

# 'When somebody tells you who you are'

## Religious education and fraudulent appropriation in Finnish schools

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This article investigates the notion of spiritual appropriation in Finnish schools, with a particular focus on the experiences of religious minorities. It draws on narratives from these communities, shedding light on their daily experiences in the educational setting. Employing counter-storytelling from critical race theory (CRT), the research examines the power dynamics and the impact of epistemological privileges within Finnish schools.

The study unveils a unique form of spiritual appropriation in the school setting, termed 'fraudulent appropriation'. Here, adults from the majority group assume the authority to teach and interpret minority religious traditions, often providing distorted or false information to minority children, and even utilizing their religion as a tool for control.

Furthermore, the narratives underscore the significance of agency and self-representation for minority groups. When minorities are able to vocalize their presence in schools through creative events, the act of appropriation can be mitigated, paving the way for appreciation. This serves as a means to counter dominant narratives while fostering a sense of belonging and respect.

In conclusion, the article emphasizes the importance of amplifying the voices of minorities and promoting appreciation over appropriation. It advocates the visibility, audibility and self-determination of minority groups. The article also posits that the term 'fraudulent appropriation' is valuable for the investigation of structures that perpetuate the exclusion and oppression of religious-minority children in schools.

### Introduction

The article is based on narratives collected from religious minorities about incidents in schools in Finland that can be understood as spiritual appropriation, that is, a specific form of cultural appropriation connected to spirituality. The term will be defined in the next section.

In Finland the discussion of cultural appropriation in schools is only beginning. Cultural appropriation can be defined as processes of stealing and mistreating culture produced by or belonging to a less powerful group. It is about the 'manner in which the elements and iconography of a dominated culture are decontextualized, deformed, or simplified' (Uzel and Avasilichioaei 2019: 10). In schools, epistemological power and the power to rule and manage children is held by adult teachers. This is a distinctive milieu that may produce specific forms of appropriation.

Only a few previous studies have explored a range of religious minorities in Finnish schools (Kavonius and Ubani 2020; Zilliacus 2014; Zilliacus and Kallioniemi 2015). These studies are made in the pedagogical sphere and focus on educational processes. This article is part of religious studies and minority studies, and brings

in a more holistic approach, focusing on everyday life in the margins.

The research questions are: What do narratives about events linked to spiritual appropriation among religious minorities in schools in Finland look like? Are there narratives about someone else becoming the expert on the minority's behalf?

Narratives about teachers belonging to the dominant group taking over the right to teach minority children their own tradition are the focus, and these are linked to the process of someone else becoming 'the expert on your experience [who] is deemed more knowledgeable' (Todd 1990: 24). This can transform into telling someone who they are.

The theoretical framework used is critical race theory (CRT) and counter-story-telling as the research concerns power relations.

### **Cultural or spiritual appropriation**

The discussion about appropriation of religion has traditionally been about Westerners capturing and exhibiting religions, and it also includes processes of placing Western colonizers at the top of the hierarchy of cultural evolution. Spiritual appropriation can be understood as a form of cultural appropriation. The term 'spiritual appropriation' is chosen for this article in preference to 'appropriation of religion', as it seems more convenient when describing processes related to everyday life, self-identification and well-being. Spirituality is connected with deep patterns of understanding oneself in the world, with the unknown and with transcendency. In this article I define spirituality among children as recognizing 'the extraordinary in the ordinary' (Bone *et al.* 2007: 344). An inspiring and inclusive approach to spirituality in educational settings can be found in the early childhood curriculum of New Zealand, Te Whāriki. It

is bi-cultural and influenced by the Maori culture and 'recognises the importance of spirituality in children's holistic development' (Goodliff 2016: 73). This holistic approach, embracing the importance of tradition and heritage, is well suited for this study's investigation of lived experiences of religious minorities.<sup>1</sup>

Cultural appropriation 'interacts with dominating systems to silence and speak for individuals' (Matthes 2016: 349). Spiritual appropriation is linked to the threat of cultural extinction or forced transformation (Borup 2020). Minority children in schools controlled by a dominant group can experience minority stress, including the chronic and ongoing impact of stress (Bassioni and Langrehr 2021). Religious minorities in schools in Finland lack access to visibility and even hide their items at school, while the majority manifests its religion (Parland and Kwazema 2023). In interviews collected for this article there were no narratives about items being taken away from the minority and used by the majority. Instead, narratives linked to processes of silencing and of appropriating or stealing dignity and possibilities were found. Loretta Todd's (1990: 24) definition of appropriation as also happening when 'someone else becomes the expert on your experience and is deemed more knowledgeable about who you are than yourself' is relevant for this article. Most religious-minority children attend schools where the adult staff belong to the majority, as Finland has only a handful of schools linked to confessional communities (Jewish and Protestant Christian).

