



SEINÄJOEN AMMATTIKORKEAKOULU  
SEINÄJOKI UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

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**Children Hybrid Integration: Learning Dialogue  
as a way of Upgrading Policies of Participation**

**Local report (Finland)**

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How do you feel about school? Local report of  
interviews with children, and professionals on their  
school experiences

Responsible partner for the deliverable: Jagiellonian University (UJ)

Main drafter of the local report  
(Finland) European School Heads Association



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## Introduction

This report is based on templates for local reports about professionals' and children's perspectives which has been delivered by UJ for use by the partners in the research activities. Each partner has prepared and delivered two local reports, about the professionals' perspectives and the children's perspectives. Draft versions of the two final reports (about the professionals' perspectives and the children's perspectives) has been prepared and circulated among the project partners by UJ for reviewing. The revisions have been introduced in the deliverable regarding local reports. This report is divided in two parts, according to the differentiation between professionals and children. The final report (D. 5.2) will include a reflection on the data presented in this report and on the most important results emerging from the local reports.

The report included a methodological overview, followed by sections for each part of the two general sections (professionals' perspectives and children's perspectives). The section on professionals is organised, for each country partner, according to the views of different professional (teachers, social workers and mediators) about professional experiences, in general and for what concerns narratives on and relationships with migrant children and their families, the experience of pandemic and finally the recommendation for good practices. The section on children is organised, for each partner, in thematic subsections about the experience of schools, intercultural relations at school, identity and belonging, and final recommendations.

## CHILD-UP WP5 local professional report: FINLAND

Aino Alaverdyan, Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences

Tiina Hautamäki, Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences

Henna Jousmäki, Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences

Maiju Kinossalo, Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences

### 1. Methods of the study

The interview sample was a spin-off from the previous, quantitative phase of the project. While interviewees were recruited from already-existing networks in schools and municipalities, additional interviewees were searched for through substantial promotional work through contacting school-leaders and in social media, private e-mail, as well as print mail sent to schools. After making initial plans with several interviewees and conducting a couple of face-to-face interviews, the broke of the COVID-19 pandemic changed the research circumstances. First, schools were closed for everyone but pupils and school staff, and later, with a societal lockdown, teaching and learning started to take place in a distant mode through different IT and communication channels. This means that a majority of the interviews have been conducted remotely, mostly using a telephone line through Skype. This also meant a delay in data collection especially in relation to teachers, as their availability and willingness to engage in research drastically decreased because of the heavy burden caused by the major crisis in their everyday work.

#### Target group: teachers

Little by little, remote interviews were fixed in all respondent groups. For teachers, 13 interviews were conducted among 11 women and two men during 9.3.2020–3.2.2021. They were occupied at all ISCED levels; in addition, many of them worked regularly with pupils from various ISCED levels in preparatory instruction, an initial two-term period for newly-arrived pupils for acquiring some basic competence in the Finnish language before integrating fully to the Finnish-speaking classroom. In addition to the remote interviews, nine teachers answered in open-ended questionnaires via web links consisting of the same questions as the interviews.

The educational backgrounds of the interviewees in this sample included class teacher (Master of Education), subject teacher (Master of Arts; often specialised in language teaching), school assistant, and youth and leisure instructor.

### Target group: social workers

As for social workers, they were interviewed in both school contexts and reception centres for refugees and asylum seekers. The latter group is introduced below after the section on interpreters. In school contexts, seven interviews were conducted: five for school social workers and two for social workers in a reception centre for unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors going to school outside the centre. Five women and two men were interviewed in the period of 29.5.–4.12.2020. Each interview lasted for some 60 minutes. The individual interviews were conducted with the help of Skype phone calls (without video). All school social workers were Finnish nationals. The educational backgrounds of the interviewees were Master's or Bachelor's Degree in Social Work or Social Services; Student Welfare Act (1287/2013)<sup>1</sup> lays down educational qualifications for school social workers.

### Target group: interpreters

As for the group of mediators/interpreters, the Finnish sample consists of three interpreters and one mother tongue counsellor. All the interviewees were women and they were recruited after their response to our call made via interpretation agencies as well as on social media. Individual interviews were conducted instead of the proposed focus group interviews because in Finland, the target group is not united but the members are scattered and work independently; thus, individual professionals were more easily available for interviews and more eager to engage in the research process. Interviews were conducted with Skype phone calls (without video connection) during 12.6.–19.11.2020 and their average length was 80 minutes. One of the interpreters wanted to participate in writing, that is, by giving written answers to the interview questions.

As to the educational backgrounds of the interpreters, all had a vocational qualification of an interpreter gained through a short-cycle study programme. One was gaining further education on interpreting in a university of applied sciences. They also had other experience in working life in such sectors as education and finance.

