conditions for adults to reach the knowledge of the child (Kallinen and Pirskainen, 2022). From the sociological perspective, children are ready and capable social actors worthy of their own voice in research, separate from their caregivers (Einarsdottir, 2007). From the postmodern perspective, children are seen as strong, knowledgeable, and capable members of society as experts in their own feelings and experiences (Einarsdottir, 2007). The critical pedagogy perspective also suggests that the focus on social justice and inequity requires the empowerment of students as social actors and authorizing student perspectives (Cook-Sather, 2002). Therefore, the knowledge of children is socially and culturally important, as childhood is not only a steppingstone into adulthood, rather, it is its own, valuable phase of life (Kallinen and Pirskainen, 2022). In addition, children have their unique perspective on the school world by the dynamics and communities they experience - thus, student perspectives can complete a more holistic picture of the school experience and culture (Cook-Sather, 2002). Despite these changing and modern views of children, their opinions and expertise may still remain dismissed in informing decisions about education and views on the school community (Quinn and Owen, 2014).

Advocating for student voice has multiple benefits holistically for the school community and student well-being. Student voice, as defined by Quinn and Owen (2014) refers to: “*students determining some of their own choices and making decisions about their learning within*

*innovative classrooms and also being actively involved in wider school governance decision-making*” (2014, p.193), and by Mitra and Serriere (2012) as: “*collaboration between young people and adults to address problems in the school, with rare cases even allowing students to assume leadership roles in change efforts*” (Mitra and Serriere, 2012, p.744). Advocating for student voice fosters a sense of inclusion, citizenship, and attachment to the school, as the school allows for innovation in practices to contribute to transforming the school and its services (Quinn and Owen, 2014). Growing civic engagement develops belief in oneself to be able to affect one’s own life, as well as the lives of others (Mitra and Serriere, 2012). The experience of being heard is also linked to the development of self-confidence and empowerment in students, realizing their potential in questioning authority, and pushing for change (Mitra and Serriere, 2012). In addition, advocating for student voice is argued to improve student engagement, personal development, and social development (Quinn and Owen, 2014).

Mitra and Serriere (2014) introduce youth development in terms of critical thinking and justice-seeking to begin in childhood from the end of elementary grades to the beginning of high school (Mitra and Serriere, 2014). Student voice has a role in enhancing youth development and its assets of agency, belonging, competence, discourse, and efficacy (Mitra and Serriere, 2014). These assets, in our view, build towards efficient and respectful collaboration and exchange in reaching common aims, such as developing a multicultural school.

### 2.3.2 The Role of Power in Reaching Student Voice

In order for students to be heard in research, and thus also in decisions and policymaking, students must have power. Heilbrun, 1988, (as cited in Cook-Sather, 2002), defines power as: “*the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter*” (p.18, 2002). Students must be given a space for their opinions and experiences to be heard in order to have an influence on the addressed matter. This, however, is difficult if the power dynamic of the situation is not carefully assessed and tackled. Such actions are impossible if the powerful adult sees the child as powerless and incapable of having meaningful opinions and experiences in informing their own education (Quinn and Owen, 2014). Teachers and other adults naturally have power over the student regarding the differences in age, position, and phase of life - this power cannot be removed from the dynamic (Kallinen and Pirskainen, 2022). Even though adults cannot influence naturally occurring differences in power, it is argued that this difference can

be leveled with certain awareness and actions (Kallinen and Pirskainen, 2022). These actions include using power to aid others in exercising power, as well as, confronting the power dynamics that occur in the classroom and outside of it (Cook-Sather, 2002). Teachers must advocate for the student to be able to participate in educational decision-making (Quinn and Owen, 2014). Teachers that authentically involve students and have a genuine interest in the opinions of students and take action based on them, truly advocate for students to have power in decisions in their education and school (Rudduck and Fielding, 2006, as cited in Quinn and Owen, 2014).

There are, however, critical views of student voice, mainly from the point of view of whether student voice can ever be “true” or “authentic” due to lack of power. Nelson argues that authenticity includes the assumption that student voice can express the truth of consciousness and experience when unrestricted (Nelson, 2015). In practice, Nelson sees that student voice is all too often left at initial consultation rather than actually following up with actions, thus creating restrictions for authenticity (Nelson, 2015). Another issue is that student voice is rarely involved in significant decisions and changes, as student voice may often only be heard in relation to “*safe topics such as toilets and rubbish bins, away from substantive policy decisions on learning and teaching*” (Nelson, 2015, p. 3). Even when student voice is lifted to ‘governance-level decisions’, involvement in pedagogy is rare (Nelson, 2015). It seems that to advocate for student voice is to advocate for the authenticity of it, meaning that hearing the voice should not stop at any level. Rather, when student voice is heard, it should be given the power and it should be taken as seriously in decision-making as with any other party.

The Lundy model of Child Participation (2014) relates to giving power to the child’s voice to participate (Lundy, n.d.). The Lundy model is constructed to conceptualize The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, Article 12, to avoid misinterpretation and thus violation of The Convention (Lundy, n.d.). Article 12 of the Convention reads: “*States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child*” (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 44/25/1989, 12 §.). The model thus includes four elements: space, voice, audience, and influence, and moves forward with each element: first the “space” element ensures that the child has an opportunity to express their voice, second the “voice” element requires facilitation for the child to express their voice, third the “audience” element states that the view of the child must be listened to, and finally the “influence” element asserts that the child’s view must be

appropriately acted upon (Lundy, n.d.). In our view, this model could act as a good tool to improve the authenticity in student voice in education, as it makes a clear conceptualization of Article 12 of The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (44/25/1989, 12 §.) and requires for following up with hearing student voice.

### 2.3.3 Inclusion and Participation

To further discuss student voice and the power dynamics behind student voice, we must look into inclusion. Inclusion is one of the basic rights of children, and it gives children the opportunity to have an influence on their life and environment (Kallinen and Pirskainen, 2022). Inclusion involves multiple aspects, such as: participating, uniting, belonging, influencing, and being included (Kallinen and Pirskainen, 2022). Genuine inclusion is only fulfilled when adults reach the view of the child (Kallinen and Pirskainen, 2022). Thus, in terms of student voice, inclusion is important, especially through actions of participation.

The Finnish government, as well as, The National Board of Education have set principles to guide successful participation (and thus, inclusion). As previously discussed, (see 2.3.2), Article 12 of The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child protects the right of the child to be included in decisions that affect them. Based on this convention, The Constitution of Finland (1999), states in parallel to the rights of the child: *“children shall be treated equally and as individuals and they shall be allowed to influence matters pertaining to themselves to a degree corresponding to their level of development (Constitution of Finland, 731/1999, 6 §.)*. In addition, the Finnish Basic Education Act (1998), states that whether a student association is organized at the school to influence school decisions or not, *“the education provider must take other action to see to it that the pupils have an opportunity to put forward their opinion about matters relating to the operation of their school or other operational unit which concern the pupils collectively” (Basic Education Act, 628/1998, 47a §.)*. These laws naturally reflect to the Finnish National Core Curriculum (FNCC, 2014), which sees participation as a transversal competence (T7), stating that participating is important especially because it is a precondition for democracy (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). The school must encourage and respect the rights of the child to participate and be involved in decisions affecting them (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). According to UNICEF, based on these laws and rights for ensuring the participation of the child, participating has intrinsic value, and the development of the child is dependent on participation (UNICEF, n.d.). It could be said that inclusion and

participation allow for student voices to be heard, and in turn, listening to student voices is a prerequisite in developing inclusion (Hajisterou and Angelides, 2014)

Regarding multiculturalism and multicultural education, we believe that student voice has a significant meaning. Hajisterou and Angelides (2014) argue that multicultural education requires each person to take action and be involved in implementing decisions toward multicultural education policies (Hajisterou and Angelides, 2014). A multicultural school is one that strives for collaboration, discussion, and exchange between everyone, especially students, to make the school a safe space where everyone is appreciated for the individual that they are. Listening and advocating for students does require effort from the adult to reach the knowledge and perspective of the child, however, this should not be a reason to ignore their valuable experience. As we are interested in hearing about multiculturalism and multicultural education from the student's perspective, we have constructed our methodology with this effort in mind.



### **3 Methodology**

In this section, we justify why this research is qualitative and discuss the characteristics of general qualitative research, which this thesis follows. Because we are doing research with children, we also present some special considerations we made in our research. Next, we discuss vignettes as a data collection method and finally introduce qualitative content analysis as our data analysis method.

#### **3.1 Qualitative Research and Generic Qualitative Research**

According to Kostere and Kostere (2022), qualitative research is a field that seeks to understand human experience in the real world, using rigorous qualitative procedures which generate rich, descriptive data (Kostere and Kostere, 2022). To understand human experiences, qualitative research is interested in the perspectives of those living in the real world (Hatch, 2002). When the purpose of research is to learn from the participants the way they experience phenomena, the meanings they put on it, and how they interpret their experiences, qualitative methods are required to allow the researcher to discover and do justice to the participants' perceptions (Morse and Richards, 2002). According to Hatch, *“qualitative methods provide means whereby social contexts can be systematically examined as a whole, without breaking them down into isolated, incomplete, and disconnected variables”* (Hatch, 2002, p.9).

As we are precisely interested in learning how students perceive and experience multiculturalism in their school lives and the meaning they put on multiculturalism, our research aim calls for qualitative methods to be used in order to discover and do justice to the students' perceptions on this phenomenon.