1 For more on research about spirituality among children and youth, see for example Berglund 2017; Berglund and Gunner 2011; Broo *et al.* 2019; Kuusisto 2022; Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2020.

## Multi-culturalism and unquestioned privilege

The idea of the ‘ideal multi-cultural school’, integrating migrants, has dominated among policy makers in Finland since the early 1990s. ‘The subject position of the Finnish pupil or teacher is constructed as someone becoming as tolerant and understanding as possible, but the privilege of their position is not considered’ (Hummelstedt *et al.* 2021a: 7).

Even though the Nordic countries are often described as secularized and modern, religious tradition has a large influence on the societal level. Grace Davie’s theory about believing without belonging (Davie 1997) is widely used. European Protestant Christian countries are referred to as places where ‘religion is used to identify with national traditions and ethnic heritage rather than with faith’ (Storm 2011: 75; Tromp *et al.* 2020: 528–31). Affiliation with the Evangelical Lutheran tradition remains a benchmark for being Finnish, but faith *per se* can be excluded. The religious tradition is assimilated into a paradigm of Finnish exceptionalism, permeated with rationalism and modernity. The dominant Protestant Christian religion may be considered as socially ‘neutral’, while minority religions may be problematized as being too connected to faith (Zilliacus and Kallioniemi 2015: 350–1).

Research indicates that there is a strong tendency to perceive Finnishness or Finnish race as a quality that unites nation, territory and culture. Finnishness defines Finns as people who are born and grow up in Finland, who through bloodline, as well as culturally, can be ‘recognized’ as Finns. Social inclusion and privileges are meant for those who belong to the majority and share majoritarian narratives. Access is given by birth (Bodström 2020: 15; Puuronen 2011: 69). In this article Finnishness and white

Finnishness are presented as concepts that includes traces of Evangelical Lutheranism in its secularized forms.

## Minority rights in schools in Finland

In Finland, religious minorities are the only minorities in school that have legal support at the national level for tuition with dedicated teachers in a subject that concerns children’s identity and tradition. This status is not declared as linked to minority rights, but nonetheless makes it possible to uncover these minority groups and gain information about them. Other minority groups are scattered around schools, and are hard to track; many are assimilated and a threat of extinction of their tradition and language may exist, as for Karelians (Nezvitskaya 2021).

The Finnish model for religious education (RE) is closer to continental Europe and the pluralistic models for RE in Belgium, Austria and Germany than to Scandinavia. Norway, Sweden and Denmark offer only one uniform choice of RE. The denominational system in these Nordic countries stems from a strong union between the state and the Evangelical Lutheran church, and a dominant Lutheran tuition that takes on new forms (Ferrari 2014: 26–9). The autonomous Åland Islands have a specific set-up.<sup>2</sup> In Finland, freedom of religion has been guaranteed by law since 1923, and if there are three students from the same religion in the municipality, they have a right to their own RE (Finnish law 21.8.1998/628).

2 The autonomous Åland Islands have had a religious-education model since 2021 similar to Sweden’s, without their own religious-education model for minorities. Previous to the reform an autonomous religious-education model did not exist (‘Remissdebatt: Religionskunskap i grundskolan’ 2010).

RE is a compulsory subject. 'Education is non-confessional, and teachers do not have to belong to any denomination' (Saukkonen 2013: 279). The teaching is academically based and includes education in human rights and studies of all world religions. The European Union states the right of children to learn about the religion of their parents, and the right of parents to teach their children in the tenets of their religion or belief (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union 2007/C 303/01).

### Compiling interview material

As the background and context of the theme under study in this article have been elucidated, I now turn to a presentation of the ethnographical material. This article is based on semi-structured in-depth interviews, which were made with nine families from religious minorities and nine teachers of minority RE. The families interviewed have children who participate, or have participated, in minority RE at school. The families and the teachers are affiliated to Islam, Judaism, Catholicism or Orthodox Christianity. One family declared double affiliation: Islamic and Orthodox Christian. Another identified itself as Jewish, but said the mother was Lutheran. The families had between two and ten children, and in the interviews at least one parent and one child took part, the youngest child being thirteen and the oldest twenty-two. Nine teachers and nine families, in total thirty persons, were interviewed. The interviews were conducted in the families' homes, and younger siblings (even babies and one dog!) contributed. The interviews conducted in big families with many children took place in the midst of the daily routines, siblings playing on the floor and joining in now and then, with friends sitting around, phones ringing and food being

cooked. Other interviews were completed in silent homes. All informants are linked to public schools run by municipalities in different parts of Finland. The schools have Evangelical Lutheran majorities, even when the Lutheranism is expressed in secularized forms. In a survey from Sweden, every second young Christian believer reported experiencing offence due to faith (Wenell 2020). Thus, religious belief *per se* may lead to experiences of exclusion.