In the field of education, generic qualitative studies are among the most common forms of qualitative research (Merriam, 1998, as cited in Caelli et. al., 2003). It is also the form of qualitative study this research will follow. Generic qualitative research seeks to illuminate and interpret meanings of the phenomenon under inquiry based on the individual perceptions and experiences described by the participants (Kostere and Kostere, 2022). Caelli et. al (2003) describe the features of generic qualitative studies as the following: they draw from concepts and theories in education, psychology, or sociology which are used to provide the framework

for the study. Concepts from the theoretical framework are used in the analysis of data and in identifying recurring factors that cut through the data (Caelli et al., 2003).

In generic qualitative research, the role of the researcher is especially important in terms of the credibility of the research (Patton, 2002, as cited in Kostere and Kostere, 2022). This is because the researcher is the instrument in data collection and analysis (Creswell and Poth, 2018). An essential part of qualitative research, whatever the chosen method is, is the researcher's self-reflection (Burnard, 1995 in Bengtsson, 2016). The researcher must take into consideration their pre-understanding of the phenomena both in the planning process as well as during the analysis process to minimize their influence (Long and Johnson, 2000 in Bengtsson, 2016). This does not mean that the researcher cannot be familiar with the context or have knowledge of the subject beforehand, they can, and it is considered an advantage, as long as it does not affect the researcher's interpretation of the results (Bengtsson, 2016).

In terms of epistemological assumptions that shape our research, Merriam (2009) identifies four primary epistemological perspectives (Merriam, 2009). These include the positive/postpositive perspective, interpretive/constructivist perspective, critical perspective, and postmodern/poststructural perspective (Merriam, 2009). In our thesis, we have taken an interpretive approach. In research, an interpretive approach is designed to study the multiple realities, descriptions, and experiences of populations (Merriam, 2009) and as we are aiming to find different ways in which students perceive multicultural situations and what observations they have of multiculturalism in their schools, we are interested in studying multiple realities. Ontologically we view reality as multi-faceted and subjective, constructed through individuals' experiences and mental processes (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2009).

## **3.2 Data Collection**

### **3.2.1 Data Collection in our Research**

Our data comes from two different classrooms, one 6th-grade classroom and one with a mix of both 5th and 6th-grade students. Both of the participating classrooms were from the Northern Ostrobothnia area and were from the same municipality. The school populations in both schools could be seen to have cultural diversity, and both schools offer preparatory education for

immigrant students. The obtaining of participants could be described as opportunity based, as we contacted different schools in the Northern Ostrobothnia area in hopes that the schools would be interested in participating in the study. The teachers and principals of the participating classrooms found the topic important for the students to explore through the research task.

In total, 22 participants took part in this research. The sample size was planned to be larger, however, there were multiple hindrances that affected the final size of the sample. First, there was a lack of willing classrooms to participate, and due to time constraints, we could not find more classrooms to participate in the research. Second, there were large, unexpected absences of students on the day of the research, which cost us a fraction of the potential willing participants. Third, there were insufficiencies in the filling of the informed consent sheets by guardians which invalidated some participants' consent, as well as some students who did not receive permission to participate. These were factors that we did not expect to affect our sample size at the significance it did, however, we were happy to notice that the data that we did receive was richer and more reflective than we expected.

The data collection happened in the classrooms of the students. All students in the classroom were present during the research, however, only the data of those whose consent was confirmed were used in this research. The students were informed about what the research is and about our role as researchers. The students were told about how consent to the study works, as well as, about data protection. We also talked about the students as experts in this research and that their participation is meaningful and valuable. The data was collected via written tasks with randomly assigned vignettes and related questions (see 3.2.3 and Appendices 1-3), as well as the informed consent sheet attached as the last page of the research assignment. The students were instructed to read the vignette they were assigned and answer the questions related to the vignettes in whole sentences. It was instructed that the student could voice anything that they thought of related to the question, as there are no right or wrong answers. The students were encouraged to elaborate on all their thoughts. All answers were informed to be valuable for our research. After the data collection, the students were able to ask questions about the research and share feelings about the topic if they wanted. The questions that came up were mostly related to data protection and anonymity, which were answered accordingly.

### 3.2.2 Research with Children

As we noticed a gap in research on multiculturalism from the view of the student, we felt strongly about wanting to do this research with children and hear their voices on this topic. Research with children and youth is not an obvious phenomenon, and often children may even be confused when an adult asks them about their opinions and views related to their lives (Kallinen and Pirskainen, 2022). Even though research based on children's experiences and views has increased, the lives of children are often only studied from an adult's point of view (Tuukkanen, 2020). To reach a holistic understanding of what is happening in the lives of children (including school life), one must study the research topic from multiple points of view (Tuukkanen, 2020). With this thesis, we hope to contribute to the research of multiculturalism in schools by bringing forth students' voices.

When doing research with children, there are many special considerations to ensure the safety of the child and the ethics of the study, as well as considerations to truly reach and appreciate the knowledge of the child. First, there are many different parties we must ask permission from to conduct the study even before asking for the consent of the students. In Kallinen and Pirskainen (2022) these parties are described as "gatekeepers": organizations, institutions, and educational professionals one must ask permissions from to get to the next stages of collecting data from children (Kallinen and Pirskainen, 2022). With our research, we collected permissions from the city of the participating schools, along with other organizational permissions. Next, we collected permissions from the principals of the schools to conduct the research in their schools, followed by the permissions of the classroom teachers. After receiving these permissions, we collected informed consent from the guardians of the students, as well as the students themselves. Although there were many steps in the process of receiving the data from the participants, we find these steps were necessary to follow carefully in order to ensure the ethicality of this research.

Even when we could physically get to the classroom to start data collection, reaching the knowledge of the child required us to design our research method carefully in advance. As we chose our participants to be 5th to 6th graders (10 to 12 years old), we had assumptions in mind that 5th and 6th graders have the most knowledge about multiculturalism in school on the primary school level. We also had assumptions about what kind of vignette stories and questions could prompt answers that would inform our research questions. According to

Kallinen and Pirskainen, the motives of the child are different from adults resulting in differences in producing knowledge and understanding it: the knowledge of the child produces truths that may shake the patterns of thinking that adults have (Kallinen and Pirskainen, 2022). Thus, respecting the view of the child affects methodology. One cannot use the same methods with children as one does with adult participants, or one will be negligent of questions of power and ethics - at the same time, the methods cannot be complete opposites, or one will dismiss the skills of the child and highlight differences between children and adults (Kallinen and Pirskainen, 2022). With this in mind, we chose vignettes to prompt the participants to answer questions about multiculturalism (see 3.2.3.). It was important for us to remain aware of our view of the child as a capable expert to express their opinions in matters affecting them. In the spirit of respecting student voice, it was also essential to give power to the children in the research situation. It was explained to the participants that they are the experts in the views of children about multiculturalism and that each of them is capable of giving answers to our research question.

In obtaining the aforementioned permissions, we committed to protecting personal data of the participants and designed the research data to not contain any personal data from the beginning. The names of the participants were only collected to confirm the consent of both the guardian and the child. After the data collection, the data was transcribed into digital form onto a secure hard drive, and the answers were coded with a letter (e.g., Participant A). This means that at no point was the name of the participant viewed with the answer sheet. As soon as consent was confirmed, the data was completely anonymized.

### 3.2.3 The Use of Vignettes in Data Collection

Considering that students are the ones whose perceptions of multiculturalism we want to understand, we needed to carefully consider how to structure our research so that firstly multiculturalism, which as a term can be very abstract to children, would be comprehensible to them whilst not guiding or prompting their ideas too much. Children very easily tend to feel as if there is a right answer that an adult wants them to give and instead of giving their true answer can feel pressured to try and answer what they think the adult wants to hear (Kallinen and Pirskainen, 2022). Furthermore, we acknowledge that for some children an interview with unfamiliar adults may not be a natural way to share personal experiences and that articulating

one's ideas may be difficult for some children, for whom visual and participatory methods can give a chance to communicate their ideas through (Kallinen and Pirskainen, 2022).

The possible problem of multiculturalism being too abstract leads us to prompts or vignettes as our research tool. Vignettes are simulations of real events depicting hypothetical situations (Wilks, 2004 in Tinson, 2009 p.55). Vignettes have long been used to study attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and norms within social science (Finch, 1987). Tinson, in her guide to conducting research with children and adolescents, states that using vignettes as a projective method in research with children and teenagers may elicit more information, be more engaging for the participants, and may address social desirability issues (Hughes 1998, in Tinson, 2009, p.56). We decided that by writing short scenarios of different situations where multiculturalism is seen in daily school life, we could ensure that multiculturalism was presented in a way accessible to the students without giving them ready answers or guiding their opinions too strongly on what multiculturalism is. The next question we faced was what type of stories to write to be used as vignettes. Vignettes were thus used in the format of a written task in our research. Hazel (1995) argues, that in research with children and young people, the more inappropriate or controversial the behavior featured in the vignette, the more confident participants will feel about offering a response (Hazel, 1995). Following Hazel's viewpoint, we have written three stories in which the challenges of multiculturalism are brought about. The way the multicultural situations in the vignettes are described is fuzzy, as Finch (1987) argues that *'fuzziness is strength', as ambiguity is a positive virtue, since it leaves space for participants to define the situation in their own terms'* (Finch, 1987, p.112) There are no clear right or wrong ways to perceive the situation, but the situations do still describe a "bad" example of a multicultural school in order to increase the participants' confidence in answering the questions.

The bad example of a multicultural school reflects level 0 of Nieto's levels of multicultural schools. Some characteristics from Nieto's description of a monocultural school present in our vignettes are: pedagogical strategies representative only of the dominant culture; racism not being discussed; color-blindness; a native language other than Finnish being seen as a handicap to learning; children learning nothing about the contribution of those outside the cultural mainstream; and the holidays reflecting the holidays of Finnish culture (Nieto, 2018). All these characteristics of a monocultural school are written into the stories in a way where the story presents them as a part of everyday school life and existing school structures. The questions

themselves included questions about the perceptions of the vignette as a difficult cultural situation, as well as questions about the participant's observations of multicultural actions in their school. The vignettes were themed as so: Vignette 1 (History Lesson), Vignette 2 (Independence Day), and Vignette 3 (Recess). We made three different vignettes because multiculturalism as a topic is so broad and multifaceted that in our opinion, one scenario would limit the diversity of perspectives and answers related to the topic. Vignette 1 detailed a history lesson situation where immigrant students had had a hard time doing difficult homework tasks that were strongly related to knowledge of Finnish culture, Vignette 2 described an Independence Day celebration performance where the protagonist has conflicted feelings about being Finnish, and Vignette 3 discussed a situation of a student being bullied because of their language background. These three vignettes were randomly assigned to the students. The complete vignettes and questions related to them can be found in the Appendices (see Appendices 1-3).

For all vignettes, three of the four questions were similar as they inquired about the overall feelings/perceptions the child had of the multicultural situations; inquired how the child's own teacher/school's adults would act in a similar situation; and inquired if the child had observed similar situations in their school. The fourth question varied depending on the vignette. For Vignette 1 (History lesson) the question related to how the child themselves would act in a similar situation. For Vignette 2 (Independence Day) the question related to being Finnish and how that is talked about in the student's school. For Vignette 3 (recess) the question inquired what languages are used in the school and in what situations.

There are two important considerations related to vignettes. Firstly, it is important to get an understanding of the level of literacy of the participants, so that the researchers can ensure the participants understand the concepts presented in the scenario (Tinson, 2009). Secondly, it is important to note that "*there is no guarantee that the responses to a given vignette will in some way mirror the actual behavior of the respondent*" (Tinson, 2009, p. 56). Especially with these two considerations in mind, we found it necessary to pilot our written task beforehand with someone in the target age group of this research. We found the pilot participants through family connections. The participants had just begun seventh grade, but we felt that the age was close enough to our target group in order to tell whether the vignettes and questions reached the knowledge of the child. The pilot participants were given the vignette and the questions the same way the students of the study would be given them. After they had answered all questions,

the participants were asked their opinions on the clarity of the questions, the vignette story, and the overall experience of answering the questions. The responses to the pilot study were successful, as they were meaningful in terms of our research question and the responses to the questions were not only written about the vignette scenario but also included personal experiences and observations of real-life multicultural situations. The wording of a few questions was tweaked to clarify them according to the experiences of the pilot participants, ensuring the story and questions are all understandable.

### **3.3 Qualitative Content Analysis as the Data Analysis Method**

Qualitative content analysis is a method to analyze qualitative data, which we will use in this research. Qualitative content analysis focuses on “*subject and context and emphasizes variation, e.g., similarities within and differences between parts of the text*” (Graneheim et. al, 2017, p. 29). The purpose of all data analysis according to Bengtsson (2016) is to “*organize and elicit meaning from the data collected and draw realistic conclusions*” (Bengtsson, 2016 p.10). Bengtsson (2016) describes that “*in qualitative content analysis, data are presented in words and themes, which makes it possible to draw some interpretation of the results*” (Bengtsson, 2016, p.10).

Qualitative content analysis can be either manifest analysis or latent analysis. Manifest analysis refers to a way of analyzing the data where the researcher stays very close to the text and describes what the participants actually say using the words they themselves have used (Bengtsson, 2016). Latent analysis, in contrast, extends from describing the visible and obvious onto an interpretive level where the researcher strives to find the underlying meaning of the text (Bengtsson, 2016). In our research, we will be doing a latent analysis. As we use vignettes to assist with data collection and questions prompting answers from the story, we seek to move beyond the obvious in the answers onto interpreting them in order to meaningfully answer our research questions and discuss the findings on a more general level of how student’s views related to multicultural education in Finnish schools. As our data collection uses vignettes, an interpretive level in data analysis is needed to discover the student’s ideas, attitudes, values, and understanding of multiculturalism outside of the situations the stories present.



Another decision qualitative content analysis as a method requires is whether the methodological approach to the analysis will be inductive, deductive, or abductive. In the inductive approach, the researcher approaches the analysis in a data-driven way (Graneheim et. al, 2017). The researcher moves from the concrete and specific to the more abstract and general from the data to a theoretical understanding (Graneheim et. al, 2017). In a deductive approach, the order is the opposite. Researchers move from the abstract level to a more concrete one, from theory to the data (Graneheim et. al, 2017). The researcher is thus testing the implications of existing theories to the phenomena at hand (Graneheim et. al, 2017). The third approach is called an abductive or complementary approach. An abductive approach can be employed for a more complete understanding and implies a movement back and forth between inductive and deductive approaches (Graneheim et. al, 2017, p. 31). As student voice is at the centre of our research, our approach cannot be deductive as the risk will then be that the students' voices remain unheard. We find it important in terms of student voice to follow an inductive approach in our analysis, with the student's views and observations driving forth the analysis.

To describe and illustrate the process of qualitative content analysis with an inductive approach, we will first describe the analysis process as modeled by Graneheim and Lundman (2004) and then apply the analysis steps to our own data. The first step in qualitative content analysis is identifying meaning units in the data. Meaning units can be words, sentences, or even paragraphs that contain aspects related to each other through their content and context (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). The identified meaning units are then condensed, a process of shortening the text whilst still preserving the core (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). The condensed text is described and interpreted in a process called abstraction (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004) Abstraction includes the creation of codes, which are tools to think with and tools that help the next steps of the analysis process (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). With the help of codes, categories are created. This is the core feature of qualitative content analysis (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004) and refers to groups of content that share a commonality (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). Categories often include sub-categories, which can be sorted and abstracted into a category, or oppositely, a category can be divided into sub-categories (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). It is important that categories are exhaustive and mutually exclusive in relation to all data and that no data falls in between two categories or fits into more than one category (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). These steps will now be applied to our own data.

### 3.4 Our Data Analysis

The very first part of the data analysis process was familiarization: reading through the data persistently and carefully in order to gain a good understanding of what each participant is telling (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). The familiarity with the data then allowed us to read through while highlighting and searching for meaning units: words and phrases related to our research questions. Since our two research questions have different focuses, we highlighted the meaningful phrases with two different colors for the two different research questions.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Väärältä tuntuu koska, Suomi on vapaa maa eikä tarvi laulaa jos ei halua.</li><li>2. Mun mielestä ope teki väärin koska, ei saa pakottaa oppilasta tekemään asiaa mitä hän ei halua. Esim. oppilas voi kuulua kulttuuriin jossa hän ei vaikka saa laulaa toista kansallis laulua. Mutta muuten olisi hyvä laulaa kerran on itsenäisyyspäivä. Opettajani varmaan kysyisi että miksi ei halua.</li><li>3. Voi olla epäkivoja oppilaita jotka sanoo toista: ”ei suomalainen” koska hän ei laula maamme laulua. Meidän koulussa toista sanotaan vaikka suomalaiseksi jos käyt saunassa: vitsillä. Eikä kukaan pakota.</li><li>4. en ole huomannut</li></ol> <p>1- How do students perceive multicultural situations ?</p> <p>2- What observations do students have about multiculturalism in Finnish schools?</p>
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Table 1. An example of searching for meaning units phase

Next, we moved on to the step of listing these meaning units identified in the data separately in relation to both research questions. We needed to carefully consider each of the participants' answers to identify when the participant voiced distinct ideas in one sentence and when their thoughts continued for many phrases signifying that all of them were listed as one meaning unit. It was an advantage that there were two researchers doing the analysis, as we could reflect on the meaning units together, ensuring that we captured the essence of what each participant was saying into the meaning units.

After the meaning units were listed, we examined each meaning unit separately and formed the condensed meaning unit for each (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). A condensed meaning unit

expresses the core of each meaning unit (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). In this phase, the data already gets reduced, whilst the meaning remains.

Meaning unit	Condensed meaning unit
<i>It feels wrong because Finland is a free country, so you don't have to sing if you don't want to</i>	Freedom to decide for oneself is a value of Finland

Table 2. An example of reduction condensed meaning units

The condensed meaning units made the next step of the analysis process easier, as in this step, the condensed meaning units were assigned a code. Codes function as a tool in describing the data, as a way to structure the researcher's observations of the data, as well as help in locating and checking different parts of data (Eskola, 2001).

Meaning units	Condensed meaning	Code
<i>It feels wrong because Finland is a free country, so you don't have to sing if you don't want to</i>	Freedom to decide for oneself is a value of Finland	Freedom as a value

Table 3. An example of coding

With all the meaning units coded, we proceeded to identify subcategories. This step is often seen as the first actual analysis technique, but it is not possible to do without the previous three steps (Eskola, 2001). The identification of subcategories meant rigorous comparing and contrasting of the codes and condensed meanings. As described previously, Granheim and Lundman model, that categories can be formed in a way that the main categories are formed first and then divided into subcategories, or subcategories can be formed first and then be sorted and abstracted into main categories (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). We chose to follow the latter approach because it was more intuitive with our specific type of data. We constantly referred back to our research questions to reflect whether an emerging subcategory was one that was relevant to our research.