For this article it is important to note that historically, all religious minorities presented herein (Jews, Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Catholics) have been targeted with oppressive policies or practices at some point (Elmgren 2020; Gardell 2011; Parland and Kwazema 2023; Saloheimo 1995; Stepanova 2020; Titelman *et al.* 2004). This is not systematically communicated in Finnish schools (Curriculum 2014); instead, the idea of the ideal multi-cultural school continues to thrive (Hummelstedt *et al.* 2021b).

The informants for this research were reached through unofficial networks and organizations for minorities and immigrants, and the National Forum for Cooperation of Religions in Finland.

The interviews were conducted from October 2020 to May 2023. During the pandemic, digital video-conferencing solutions were used. Families were interviewed face to face. The interviews were conducted in Finnish, Swedish, English or Russian, and the material was submitted to the Cultural Archive of Åbo Akademi University. The translations of the interview material into English were made by the author. The interviewees are denoted in the article as teachers B, K, M, O, P, Q, T, U, Z, and as parent BB, child BB; parent DD, child DD1&DD2; parent JJ, child JJ; parent KK, child KK; parent LL, child LL1&LL2; parent MM, child MM1&MM2; parent

OO, child OO; parent ZZ, child ZZ; parent TT, and child TT.

Pronouns indicating gender are used to make it easier for the reader wishing to consider the intersection of gender, religion, race, racialization and ethnicity in schools. The narratives collected indicate that male teachers do stand up for themselves in a way that female teachers do not. However, this is qualitative study and more material would be needed for a proper intersectional analysis.

The interviewer (and author) can be placed in a position of power and privilege as interlocuter and in the Finnish societal context but is affiliated to a minority religion and ethnicity. This most likely created trust, as she shared experiences of her family being denigrated.

### **Counter-storytelling from CRT as an analytical point of departure**

Counter-stories are important as they give voice to the oppressed and relate to the question formulated by Michel Foucault, 'Qui sommes-nous?' (Foucault 1982: 4). Counter-storytelling as a method stems from CRT and works as a suitable framework to detect power structures at school and possible spiritual appropriation. Counter-storytelling can be 'an analytical tool for understanding discourses on race and the intersections of other forms of oppression' (Hubain *et al.* 2016: 948). Counter-storytelling is 'a form of resistance to standard and majoritarian-stories' (Solórzano and Yosso 2002: 23). Research also shows that CRT offers strong tools for analysing educational institutions (DeCuir and Dixson 2004: 26). The constellation that connects race and religion in the European context has already been investigated. The invention of race in the European Middle Age is based on *othering* linked to religions (Gardell 2011; Heng 2018; Topolski 2020).

These researchers also show that race is never static, but always constructed, and racialization takes place using any invented or real characteristics, including religion.<sup>3</sup>

In this article the focus is on the voices from the margins, that is to say the voices of religious minorities in schools. In the framework of counter-storytelling, voices from the margins are called 'voices of colour', but in this article 'voices of minorities' will be used instead. This is not to equate all these groups with one another or with minority groups such as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) in the US. The choice of using a method from CRT is based on the assumption that this theoretical framework assists in the analysis of narratives shared by minorities in schools. The counter-storytelling method starts from the assumption that there exists a *stock story* – 'standard formulae' – silencing the voices of racialized people (minorities). Counter-storytelling is an active process, helping us to make sense of the world, and consists of stories that 'we believe in and adhere to affect our lives, how we interact with others' and are 'sources of strength' (Solórzano and Yosso 2002: 24; Zamudio *et al.* 2011: 124).

The voices from the margins are rarely heard, as minorities are othered. This othering of minorities in Finland is tied to Finnish and Nordic exceptionalism and is applied for 'strategic purposes like selective amnesia to avoid ethical judgements related to responsibilities towards those who are not included' (Atabong 2016: 24).

Stories of actions aimed at silencing and deceiving minority children are often found in the collected material. These

3 'Race' in English differs from the German and Nordic 'Rasse/Raße', 'ras', 'rotu'. These words also mean 'breed'.

observations, repeatedly forming similar patterns, are the basis of this investigation and have led the researcher to question if we are witnessing spiritual appropriation and in what specific form. Narratives in the form of counter-stories are analysed to reveal possible spiritual appropriation.