Meaning unit	Condensed meaning unit	Code	Subcategory
<i>In my opinion, no one should be categorized as Finnish without the person's own opinion</i>	cultural identity should be based on one's own experience of it	Self-determining one's cultural identity	Freedom to decide for oneself
<i>It feels wrong because Finland is a free country, so you don't have to sing if you don't want to</i>	Freedom to decide for oneself is a value of Finland	freedom as a value	

Table 4. An example of the formation of a subcategory

The final step in the analysis was looking for similarities and differences in the subcategories to form the main categories, which directly answer the research question (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). Continuous reflection of the subcategories in relation to both research questions was needed in order to form the final categories (see Table 5). As a final step we compared the categories to ensure that they all were mutually exclusive and reflected a different theme.

The data analysis was carried out both in Finnish and English. The participants' replies were in Finnish, thus, to ensure that the view of the child is at the centre of our research, we formed the condensed meaning in Finnish first and then translated it to English. The codes assigned were in English, however, the meaning units we kept referring back to were only translated for the sake of illustrating the analysis process. During the analysis, they were left untranslated so that we would not change something that the child communicated whilst in the middle of finding perceptions and observations from the data that the students expressed. The categories were named in English to assist with discovering connections to the theoretical framework.

Meaning units	Condensed Meaning	Code	Subcategory	Category
<i>The situation felt wrong. No one should be segregated because of their own language</i>	Segregation based on language is wrong	Language and segregation	Segregation and discrimination	Perception through sense of justice
<i>It is wrong to say mean things behind somebody's back. Even if Naava cannot speak Finnish that well, she is just as important as everybody else.</i>	The child feels injustice, since every person is equally valuable	Discrimination is against personal values		
<i>In my opinion, no one should be categorized as Finnish without the person's own opinion</i>	cultural identity should be based on one's own experience of it	Self-determining one's cultural identity	Freedom to decide for oneself	
<i>"It feels wrong because Finland is a free country, so you don't have to sing [the national anthem] if you don't want to"</i>	Freedom to decide for oneself is a value of Finland	Freedom as a value		

Table 5. An example of the formation of the final categories

# 4 Findings

Through carefully reading the data and following the steps of qualitative content analysis, three categories emerged related to student’s perceptions of multicultural situations and two categories emerged related to observations students have of multiculturalism in their schools. The following section will present the findings related to both research questions, as well as their subsequent categories along with their subcategories. Excerpts from the collected data have been included to illustrate participant answers - the excerpts have been translated from Finnish, with the original excerpt being available to view along with the translated quote.

## 4.1 How Do Students Perceive Multicultural Situations?

First, we will present the results in relation to our first research question: “How do students perceive multicultural situations?”. This research question was examined via vignettes describing difficult multicultural situations one might experience at school. Three categories emerged from the analysis: perception through feelings of compassion, perception through sense of justice, and perception of the effects of cultural background. The categories and subcategories related to the research question are illustrated in Figure 1 below. In this section, we will expand on each category and their subcategories.

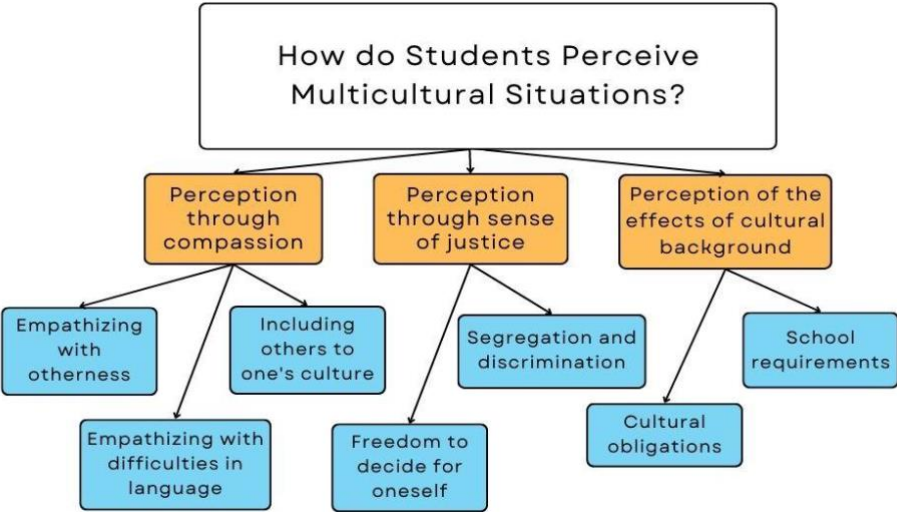


Figure 1. How do students perceive multicultural situations?

#### 4.1.1 Perception Through Feelings of Compassion

Feelings of compassion and empathy were echoed in the answers of many students. These feelings of compassion were mainly directed towards multicultural situations, such as empathizing with otherness and being an outsider. The students placed themselves in the position of the characters in the vignette and could be observed to relate to the multicultural situations and the protagonist experiencing a difficult cultural situation. The clearest expressions of empathy directly expressed that they could imagine themselves experiencing similar struggles if they were immigrants, or suggested that the characters of the vignette should place themselves in the protagonist's shoes:

*“This could have also happened to me if I had only recently moved to Finland...”*

*(Original: “Itselle olisi voinut käydä samoin, jos olisi vasta muuttanut suomeen...”, Participant I).*

*The other classmates could have imagined being in the position of this person...no person deserves to be talked about that way.”*

*(Original: “Muut luokkalaiset olisivat voineet miettiä, jos olisivat tämän ihmisen kohdalla... kenestäkään [ei] saisi puhua noin”, Participant C).*

Participant I expresses clearly that they understand why the situation in the vignette happened and that if they were in the same position it could happen to them too. Participant C sees that if one positions themselves in another person's shoes, it could affect their actions toward others, in this case talking badly about someone. In a more specific view, some participants addressed feelings of compassion in the multicultural situation towards language:

*“I feel bad about the situation, because Naava cannot talk much with the others using their own mother tongue.”*

*(Original: Minun mielestä [tilanne tuntui] aika kurjalta, koska Naava ei voi kovin paljoa jutella muitten kanssa omalla äidinkielellään”, Participant W).*

Participant W describes that they feel bad about the situation specifically because the protagonist cannot use their mother tongue to communicate with others. Empathizing with language related issues reflects a deep level of compassion and a sense of importance of one's mother tongue. Similarly, answers related to including others to one's own culture reflect an understanding of the importance of one being included.

In addition to expressing feelings of compassion towards the multicultural situations, some participants also wanted to help if they saw someone in a difficult cultural situation. Vignette 1 (History lesson) describes immigrant students struggling with difficult homework tasks strongly tied to knowledge about Finnish culture. Especially this vignette prompted some participants to offer help in either teaching one about Finnish culture so they could understand the task, or to offer to do the homework tasks with them:

*“I would probably tell them about Kalevala because then they would know about it and they would understand it better...it is also a nice thing to do to another.”*

(Original: “Mää varmaan kertoisin niille Kalevalasta koska sit ne tietäis ja tajuais niit asioita paremmin...se on myös kivasti tehty toiselle”, Participant D).

Participants also empathized with the position of the immigrant parents in the vignette and suggested that in this kind of a situation they could help immigrant students with their homework in place of the parents if the topic was difficult to understand in a cultural sense.

The compassionate feelings that the students voice towards the characters of the prompting stories shows that the students can relate to and understand the perspectives of others, which the Finnish National Core Curriculum affirms as one of the aims of multicultural education in schools (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). Participant C, who expressed how understanding another's perspective would affect one's actions, illustrates communications skills respectful of others. This too, is an aim of multicultural education in Finnish schools (Laaksonen-Tervaoja et al., 2021). Paavola and Talib state that conditions for multicultural schools in Finland include the mother tongues of students being respected and taught and different linguistic backgrounds being respected (Paavola and Talib, 2010). Participant W's compassionate feelings towards a student's inability to use their mother tongue with



schoolmates seems to echo the sort of understanding of language outlined by Paavola and Talib (2010).

Interestingly, whilst 20 of the participants voiced compassion or empathy towards the multicultural situation in some way, two of the answers were different, as they expressed that the situation in the vignette felt strange:

*“The situation feels strange, and in my opinion, Amir is embarrassed and does not necessarily want to sing in front of a large crowd.”*

(Original: “Tilanne tuntuu oudolta ja mielestäni Amir on nolostunut eikä hän välttämättä halua laulaa ison joukon edessä.”, Participant V).

Participant V expresses understanding toward protagonist Amir from the perspective of being a student and being embarrassed to participate in singing in front of a large crowd of people, rather than seeing that the protagonist felt conflicted about singing because of a difficult cultural situation.

*“The situation feels strange. Of course Amir should participate, whether he sings or does not. I think [the teacher’s] answer was good.”*

(Original: Tilanne tuntuu oudolta. Tottakai Amirin täytyy osallistua, lauloi tai ei. Mielestäni [opettajan] vastaus on hyvä.”, Participant X).

Participant X also feels strange about the situation, however, feels that the situation is obvious in a way that everyone should participate in a school performance. Participant X was the only participant who thought that in Vignette 2 (Independence Day) the teacher’s response to the protagonist was appropriate. These two participant’s answers stood out from the others as it seems like the students overlooked the cultural issue of the situation in some way, as they both voiced that this was a “strange” situation.

#### 4.1.2 Perception Through Sense of Justice

Many participants reflected that they felt the prompt situations were “wrong” or “unfair”, especially through the lens of one not being able to decide their own actions for themselves.

Especially Vignette 2 (Independence Day) evoked strong expressions of freedom, specifically from the standpoint of an individual's and a child's right to decide for themselves. The concept of "forcing" someone to do something, especially when it appears as an exhortation from the adult to the child, was seen from the participants' perspective as wrong and unfair.

Although most of the participants who perceived the multicultural situations through a sense of justice for the right for freedom to decide for oneself on a general level, some participants also raised clear connections of deciding for oneself in relation to culture as well.

*"It feels wrong because Finland is a free country, so you don't have to sing [the national anthem] if you don't want to"*

(Original: "Väärältä tuntuu, koska Suomi on vapaa maa eikä tarvi laulaa jos ei halua.", Participant H)

Participant H addresses that in their view, one of the values of the Finnish nation (and culture) is freedom. The participant felt that the vignette story did not reflect this freedom according to Finnish values, and that one should be able to decide whether one wants to participate in singing the national anthem. Some participants linked similar ideas of being able to decide for oneself to culture identity:

*"In my opinion, no one should be categorized as Finnish without the person's own opinion."*

(Original: Mielestäni kenenkään ei pitäisi luokitella suomalaisuutta ilman henkilön omaa mielipidettä", Participant L).

*"It feels unfair...if you identify as, for example, a Swedish person, you should not be forced to sing the Finnish national anthem. If they were in Germany, they would not like to sing the German national anthem, right?"*

(Original: "Tuntuu epäreilulta...jos tuntee olevansa vaikka ruotsalainen, ei silloin saisi pakottaa tekemään [laulamaan] Maamme laulua. Jos hän olisi Saksassa ei hän haluaisi laulaa Saksan kansallislaulua, eihän?", Participant B).

Participant L brings up ideas of cultural identity and one being able to define their identity for themselves. Participant L uses the term “to categorize” to explain that no one else should have a say on one’s cultural identity. In a similar fashion, Participant B expresses the concept of “feeling like you are (a nationality)” which also alludes to cultural identity and being able to self-determine what that identity means to you. In this case, Participant B expresses that if you identify as a Swedish person, you cannot be forced to sing the Finnish national anthem and you probably would not like to sing the German national anthem either. Vignette 2 (Independence Day) ambiguously discusses identity and categorization, and these participants have perceived said themes in a culturally sensitive level.

Many participants also expressed their perception through sense of justice prompted by the vignettes through segregation and discrimination. In these answers, participants also wrote something was “wrong”, “unfair” or “inappropriate”, especially when the participants felt that there was segregation or discrimination in the vignette stories. Values such as “respect”, “acceptance”, and “equality” were reflected in tandem with the participants addressing injustice in the vignettes.

*The situation [in the vignette] felt wrong. No one should be segregated because of their own language...one must be able to speak the language they can speak.”*

(Original: “Tilanne tuntui väärältä. Ketään ei saisi syrjiä oman kielensä vuoksi...Hän saisi puhua sitä kieltä mitä hän osaa.”, Participant C).

*The situation [in the vignette] felt quite inappropriate. In my opinion, no one should be segregated. The others [students in the vignette] were really mean.”*

(Original: “Tilanne [tarinassa] tuntui mielestäni aika epäsopivalta. Mielestäni ketään ei saisi syrjiä. Muut [oppilaat tarinassa] ovat tosi ilkeitä”, Participant Å).

Participant C and Participant Å both expressed feelings of injustice with strong expressions of “wrong” and “inappropriate”. They both also used the term “segregation” to describe the situation in the vignette, as well as, to state their opinion on the matter.

The feelings of injustice the participants expressed align with what the FNCC outlines as the social task of basic education: “promoting equity, equality and social justice” (Finnish National

Board of Education, 2016, para. 3.1). The FNCC specifies that one of the aims the FNCC sees of multiculturalism in schools is advocating for equity, equality, and democracy (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016).

The student's views of self-determining one's cultural identity reflect an understanding of democracy related to cultural matters. Using terms such as "segregation" and "equality" shows the students have knowledge related to the aims of multiculturalism and most likely have had discussions related to these topics at school. Furthermore, the view of Participant C, who specifies segregation related to language and the importance of one being able to speak a language they know, relates to another aim the FNCC specifies for multiculturalism in schools; developing language awareness (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). Overall, the feelings of justice voiced out by the students strongly echo the aims that the FNCC outlines for multicultural education in schools.

#### 4.1.3 Perception of the Effects of Cultural Background

The participants also identified how culture could affect one's school requirements and how one should act in social situations according to the surrounding culture. Vignette 1 (History lesson) detailed a situation that described immigrant students' struggles in completing homework strongly tied to knowledge about Finnish culture. Most participants who were handed this vignette, expressed that it is acceptable and "ok" that a student who has recently moved to Finland would not complete homework if it is about a difficult topic related to Finnish culture for the student:

*"It is OK. But the others could have searched the internet."*

(Original: On OK. Mutta muut olisivat voineet etsiä netistä", Participant U).

Participant U details that it is acceptable that a student with an immigrant background would not complete the homework, however, adds that the other students would need to search the internet if they did not have enough information about the topic. Many participants expressed in relation to the same vignette that it is normal that the requirements for immigrant students and Finnish students are different. Some participants' answers also expressed that a similar situation could happen in their classroom, and that they would want to help immigrant students

if they were struggling with difficult homework and teach them about Finnish culture so that school tasks would be easier for them to understand.

Vignette 2 (Independence Day) evoked perceptions of cultural background on cultural obligations as opposed to school requirements. Some participants felt strongly about respecting the culture of the country one lives in. The effect of cultural background, however, varied between participants:

*“Amir [vignette protagonist] is kind of Finnish so he should sing the Finnish national anthem too.”*

(Original: “Amir on tavallaan suomalainen, joten hänenkin kuuluisi laulaa maamme laulu.”, Participant S).

*“You cannot force the student...The student could belong to a culture in which it is not allowed to sing the national anthem of another country. Otherwise, it would be good to sing it since it is Independence Day.”*

(Original: “Ei saa pakottaa oppilasta...Oppilas voi kuulua kulttuuriin jossa hän ei vaikkakaan saa laulaa toista kansallislaulua. Mutta muuten olisi hyvä laulaa kerran on itsenäisyyspäivä.”, Participant H).

Participant S expresses that they think the protagonist should sing the national anthem because he is “kind of Finnish” which could mean that in the view of the participant, Amir living in Finland makes him part Finnish and thus obligated to sing the national anthem. Participant H addresses also the cultural factors playing in this situation and shows understanding of sensitivity when it comes to different customs and boundaries of cultures. Similarly to Participant S though, Participant H also expresses that it is a good thing to sing the national anthem if one’s culture does not prevent it. Importance of singing the national anthem as a part of Finnish culture and customs could be seen in these answers.

Paavola and Talib (2010) describe that in a multicultural school cultural and linguistic backgrounds should be appreciated in planning, testing and evaluation. Vignette 1 included a situation in which homework was difficult for immigrant students to complete and homework was a big part of the evaluation for that class. The student’s thoughts related particularly to this

prompt showed an understanding that one’s cultural/linguistic background can affect school requirements and should make a difference in how much support one receives in school. This shows the students grasp the concept of equity, which multicultural education advocates for (Talib, 2002). As discussed in our theoretical framework, superficial multicultural education can often look like celebrations of cultural diversity whilst matters of equity are sidestepped altogether (Gorski, 2016). The students’ compassionate views towards one’s cultural background affecting school requirements seems to indicate an understanding of multicultural education beyond the superficial extent.

**4.2 What Observations Do Students Have about Multiculturality in Finnish Schools?**

In this section, we will present the findings in relation to our second research question: “What observations do students have about multiculturalism in Finnish schools?”. The findings for this research question were acquired with the same methodology as with our first research question, however the focus is on the participant’s observations about the multiculturalism and multicultural actions in their own school. Two categories emerged from the participants’ answers to our second research question: observations related to diversity and observations related to school actions. The categories and subcategories of the findings for research question are illustrated in Figure 2. below. Next, the categories will be expanded on along with their subcategories.

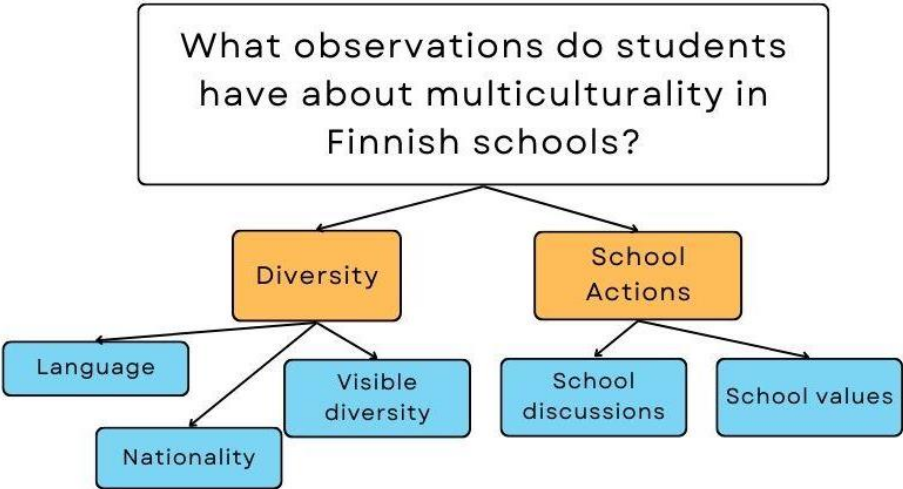


Figure 2. What observations do students have about multiculturalism in Finnish schools?