### **Narratives shared by minority families and teachers**

During the interviews with teachers and families no direct question about appropriation was made. Some terminology from CRT was shared with interviewees. Another strategy that was employed consisted of sharing some stories told by other teachers with the interviewees during the interviews. It was decided that an opening consisting of an explanation of some terms from CRT would be useful as a foundation to make sensitive themes safer to tread.

Here are some definitions of the terms as shared with the interviewees:

1. In- and out-group. A term from sociology that connotes, for example, Russian children in a big Finnish school, spread over different classes. These children were coming together once a week to study the Russian language. During these lessons, the children were in an 'in-group' with other Russian children. The rest of the week, they were in 'out-groups' with all other children (Tajfel 1978).
2. Finnishness. The idea of being Finnish, of belonging and about what it takes to belong, to be pure enough and to have access to power and whiteness (Atabong 2016; Keskinen 2016).
3. Whiteness is not about skin colour but power and privilege. In Finland, whiteness means to be able to claim Finnishness (Atabong 2016; Keskinen 2016).

4. Colour blindness. Denial of race, racelessness. For example, when a headmaster claims to see no difference between children and therefore claims to be free from racism (Atabong 2016).
5. White fragility. Evident when you inform the headmaster about instances of racism, who consequently becomes hostile, denies it and blames you, the messenger (DiAngelo 2011).
6. Structural racism. When school staff inform minority students that they cannot study medicine but should become nurse-assistants. In Finland, this has been discussed recently (Ahmed 2012; Atabong 2016; Keskinen 2016).

The decision to share the terms with the interviewees was made to sustain an active standpoint where the interviewer, as a researcher, promotes solidarity among minorities by reducing the comparative status of power the researcher has.

The decision to share terms from CRT offered the chance for those with less knowledge in the field to talk more precisely about things that might otherwise be kept in silence. Explaining terms to the interviewees guaranteed inclusion and equality among them as some of them were acquainted with CRT and anti-racism, while others did not have any knowledge in the field. The decision to use the terms or not was left to the interviewees. Some of the children used the terms, and many parents and teachers did.

The narratives were divided into three groups. Narratives about 1. silencing and blending in, 2. fraudulent appropriation, and 3. respectful sharing. The focus in this article is on group 2 because this article introduces a new concept, called 'fraudulent appropriation'. Silencing and blending in might be seen as processes that prepare and contribute to fraudulent appropriation,

and it differs from fraud. Silencing is about taking over the right to talk and be a subject, while fraudulent appropriation contains an act of cheating and faking. Group 3 is introduced in the spirit of counter-storytelling and activism, pointing the reader towards dialogue and respectful co-existence.

Three families (JJ, ZZ, BB) shared narratives about heavy bullying, racism and violence going on for years while the school ignored it or was incapable of solving it. The existence of such narratives will remain in the background, as these stories do not fit within the scope of this article.

The narrative will be followed by comments because many families and teachers shared stories of vulnerability, and exposing them to the reader without context could cause harm to these people and minorities. Exposing oppression can be counter-productive and often leads to processes of convergence, that is to say the merging or coming together of 'large segments of society who have little incentive to eradicate it' (Delgado and Stefancic 2017: 9).

### 1. Narratives about silencing and blending in

Many narratives shared by minority children reflected blending-in at school, and hiding their religion (child DD<sub>1</sub>&DD<sub>2</sub>, child ZZ, child KK, child TT, child BB). Child ZZ shared a narrative about her desire to blend in with the majority and to visit their church, and child DD<sub>2</sub> shared a narrative about abandoning his own religious class at secondary school, and joining the majoritarian class, naming it 'norm-religion' (Fi. 'normi-uskonto'). This child did not give any reason for leaving the Jewish RE, which he talked about positively. It may be that he preferred to blend in with the majority. The father (parent DD) did not comment, but the sister (child DD<sub>1</sub>) said the brother was scared to stay in spaces linked to their own minority reli-

gion. Child ZZ reacted against the concept 'minority' (Fi. 'vähemmistö'), explaining the word is ugly, and that she never felt she belonged to a minority, since she was active in her religious community, having lots of friends there. Later, she nonetheless shared narratives about the desire to blend in with the majoritarian religion at school. None of these children expressed any spiritual interest in the majority religion or in exercising their right to religious freedom in that way. Child KK shared a narrative about the desire to blend in at secondary school, feeling ashamed about her own religion, but becoming proud of it in higher secondary school, and getting the unwilling director to organize classes in her minority RE. Children with frequent changes of teacher had difficulty in remembering RE classes, thus being silenced through the poor educational quality (child LL<sub>1</sub>&LL<sub>2</sub>, child JJ).