#### 4.2.1 Observations Related to Diversity

In the collected data, many observations of characteristics of diversity were brought up by the participants. Some of these observations were prompted by the questions whilst others were not. These characteristics have been quantified in the table below:

Characteristics	Times mentioned in answers
Language skills	6
Different background	5
Skin colour	4
Foreign name	3
Different appearance from others	1
Religion	1

Table 6. Participant answers on characteristics of a multicultural student

The most repeated observation of the characteristics of diversity was language skills. The participants explained that when someone has “problems” with their Finnish language skills, it makes them different from others. These “problems” were most often related to sounding different when speaking. Some participants also added that these students go to “Finnish as a second language” -lessons. The second most repeated characteristic was having a different background (nationality). Having a different background was described by the participants as having a parent or parents from a different country or simply referred to as “coming from a different background”. The third most repeated characteristic was skin colour. Half of the participants who listed skin colour as a characteristic also specified the skin colour of a multicultural student to be darker than other students. Other visible characteristics along with skin colour were having a name that sounds foreign, having a different appearance from others, and being of a different religion. One participant also specified in relation to asking why the

vignette character would be discriminated against (Vignette 3) that they think others can be envious of the language skills and different backgrounds of other students:

*“...They are envious because they cannot speak Chinese and because they [the vignette character] are from a different country.”*

(Original: “...He ovat kateellisia kun ei itse puhu Kiinaa ja siksi koska hän on eri maasta kuin muut, Participant N).

We find it interesting that language stood out as the characteristic students related to diversity the most. As discussed in the theoretical framework, the Finnish National Core Curriculum has shifted its focus from cultural differences in student identities to differences in language identities (Mikander et al., 2018). Perhaps this shift in the Core Curriculum, which guides teaching in all schools in Finland, explains why the students related multiculturalism and diversity to language, and why their replies mentioned language more frequently than nationality or visible diversity.

*“There are many multicultural students in our classroom...but they go to Finnish as a second language class.”*

(Original: meidän luokas on paljon monikulttuurisia niin ehkä siksi mut ne käy s2, Participant D).

Participant D defined multicultural students as based on their language skills as those who do not speak Finnish fluently, and thus go to Finnish as a second language class. This resembles the definition of the FNCC (2014) of multicultural students as “students with other linguistic backgrounds” (Mikander et al., 2018). On the other hand, multicultural, as described in the curriculum, is something that all students are and will be supported to become in school (Mikander et al., 2018). This viewpoint that all students are multicultural was not seen in the observations of the students. The students defined characteristics related to multiculturalism and observed that there are some multicultural students in their class but did not voice that all are multicultural nor assigned multiculturalism as something they themselves would be. One participant stated that since all students in their classroom are born in Finland, there is no multiculturalism in their class.



Of the characteristics students associated with diversity, differences in gender, social class and sexuality were not mentioned. Riitaoja (2013) in her research had outlined that in discussions related to multiculturalism, these differences were in fact the ones always left out, as well as discussions on historical minorities in Finland. Arguably, the vignettes were not written in a way that supported these discoveries and opinions, and perhaps social class, gender, and sexuality are more difficult for students to pick up on, as they can be abstract. When there were no language differences, or diversity in nationality, the students observed that there was no multiculturalism present amongst themselves and their peers:

*“There are no foreigners in our classroom.”*

(Original: “Meidän luokassa ei ole ulkomaalaisia”, Participant U).

Participant U expresses the word “foreigner” to indicate how they view diversity in their classroom. Here, the participant connects being from a foreign country to multiculturalism and diversity, rather than viewing their classroom and themselves as multicultural.

#### 4.2.2 Observations Related to School Actions

In addition to diversity, the data reflected the participants’ observations related to school actions. The vignette stories and questions curated for this research prompted participants to think about what kind of discussions the participants have had about culture and diversity in school. In Vignette 1 (History lesson), the task questions asked whether the students had had school discussions of home countries of classmates or diversity in general. Half of the participants answering this question had had discussions about different home countries and diversity:

*“Yes, for example, what countries the people we have are from and what kind of cultures there are in the world.”*

(Original: “Joo esim. mistä maista ihmisiä meillä on tai minkälaisia kulttuureja on maailmassa”, Participant A).

*“Yes, we talk about them occasionally and learn about them because we have people in our classroom who can tell us about their own country. I have learned from my classmates, and about other countries and cultures at school.”*

(Original: “Kyllä välillä puhutaan ja opitaan koska meidän luokassa on ihmisiä jotka voi kertoa omasta maasta. Olen itse oppinut luokkakavereilta ja koulussa muista maista ja kulttuureista.”, Participant I).

Half of the participants answering this question, however answered that they had not discussed these topics in school:

*“No, everyone in this classroom as far as I know have been born in Finland.”*

(Original: “Ei, kaikki tässä luokassa ovat tietääkseni syntyneet Suomessa.”, Participant U).

All these example answers from Participants A, I, and U, allude that whether diversity and different backgrounds are talked about could be dependent on whether the students in the classroom are diverse in terms of background and culture. In a similar fashion, the participants assigned Vignette 2 (Independence Day) were asked about whether being Finnish (“suomalaisuus”) is discussed in school. All participants who were asked this question answered that being Finnish is not discussed in school. One participant specified that being Finnish is joked about among peers:

*“In our school one might call someone Finnish if they go to the sauna: as a joke.”*

(Original: “Meidän koulussa toista sanotaan vaikka suomalaiseksi jos käyt saunassa: vitsillä.”, Participant H).

According to Talib, no one is purely Finnish but everyone has ancestors of different nationalities and ethnicities (Talib, 2002). Multicultural identity in Finnish schools thus refers to the opportunity for a student to embrace multiple cultural identities by creating an environment that appreciates multiple ways of living (Talib, 2002). The participants’ answers reflected that Finnishness is not discussed in school. It may be joked about, but there are no conversations of being Finnish and how that might relate to the students’ identities. Perhaps the

lack of discussion on being Finnish or Finnishness and one's cultural identity is one possible reason why students could not identify themselves as being multicultural nor see multiculturalism in a classroom where all spoke Finnish and were born in Finland.

In addition, even though the participants expressed that being Finnish is not discussed in school, in the same answers they expressed strong feelings toward Finnish values and customs as they either talked about respecting the Finnish custom to sing the national anthem or the Finnish value of freedom. Thus, we observe that students have ideas and even strong feelings about some aspects of being Finnish which are present in students' lives even if being Finnish is not explicitly talked about.

The observations of the participants about school actions also included expressions and statements about school values:

*"The atmosphere in our school is quite good towards everyone."*

(Original: "Koulussamme on ihan hyvä ilmapiiri kaikkia kohtaan.", Participant L).

*"In our school, nationality makes no difference."*

(Original: "Meidän koulussa kansalaisuudella ei ole väliä", Participant N).

*"The teacher should have told the others that no one should be spoken about like that...A teacher's job is to respect and accept everyone."*

(Original: "Opettajan olisi pitänyt sanoa muille, ettei kenestäkään saisi puhua noin...Opettajan työhön kuuluu kaikkien kunnioittaminen ja hyväksyminen.", Participant C).

In the theoretical framework, we discussed how Finnish comprehensive school is regarded as a place of equality and equity as each student is seen to be on the same starting point (Ahmed and Eid, 2020). The values of "acceptance", "equality", and "respect" that the students voiced as values of their schools, show that they themselves associate school as a place of equality and equity. Participant L described their school as having a quite good atmosphere towards all. According to Paavola and Talib (2010), the school atmosphere is meaningful in defining a

multicultural school. School actions may either uplift the meaning of the majority culture of the surrounding society or advocate for minorities based on school values (Paavola and Talib, 2010). Participant C's answer shows that they expect the teacher to advocate the school values of respect and acceptance of all. Whilst the methodology did not show which situations the students had concretely identified these values in or how they concretely could be seen in school life, the findings support students observing their school to be reflective of the values of equality, integrity, and respect.

The last subcategory we observed from the participants' observations related to school actions, was language. The participants assigned Vignette 3 (Recess) were asked about the use of languages in their schools. When asked about different languages and their uses in school, many students observed a multitude of different languages used in different contexts. The participants did identify Finnish and English as the two main languages used at school, however, also described how other languages are used both during classes and outside of classes. Some identified that overall, different languages were used both in class and during recess, whilst others noted that there was a difference between the languages used in the two different contexts. One participant described how languages aside from Finnish or English were used explicitly to increase understanding:

*“In my school, we mostly speak Finnish and English. Also, for people who do not understand these languages, one might speak to them in e.g., Russian. Languages are used in situations when someone does not necessarily understand.”*

(Original: “Koulussani käytetään enimmäkseen suomenkieltä ja englanninkieltä. Myös ihmisille jotka eivät ymmärrä näitä kieliä saatetaan puhua esim: venäjää. Kieliä käytetään tilanteissa jos joku ei välttämättä ymmärrä.”, Participant C).

Participant C describes with the example of Russian how different languages are used in school to ensure all understand. Other participants made similar connections between uses of language and understanding. The participants observed that the students in the preparatory class of their school could use their mother tongues to speak with each other, whilst teachers and students of other classes would try to speak Finnish to them.