Research shows that Muslim students in Finland do not dare to think about prayer rooms at school as a right. Young Muslim students are left alone to struggle for the right to pray, without support from staff (Vähärautio-Halonen 2021). Only two interviewees (U, OO) out of thirty mentioned prayer rooms at school.

Indeed, research shows that the school space is controlled and managed by the majority (Parland and Kwazema 2023). Especially at secondary school, students shared narratives about trying to be the same as everybody else. Child ZZ told how she joined girls from the dominant Lutheran group: 'Now I was trying to join the bullies, so that they would not bully me any more.'

Minority children often start to blend in by hiding their spiritual adherence. In this way, religious freedom is taken away from them *de facto*, through social pressure, even if no official ban exists. Research shows silencing and assimilation take place

in school (Stapleton 2020). According to CRT, racism is endemic (Delgado and Stefancic 2017: 8–9) and the narratives collected confirm this. Narratives detailing the silencing and blending-in of minorities, along with the necessity for them to hide, are frequent. This points to the oppression they face, both systemic and repetitive. Such silencing and hiding might be interpreted as the oppressive system's encroachment on and denial of individuals' rights to religious freedom. Dominant norms underscore the virtue of Finnishness, while advocating religion in the form of Lutheranism or secularized Lutheranism.

Minorities tend to stay silent about their difficulties and sorrows (Ahlvik-Harju 2016; Lehtola 2022; Spivak 1988). There exists a disillusionment about talking about oppression expressed in Reno Eddo-Lodge's book *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race* (Eddo-Lodge 2020).

A school milieu where the voices of the minority children are silenced might make a fertile ground for appropriation. Silence increase further oppression (Spivak 1988).

## 2. Narratives about fraud

i.

Parent KK shares a narrative about how the school, counter to the law, started co-tuition for all religious groups together. The teacher belonged to the majority and had no qualification in any minority religion. KK's family is Orthodox Christian. KK saw his child's notebook was filled with facts about the dominant Lutheran religion, misinforming his Orthodox child, not specifying and ignoring to mention differing Orthodox traditions. The child's young age precluded any opportunity to analyse this. The narrative reveals appropriation of religion, as the school pretends that co-tuition is as good as Orthodox RE for the child. The

right to one's own separate religious tradition with its own features was taken away from the child. Parent KK complained to the municipality, but this achieved nothing other than the child being forced to sit alone in the corridor during the 'common' RE lessons. Finally, the family moved the child to a school in another municipality with Orthodox Christian RE. Parent KK made a complaint to the the National Non-Discrimination and Equality Tribunal. Parent KK shared the documentation with the interviewer. It took five years before the family formally 'won' the case (YVTltk 360/2017). This is a counter-story, as parent KK talks about his own acts of resistance.

This narrative reveals the experience of minority children in majority-dominated schools and illustrates how a family experienced the violation of the law by the municipality. Such incidents manifest the tendencies articulated in CRT, specifically convergence, and the endemic nature of racism (Delgado and Stefancic 2017: 9). This becomes evident through the apparent normalization of illegal actions when it involves minorities. The narrative of a majoritarian teacher posing as a teacher of Orthodox religion for Orthodox children can be perceived as an act of appropriation, as the majoritarian teacher became the 'expert'. This can be viewed as deceptive, as the child is fed incorrect information, making the term 'fraudulent appropriation' a fitting description of the situation. This narrative also functions as a counter-story, given its elements of resistance and the parent protecting his own child.

ii.

Teacher U is both a teacher in Islamic RE and the deputy director at her school. U says that in the early 2000s and the 1990s minorities were left in peace, but the climate in schools changed around 2010–12,



becoming more oppressive, with hate-speech being normalized.

She shared many narratives associated with Ramadan. She recalled Muslim children requesting a place to pray during Ramadan. A teacher from the majority provided access to a room, and things went smoothly. But then the neighbouring school objected, arguing that children should not pray at school and that if there is a prayer room for Muslims, non-confessional children should also have one. Teacher U responded that non-confessional students could have a room if they asked for one. However, U expressed concerns about the neighbouring school and the Islamophobic attitudes continually exhibited by the staff.