One aim for multicultural education in Finnish schools is reaching the destination in which different languages and cultures are a part of everyday life, and that communication between individuals and groups is natural and obvious (Nissilä, 2010). Some of the students' observations of the uses of different languages, such as using languages in class which are not school subjects; using different languages to support understanding; and students of other linguistic backgrounds being allowed to use their own languages with each other in a natural way, showed that different languages are a part of daily life as natural communication between individuals and groups. The FNCC outlines aims of multicultural education related to language: mother tongues of students being respected and taught (Paavola and Talib, 2010) and developing language awareness (Laasonen-Tervaoja et al., 2021). The students' observations of languages in their school present different ideas of language awareness. Whilst other participants observed that in their school multiple languages are used naturally during and outside of classes, and that language is used to support inclusion, others observed language as a school subject only. The difference in these observations was not caused by being from different schools, as participants from the same school could observe language as a tool for inclusion and only as a school subject.

## **5 Discussion**

In this thesis, our aim was to discover how students themselves perceive multicultural situations and what observations they make about multiculturalism in their schools. As we noted that the view of the students was missing from the discussion on assessing, evaluating, and developing multicultural education in Finland, with this thesis, we wanted to illustrate the need for listening and giving a platform to student voice on educational issues. Through the analysis, we found how valuable and meaningful views student voices could offer to educational research. Even with a limited scope, the data we received from the participants provide significant viewpoints to begin a larger discussion on what type of insights student voice can offer to research on multicultural education. Thus, in this section using the findings of both research questions, we will discuss our findings in a broader context, and examine what student voice on multiculturalism could tell us about multicultural education in Finnish schools. We will also discuss ethical considerations, as well as the validity and reliability of our research. Finally, we will conclude with ideas for further research.

### **5.1 What Does Student Voice on Multiculturalism Tell us about Multicultural Education in Finnish Schools?**

Discussing our findings in a broader context is important for our thesis, as we want student voices to be heard in matters that affect their education. Such as The Lundy model of Child Participation (2014) suggested, to give power to student voice it must be taken forward and acted upon (Lundy, n.d.) - we want to respect the voices of these students who took the time to tell us about their perceptions and observations on multiculturalism for this research, and thus have their view inform us about multicultural education in Finnish schools. It must be noted, however, that our sample size was very small for this kind of research to reliably inform us about how multicultural education is truly implemented in Finnish classrooms, however, we still feel as researchers that the participants' views that we had in this small study are just as valuable and tell something about the situation in Finland in general. To discuss the findings from a broader perspective, we will relate our findings to Nieto's levels of a multicultural school.

First, common to many categories in our findings were the values of equity, equality, and social justice. Out of all the answers, 20 students voiced feelings of empathy directed toward the cultural situation at hand. Only two of the participant's answers gave the impression of overlooking or not seeing the cultural situation. The values of equity, equality, and social justice were ones that the students attached to fictional multicultural situations. Additionally, through our second research question, we discovered that these values were also communicated as observations related to their own school values and the values students perceived a teacher should have. Ignorance to difference or color-blindness is a characteristic of Level 0 in Nieto's framework of multicultural education. The students' compassionate views and empathy towards being an outsider, towards not getting appropriate support, or not being able to communicate in their own mother tongue show, that they are not ignorant to differences or color-blind in multicultural situations. Furthermore, in a level 0 school, other languages than Finnish are viewed as a handicap to learning (Nieto, 2018), which is a viewpoint the students' observations and perceptions heavily contrast. Although some students state that Finnish and English are the main languages used in their school, the students express that other languages could be used in classroom situations to ensure understanding and inclusion. The contrasting views on these characteristics of a multicultural school seem to indicate that multicultural education in these Finnish schools appears to be beyond level 0.

As noted, the school atmosphere is meaningful in defining a multicultural school because school actions may either uplift the meaning of the majority culture of the surrounding society or advocate for minorities based on the school values (Paavola and Talib, 2010). In terms of values, the students view school as a place where nationality makes no difference, and everyone is respected despite differences in language. This shows that the students perceive their schools to be places where there is genuine respect towards diversity, not just tolerance of differences. Differences are not accepted only to be modified (Nieto, 2018), which indicates the students perceive multicultural education in their schools to be beyond level 1, the level of tolerance.

Another reason why the student voices on multiculturalism in these Finnish classrooms indicate that it is beyond level 1, is the perspective the students observed their schools to have towards languages. Nieto describes that a level 1 school aims to assimilate students and replace the differences in language and culture as quickly as possible (Nieto, 2018). Furthermore, Nieto expresses that in a level 1 school, students' native languages are seen as a hindrance to learning. The students' views communicated the opposite. Their observations of the use of languages

included seeing language as a tool to support understanding and ensuring all peers were included. The students observed that many languages besides Finnish could be used in classroom situations and during recess. Those who were not yet fluent in Finnish could, according to the students' observations, use their own languages as well. Participant W (see 4.1.1.) voiced that they felt bad for the vignette protagonist who was unable to communicate in her/his mother tongue. These observations and perceptions of multicultural situations related to language communicate a respectful and appreciative view of different languages rather than a view of them as a hindrance to learning.

Establishing that the students' views seem to allude that multicultural education in some Finnish schools is not of level 0 or level 1, we can move on to examine the students' perceptions and observations in relation to level 2. A school at level 2 is appreciative of differences and sees all students as bringing something special that does not need to be reconstituted (Nieto, 2018). Racism and discrimination are dealt with seriously (Nieto, 2018), a view that the student's strong perception of justice in situations of discrimination echo, as well as their assurance that teachers and adults in their school would have dealt with the situation solemnly. In a level 2 school, differences are acknowledged, and their importance is neither denied nor belittled (Nieto, 2018). Students' perceptions related to Vignette 1 (History Lesson) showed an understanding view of how differences in language abilities or parents' knowledge of culture-tied topics would make it difficult for peers to meet certain school requirements. Students expressed that the teacher should support students more in this sort of situation. Furthermore, in the case of Vignette 2 (Independence Day), students voiced an understanding of one's cultural background affecting participation in certain traditions and communicated that this is understandable, such as Participant H (see 4.3.1.) stating how one should be understanding towards students whose culture might have rules that prevent them from singing a national anthem. These views that the students communicated through their perceptions and observations express that the students not only acknowledge differences but also their attitude towards differences is not belittling or denying. Thus, many characteristics students communicated of their schools can be seen to match the characteristics of a school with level 2 multicultural education.

A level 3 school holds diversity in high esteem and differences in the school are respected and used as a basis for much of what goes on in the school (Nieto, 2018). Although the observations students made communicated respect as a school value, the students did not elaborate on how



this is seen in practice. It is thus difficult to relate the students' views onto a level 3 school. Other characteristics Nieto (2017) describes associated with a level 3 multicultural school are multiculturalism being integrated into all subjects; the curriculum having been through changes and is now anti-racist; school staff being reflexive of diverse communities; student accomplishments in a variety of subjects being celebrated; as well as staff taking educational courses. These characteristics are not seen in the findings of our study. This does not signify that students' views tell us that multicultural education in Finnish schools is not of level 3, rather it shows us that through this particular study and research design, the views of the students that we were able to reach do not illustrate a level 3 multicultural school. Similarly, level 4, affirmation, solidarity, and critique is one to which the students' views did not have connections. Again, the limited scope of this thesis, as well as the research design inevitably have some effect on the types of views we were able to reach and those we were not. For example, none of our questions specifically asked the students about the diversity of the staff, and thus, it is not surprising that no participant commented on this. Kallinen and Pirskainen (2022) state that in research with children, leaning on one method alone can lead to one-sidedness and that using multiple methods builds an overall picture of children's thoughts and experiences (Kallinen and Pirskainen, 2022). We recognize that for a more valid study with more accurate findings on students' perceptions and observations related to multicultural situations, following the written assignments with interviews where we could have clarified and given follow-up questions on the topics the students brought up in their answers, would have led to more meaningful results in terms of broader connections.

What can be concluded from the student voices heard in this thesis and the scope of two classrooms, is that overall, the students' views tell us that multicultural education in some Finnish schools appears to have similar characteristics to a level 2 school of acceptance from Nieto's model of multicultural education. Furthermore, the students' views tell us that multicultural education in these Finnish schools reflects many aims outlined by the Finnish National Core Curriculum: understanding and advocating for human rights; advocating for equity, equality, and democracy; respecting diverse identities; developing language awareness; and understanding the perspective of others. Additionally, it is apparent from the data that the shift in the focus of the Finnish National Core Curriculum from cultural differences to differences in language identities (Mikander et al., 2018) affects how multiculturalism is perceived in schools. This was exemplified by many students associating multiculturalism in their school with linguistic differences, and one participant defining multicultural students as

those with diverse linguistic backgrounds. The students' views also tell us that currently in these Finnish schools, students are not identifying themselves as multicultural and do not relate to the view of the national curriculum that all students are multicultural. These are the findings and conclusions we have arrived to by analyzing the student voices of this sample, however, we recognize that students from different schools and regions could have different viewpoints on multiculturalism.

## **5.2 Ethics**

Multiculturalism as a topic for students is a sensitive one, which affected our whole research process and the ethical considerations we have made. In any research, taking careful consideration of the ethics of the study are important. We have considered ethics on a general level in relation to qualitative research based on the recommendations of Lichtman in her guidebook to qualitative research in education (Lichtman, 2013). Special considerations in research with children were described more in detail in section 3.2.2 "Research with Children".

The first of Lichtman's recommendations is "do no harm", this meaning that participants should never be harmed or violated in the research (Lichtman, 2013). From the very start of our thesis process, it was clear to us that the topic of multiculturalism is one that can be sensitive and that it includes risks of leaving the participant confused or anxious. This is something we took into consideration when designing the vignettes and the questions in the written task: the vignettes, although describing difficult multicultural situations, were kept as ambiguous. This way, we ensured and evaluated that our study would be as harmless as possible to the participant regardless of their background. The participants were also given the space to share feelings and ask questions about the research afterward. The participants asked questions about the vignette characters and shared ideas about whether they thought the characters were Finnish or immigrants. The participants were also concerned about anonymity and how the data will be handled which we clarified for them appropriately.