Teacher U shared a narrative about majoritarian staff forcing Muslim children to eat during Ramadan. Teacher U herself calls this feeding by force, and spiritual violence, as the staff based their violent acts on phrases from the Muslim context about children not having to fast.

U related that the municipality wanted to work out rules for Ramadan, and to forbid fasting for Muslims under 15. With the position of deputy director, she told the administrators it would offend religious freedom and the curriculum. U says the administrators were upset and chose to maintain the status quo, instead of promoting the situation for the minority. U ironically calls their idea of regulating Muslim children's fasting a 'fatwa'.

Teacher U thinks that the administrators lacked sensitivity towards lived religion and the social aspects of Ramadan. U uses the word 'fatwa' to underline her own right to speak with terms from Islamic tradition, while revealing the majoritarian use of Islamic tradition as a tool to oppress Muslims. It is possible to see this act of feeding children during Ramadan, made by representatives of the majority with

power over the Muslim children, as spiritual appropriation: an attempt to steal fragments from the traditions and use them to control the minority. U's narrative can also be seen as a counter-story about protecting minority children.

iii.

U shared a narrative about the teacher-training programme for Islamic RE teachers. For practical and formal reasons, it is inaccessible to teachers of Islam in the field without formal qualifications. Instead, majoritarian students enter, but do not gain sufficient knowledge to teach Muslims. Teacher U also said her municipality prefers teachers from outside the tradition.

U thinks that introducing majoritarian teachers with bad knowledge to the children is to ruin Islam from inside and to erase the safe space of Islamic classes at school. U says that some of these majoritarian teachers of Islam are good, but that many are not. Muslim children complained to her that their new teacher of Islam did not know when Ramadan starts, and a child said the teacher talked pejoratively, naming the Holy Scripture of Islam in a denigratory way. Teacher U calls this spiritual violence, as the teacher is destroying what is holy for this child. According to her, schools in Finland are only now starting to learn to identify sexual and racial harassment, but spiritual harassment remains unacknowledged. In her narratives we can see a form of counter-storytelling, where irony is used as resistance. U turns the stereotypical way of using the provocative word 'fatwa', connected to processes of stereotyping in the context of Finnish society, against the administrators themselves. The administrators' unwillingness to make any rules that would protect the rights of Muslim children seems oppressive. U said she lacks tools to fight against spiritual oppression,

as schools do not even recognize this sort of oppression.

Teacher U's narrative, underlining racism, is convergent (Delgado and Stefancic 2017: 9), as it shows how the university promotes 'Finnishness' (Atabong 2016: 24–8), arranging the education of teachers of Islam in a manner inaccessible to minority teachers without formal education. The problem with Finnish authorities promoting teachers in Islam from the dominant group is also linked to a case with an officer at the University of Helsinki who, seeking teachers of Islam for municipalities from among their students, preferred those with 'Finnish' names. The Non-Discrimination Ombudsman was engaged in the case, and it seems it was formally resolved through mediation and compensation (Jutila 2021; Saukonoja 2022). Research shows that minority children prefer their own minority-background teachers and even perform better with them (Cherng and Halpin 2016).

#### iv.

Parent LL shared a narrative about her child being subjected to a teacher from the dominant religion, who was offering tuition in minority RE. This was part of a bigger reform towards common RE that was promoted in this school. According to parent LL, this teacher made mistakes, for instance asking the students to familiarize themselves with all the books in the Bible but providing them with a list based on the Lutheran Bible. For Catholics, several books were absent. This narrative illustrates how spiritual appropriation from the child occurs, as the tuition purported to be Catholic, but was not. Child OO<sub>1</sub>, who is Muslim, spoke about a teacher from the majority who presented ethics superficially, and avoided connecting with Islam.

This sort of spiritual appropriation

involves falsely claiming to teach a child their own religious tradition, when the child is in fact being taught the dominant religion. This can be viewed as an act of fraud. This type of fraudulent appropriation targets children and may go unnoticed. Minority children in a school environment dominated by adults belonging to the majority, without support for their own religion, risk assimilation as they often remain silent or even find themselves in a 'cloud of silence' (Fontaine 2017). This happens in a setting where silencing and blending take place, as described earlier.

#### v.

Teacher P shared a narrative about how he had to replace dominant narratives shared during history lessons and correct the negative stereotypes in these narratives about the Catholic Church. He stated that the same false narratives about Catholics have been reproduced in the dominant culture since the Reformation. Children MM<sub>1</sub>&MM<sub>2</sub> and child LL<sub>1</sub> from Catholic families also remembered problematic situations during history lessons.

This narrative by teacher P is a counter-story, as P resists actively and protects his students. It is also about appropriation, as the minority children badly need their history presented respectfully.

The narratives shared above indicate that the process of 'someone else becoming the expert on the minority's behalf' is seen as problematic from the point of view of the minorities.

In the article 'Cultural appropriation without cultural essentialism', Eric Matthes (2016: 363) points out that we should be concerned about the problem of unjust credibility generally, and the systematic inequalities that allow them. When the mandate to teach is stolen from minorities this relates to their marginalization and

weak position. The weak position is produced and reproduced through processes of silencing and blending-in, as discussed earlier.

It seems that although the law protects the religious minorities there is a lack of implementation of good practices and dissemination of knowledge about the needs of minorities, and of awareness that tuition dominated by the majoritarian group may target religious-minority children.

Historically, the dominant group's theft of the mandate to teach and define minority religion was perpetrated by the state authorities in Eastern Finnish Karelia in the seventeenth century. Reforms to modernize and westernize the 'old-fashioned' and 'primitive' Orthodox religion were made and resulted in a mass exodus of Orthodox Karelians (Saloheimo 1995). During the twentieth century the religious minorities were given some space; the dominant group did not teach on the religious minority's behalf, and flexible solutions for training teachers of Orthodox RE were implemented (Okulov 2020).

Praxes of domination can often be hidden among progressive discussion or in patronizing talk. In the Finnish context, Veli-Pekka Lehtola (2022: 178–9) points out the dominant voice 'commanding paternally/paternalistically' (Fi. 'saneliat isällisesti') to the indigenous Sami people, explaining to them what is best for them. In this 'patronizing' way the majority hinders improvement, even though the law has protected the Sami language since 1923.

Policies of domination and control over minorities are often linked to epistemological hegemony, and a lack of understanding of the needs of the minorities as belonging, lived experiences, and shared destiny (Smith 2005: 134–5).

The experiences of religious minorities are specific and differ from the experiences

of children belonging to the dominant group. When they remain hidden and the voices of the minorities are silenced, respectful dialogical co-existence is hard to achieve. Minority children need supporting teachers from their own background, because their processes of identity development is specific: a strong identification with their own group gives them higher self-esteem and greater academic achievement (Phinney and Chavira 1992; Quintana 2007; Seaton *et al.* 2006).

### 3. Narratives about sharing religion

Narratives about positive sharing in school can also be found in the material collected. These narratives are all about situations where individuals belonging to the religious minority were conducting an event and making the decisions. The narratives were about performing Chanukah songs, sharing the Orthodox *virpominen* tradition (linked to Karelian Palm Sunday), creating a visual art exhibition about mosques, having RE teachers visit other groups in school, and so on. These narratives show that sharing and inter-religious dialogue are possible, but the minorities want to be respected and to be in control of their own issues. The voice of minority individuals and the opportunity to speak out and be seen in the way they choose for themselves matter (Delgado and Stefancic 2017: 11).

These narratives about good sharing are counter-stories, as they may inspire minorities to become more visible and active. This will probably only happen in environments where minorities feel safe; thus, in all the stories shared there was an adult teacher from the minority attending or leading the event. The narratives about sharing indicate that instead of appropriation, one can cross borders and share in acts of appreciation. For such practices to spread, the dominant group should investigate their existing

power positions and wish to define and manage the 'other' (Hage 2000). Spiritual appropriation is linked to wronging a tradition and lacking sensitivity to the dignity of others, while appreciation is about respectful sharing.

Appreciation involves valuing a culture and increased sensitivity to the injustices faced by its members. According to Erich Matthes (2016: 366), 'a failure to acknowledge the harms of cultural appropriation should lead us to question whether someone truly values a culture, rather than leading to the mistaken judgement that concern about cultural appropriation stands in the way of cross-cultural appreciation'. This might also be applied to sharing religion, that is to say respectful sharing is possible if you truly value the other faith.

On the European level we can find models of tuition that imply dialogue and sharing in a respectful way. In Austria, there is a research project of the University of Graz called 'Christian-Islamic Religious Education in Team Teaching'. Two teachers from two different religious traditions teach the students together in the classroom. This model with teachers representing each tradition guarantees support for the children from an adult expert from their own tradition (Wenig 2022).