Another one of Lichtman's guidelines is "privacy and anonymity", as individuals participating in a research study should be able to expect that their privacy is guaranteed (Lichtman, 2013). In addition, children are in a vulnerable position, thus careful information handling is of utmost importance (Lichtman, 2013). During our research study, we did not collect any identifying

information from the participants and the data was transcribed into digital form on a secure hard drive immediately after data collection. Only participants' names were collected to confirm informed consent in connection to their guardians. In addition, the excerpts presented in the findings of this research are not in any way identifying to the participant. Issues of privacy and anonymity were carefully explained to the participants before and after data collection. In a similar fashion, the nature of the study was explained along with the ability to withdraw.

Ethical considerations during the data interpretation process specifically include issues of misstatements, misinterpretations, and fraudulency (Lichtman, 2013). To avoid these issues, we have presented excerpts from the data as evidence to support our data analysis. Furthermore, we have also included tables that show our analysis process and how the data was interpreted. According to Lichtman, subjectivity is allowed in research analysis to some extent to preserve ethicality, however, one must be aware of their own views (Lichtman, 2013). Throughout our thesis process, we have reflected upon our position as researchers and our view of the participant, in this case, the student. To respect student voice, we kept the participants' answers at the centre of our analysis by continuously returning to the meaning units that arose from the data. As there were two researchers conducting the analysis, we were able to reflect with each other on the possibility of misinterpretations.

In our view, we have carried out an ethical study, as we have taken into account both the ethical issues of qualitative research in general, as well as the ethical considerations related to the vulnerability of the sample group we had chosen for our study.

### **5.3 Validity and Reliability**

In terms of validity, we reflect on our research methodology and its strengths and limitations in answering our research questions. As the strengths of our research, we identified that there being two researchers conducting the analysis of the data supported us in ensuring that the student voices were at the center of our analysis. For example, if the analysis was at risk to become too interpretive, the other researcher could always guide the analysis back to the data and the essence of the participant's view. In our opinion, this enhances the replicability of the analysis from the same data, as two researchers made the same observations, interpretations, and connections with the data. The research is also replicable due to our thorough description

of the data collection and analysis process. We also reflect that the decisions we made in terms of choosing qualitative research over other approaches were appropriate in answering our research questions. Student voice could not be respected as thoroughly if the responses were only quantified. In addition, we find that even with a small sample, our methodological choices enabled the data to provide significant findings from students.

On the other hand, there are also limitations to this research. The sample size, as described in relation to the data collection (see 3.2.1), was small, which naturally led to fewer perspectives and observations to analyze. This means that the generalizability of our findings and discussing them in the broader context of multicultural education in Finnish schools is narrow. The sample size was affected by factors beyond our control, such as some students being sick on the day of the research. As researchers, we observe that the sample size could have been larger by default so that unexpected factors affecting the sample size could be reduced. Regarding this thesis, timing limited our possibilities in obtaining more participating classrooms for the study.

In terms of our research methodology, the vignettes we curated for this research provided some limitations. The small sample size together with the methodology of randomly assigning three different vignettes to the students reflected in there being less data for each question of the research assignment. If there had been fewer vignettes with the same sample size, the amount of data for each question would have been larger. However, reducing the number of vignettes would have narrowed the way multiculturalism was presented to the students as a phenomenon, thus also narrowing the themes discussed in this research.

Yet, from a critical perspective, we recognize that the questions in the research assignment could have been phrased in a way that could offer more accurate answers in relation to our research questions. For example, question four in Vignettes 1 and 2 (see Appendices 1 and 2) were phrases starting with “do you...” or “have you...” which did not prompt an analytical response from the students and instead led them to answer with one or two words. As an example, in Vignette 2, question four asks: “*Have you noticed similar situations in your school? What were they like and how did they feel like?*”. This question could be answered with only a few words and the second part of the question cannot be answered if one has not experienced similar situations in their school. Such questions should rather be phrased in a way that prompts more elaborate descriptions of the students’ observations of multiculturalism in their own schools. If other methods, such as an interview, were to be conducted in support of the written

task, these questions could function as conversation starters and the answers to them could be expanded upon in a natural manner. Thus, reaching the knowledge of the child, in our view, requires careful consideration of methodological limitations, such as if multiple methods of data collection should be used.

As discussed in our theoretical framework, Riitaoja (2013) points out that in Finnish multicultural education, discussions of multiculturalism often forget to include considerations of social class, gender, sexuality, and Finnish historical minorities (Riitaoja, 2013). We recognize that the vignette stories written for this research did not guide the students to discuss these topics in regard to multiculturalism. However, in our research design, we pondered upon how to formulate the stories on a level of the child's assumed knowledge of what multiculturalism is. In an effort to avoid guiding the participants to our view of multiculturalism and instead letting their understanding of multiculturalism surface, we decided on vignettes that describe more familiar conceptions of multiculturalism in school. In our view, with a different research methodology, it would have been easier to have discussions with the students about these more forgotten areas of multiculturalism.

#### **5.4 Further Research**

Reflection about the validity and reliability of our research already guides us to ideas on how to continue research on student voices on multiculturalism. In the future, we find that expanding research on the more forgotten areas of multiculturalism (social class, gender, sexuality, and Finnish historical minorities, Riitaoja, 2013), would provide interesting insight into how students understand multiculturalism and whether Finnish multicultural education supports a broader conception of what multiculturalism is.

Further, as discussed by Kallinen and Pirskainen (2022) method triangulation would offer a more holistic picture of children's thoughts and experiences (Kallinen and Pirskainen, 2022). In the future, the quality of the research could be enhanced by using interviews along with the written task to gain a more holistic understanding of student voices on multiculturalism.

In addition, a larger sample size would be beneficial in elevating the generalizability of the research findings. Thus, with a larger sample size, student voice on multiculturalism could

provide relevant and accurate information about multicultural education in Finnish schools. A larger sample size would also allow for a comparative approach, for example, comparing multicultural education in two different regions of Finland. To specify this idea, the capital region of Finland is known to be more culturally diverse than the northern regions. A comparison between the implementation of multicultural education in these different regions according to the perspective of students could lead to questions of whether the diversity of the school population impacts this implementation, and whether the multicultural aims of the FNCC (2014) are reached in all regions of Finland.

These are only a fraction of the potential ideas that listening to student voices in educational research on multiculturalism could offer. In our view, research with children should occupy a larger space in discussions of policies and practices in schools, as students hold unique points of view on school life that educators can only reach by listening to student voice.

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## Appendix 1

### Vignette 1. History Lesson

Many students in our history lesson had not done their homework because it had been difficult. I told my teacher that luckily my parents know a lot about Kalevala [the Finnish national epic]. My grandpa has read bedtime stories to me about Kalevala. Nazir and Aliza said that their parents could not help them because they had moved to Finland only two years ago. They always get bad grades in history because according to our teacher, homework is a big part of our grades. Once in third grade, Nazir and Aliza told us about their home countries and that it is warm there. Maybe they do not read Kalevala there.

1. What do you think about this situation?
2. Could a similar situation happen in your classroom? Why?
3. If you were a classmate of Nazir and Aliza what would you think or do? Why?
4. Do you talk/learn about each others' home countries in your classroom? Do you talk about diversity in your classroom?

## Appendix 2

### Vignette 2. Independence Day

Today is our Independence Day celebration at school. We have practiced to sing the Finnish national anthem together. All students' parents have been invited to watch us perform. My grandma and grandpa are coming too. The performance is about to begin and our teacher is calling us onto the gym stage. My classmate Amir looks nervous. He nudges our teacher:

"Teacher, I do not want to sing the national anthem," they say.

"Oh no, you do not have to be nervous, it is going to be all right!" our teacher encourages.

"But everyone says that I am not Finnish," Amir mumbles.

"Amir, we are all in Finland now and here we sing the Finnish national anthem", our teacher confirms and guides them to the stage.

1. How did you feel about the situation?
2. What do you think about the teacher's response to Amir? What do you think, how would your teacher respond to Amir?
3. What do you think, why has Amir been told they are not Finnish? How do you talk about being Finnish in your school?
4. Have you noticed similar situations in your school? What were they like and how did they feel like?

## Appendix 3

### Vignette 3. Recess

Today was a nice day at school. My good friend Naava had finally returned from China where their grandma lives. We have not seen each other in months, so as soon as recess started, we went to the swings to talk about everything. Suddenly, I saw other fifth graders whispering next to us.

“Why are they playing with Naava, Naava does not even know how to speak Finnish properly?” one of them whispered.

“Yeah, Naava should just stick with playing with the other small group students, they can play charades because in that game they do not have to talk”, another one laughed.

Naava jumped off the swing and ran inside to the bathroom. I ran after Naava but they had locked themselves in the bathroom and did not want to talk to me. I told a teacher what the fifth graders had said.

“Well there is nothing one can do about it, luckily we know that we are all the same and as valuable”, the teacher said and knocked on the bathroom door.

“Naava, have you once again talked Chinese with other small group students? You know that other children feel like outsiders when they do not understand?”, the teacher reminded and walked away.

1. How did you feel about the situation?
2. In your opinion, how did the teacher react in the situation? What do you think, how would the adults in your school react in a similar situation?
3. What kind of languages do you use in your school? In what situations?
4. Why do you think the other fifth graders whispered about Naava? Do you think the same in your school?