### **Fraudulent appropriation versus respectful appreciation**

The narratives shared by religious-minority teachers and families indicate that spiritual appropriation takes place in schools, as well as silencing and blending-in. There were also narratives about positive experiences, about the minorities being seen and heard, and having the mandate to speak for themselves and about themselves. The narratives about silencing show that the minorities experience the dominant group as forcing them to hide, stay invisible and without

space (Parland and Kwazema 2023). This silencing seems to prepare the ground for another, more violent form of oppression when someone else takes over the mandate to teach the tradition of the minorities. In this article this form of theft is called fraudulent appropriation. From the majoritarian perspective it may look as if the silencing and blending-in occurring in the context of the fraudulent appropriation take place voluntarily, but based on the narratives shared in this study the situation looks different when seen from the margins. Silencing and blending-in are experienced as forced on the children in school settings managed by majoritarian adults.

The narratives about fraudulent appropriation were either linked to narratives about tuition called 'common' (Fi. 'yhneiden'), where all different religions were taught by the same teacher belonging to the dominant group, or linked to narratives about a teacher from the dominant group offering tuition to one minority RE. According to the narratives shared, the majoritarian teachers not only made outright mistakes but also denigrated the minority tradition and what the tradition holds as holy. This sort of majority-led tuition was linked to a feeling of fraud among the minority families and minority teachers. For minorities, experiences linked to oppression will be seen in the light of earlier oppression, as for example Orthodox being exposed to assimilative processes in the seventeenth and twentieth centuries or the visual othering of the Tatar Muslim minority in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Elmgren 2020; Sarhimaa 2017; Stepanova 2020).

Within the majority there often exists a desire to be the manager of multi-cultural processes, to lead and take care of a process in which minorities are supposed to be the participants (Hage 2000).

Minority children shared narratives about experiences of oppression and bullying targeting the minority children, and about minority children's desire to blend in; this indicates that the schools are failing in their support for minorities, and that assimilative processes may thrive. The question is, why do these young students from religious minorities choose to blend in? Is there a message about the dominant culture being more worthy?

Research shows that ethnic-minority children benefit from developing a strong ethnic identity and acculturation that is not assimilative (Roberts and Ali 2013). From the minoritarian point of view, blending-in means that their future is at risk.

Minorities appreciate RE in their own religious tradition at school, with their own groups and their own teachers (Metso 2019; Rissanen 2014, 2019, 2021; Zilliacus 2014). According to the narratives collected for this article the minorities experience their own RE as helping to diminish internalized oppression and assimilation.

The narratives also show that there are ways to share religion in a way that minorities experience as respectful. Examples of such occasions were the Jewish children singing Chanukah songs for all students, the Muslims spreading art works of mosques in the school (teachers O and M); sharing religion in this form can be called cross-cultural appreciation. Moving from appropriation towards appreciation means increased 'sensitivity to the injustices' and 'truly valuing a culture' (Matthes 2016: 366). In these narratives children from the minorities together with their own teachers are leading and vocalizing the sharing of events. The narratives show that minorities are happy to share when they are the agent and decide how their own religion is presented and represented.

## Conclusion

A new term, 'fraudulent appropriation', was introduced in this article. The term is used to describe processes when teachers from the dominant group take over the mandate to teach minority children about the children's own religious tradition. In schools, the power is in the hands of adults, and when these adults belong to the dominant group the amount of power grows. The term 'fraudulent appropriation' is useful in settings with children from minorities within a powerful educational institution where someone takes over the right to tell them who they are. Narratives about events linked to how 'someone else becoming the expert on the minority's behalf' (Todd 1990: 24) presented in this article show that minorities react sharply against this. Minority children benefit both emotionally and academically from having their own teachers with a shared minority background (Phinney and Chavira 1992; Quintana 2007; Seaton *et al.* 2006).

The importance of being subjects in their own lives, and being able to speak out and be heard about their own issues can be linked to CRT (Delgado and Stefancic 2017), emphasizing the voices of minorities and their right to pose and answer the Foucauldian question 'qui sommes-nous?' (Foucault 1982: 4).

At the same time, it is important once more to underline the perspective from the margins. There is a need to recognize historical injustice and its connection with the privileges of the white/dominant group and the need for transformative measures to be taken (Rovid 2022). As mentioned, historically all religious minorities presented in this article have been targeted with oppressive policies at some point. This dark side of inter-religious co-existence in Finland and its influence on school is silenced and the paradigm of the 'ideal multi-cultural

school' thrives (Hummelstedt *et al.* 2021b).

In addition to previous research that shows that religious minorities appreciate their own RE at school (Metso 2019; Parland and Kwazema 2023; Rissanen 2014, 2021; Zilliacus 2014), the narratives collected for this study show that the right to decide about their own concerns is essential for religious minorities, including the right to protect their children from fraudulent appropriation and the danger of assimilation through blending into the dominant tradition. ■

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