### Target group: reception centres

In reception centres for asylum seekers and refugees, three focus group interviews were conducted. Six women and four men participated in these interviews in the period of 2.4.–1.10.2020. Each interview lasted for approximately 70 minutes. The group interviews were conducted with the help of Skype (without videos). Among the interviewees, there were three persons with a migrant background. Each focus group had a distinct profile; one an NGO working with migrant youth, second doing social work among migrant adults, and third a reception centre for asylum seekers.

The educational backgrounds of the interviewees included Master of Social Sciences, Bachelor of Social Services, Bachelor of Nursing, Bachelor of Accounting, and Youth and leisure instructor. The

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<sup>1</sup> Student Welfare Act 1287/2013. Available in English: <https://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/2013/en20131287>.

job titles of the interviewees included social counsellor, leisure and peer counsellor, mother tongue counsellor, and nurse; in addition, some occupied the role of a leader or coordinator of activities.

## 2. Professional experiences – an overview

### Professional experiences: teachers

All the teachers interviewed worked directly and regularly with pupils with a migrant background. Some of them had only recently started in working life but most had years of experience and had worked in various schools.

The specific field of most interviewees is preparatory instruction (detailed more in-depth in WP3 report on legislation in Finland<sup>2</sup>). This is a type of education Finnish municipalities may offer for school-aged children as part of their compulsory basic education. While the Basic Education Act suggests that municipalities organise preparatory basic education, there is no legal obligation for municipalities to do so. Hence, it is up to individual school to decide whether preparatory classes will be offered to newly arrived pupils, and it is up to individual teachers to design the content and syllabus of these courses. There is thus a high degree of autonomy in decision-making.

Usually the newly arrived pupils are placed to group of preparatory instruction for basic education. If a pupil is placed in preparatory class/group, the integration to the mainstream classes begins immediately in such subjects where knowledge of the local language is not particularly essential, and integration should proceed gradually and in close collaboration between preparatory teacher and regular class teacher.

The Finnish education system rests on the National Core Curriculum (Finnish National Board of Education 2016<sup>3</sup>) which has a section on *Finnish/Swedish as a second language*<sup>4</sup>. If the migrant pupil's competence in Finnish/Swedish is insufficient for attending regular language/literature courses in basic education, courses are offered in Finnish/Swedish as a second language. In the sample context, the mainstream language is Finnish, and in the following, this subject is referred to by its Finnish abbreviation S2 (S for *suomi* 'Finnish language'; 2 for second language).

The interviews showed that teachers in preparatory instruction work essentially as special needs teachers but without the status and pay of such. By special needs, we refer to S2 teachers' constant need for dynamic action to meet the variety of needs to pupils have. Previously, it has been noted elsewhere that migration background can, as such, be expected to raise the need for pupils' *additional support* – "for example, social and emotional support." (Eurydice, 2019, 91.)

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<sup>2</sup> Available at [http://www.child-up.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CHILD-UP\\_Report-on-legislation.pdf](http://www.child-up.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CHILD-UP_Report-on-legislation.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Finnish National Board of Education. 2016. New national core curriculum for basic education: focus on school culture and integrative approach. Available: [new-national-core-curriculum-for-basic-education.pdf](#) (oph.fi).

<sup>4</sup> The mainstream language in the pupil's environment may be Finnish or Swedish.



Preparatory educators are in constant flux also because “the arrival of new pupils throughout the academic year can render the design of a coherent teaching plan difficult” (OECD 2018, 178). In addition, the work involves and craves for fine pedagogic skills, language awareness, and interactional and emotional competence. Teachers’ work is, in essence, collaboration every day with both school assistants, class teachers, other S2 teachers in municipalities, and support services.

Despite the intensive and specific competences needed, there is no legislation on the qualification requirements for teachers in preparatory teaching. Most teachers are hired as teachers of Finnish or of Finnish as a second language; however, it is the case that some teachers have completed no studies in S2.

Because of the obscurities in qualifications and in The Basic Education Act, the teachers described themselves being in a situation where they need to prepare their teaching materials very far by themselves by using multiple sources. This is a complex and a constant process: pupils need material that not only suits their age but also their language skills. The same deficit shows in the teaching material of migrant/minority languages.

Preparatory class instruction has several challenges, as the teachers describe. The pupils are of different ages and have different skills, and their backgrounds may be different in many ways. It is also possible to receive preparatory education individually or in smaller groups, which also gives variation to the pedagogical approaches that the teachers need to adapt to. The context of language support or other forms of support varies. The support for S2 is provided either in a separate classroom or as differentiated teaching in the mainstream classroom. However, if any support is given to the pupils separately, they will be integrated to the mainstream class as soon as possible.

Teachers systematically showed affection towards their experiences at work. This they did not in order to say the work is easy but that the work they do is meaningful for both them and to the pupils. Part of the meaningfulness in teachers’ daily work seemed to partly arise from countering and overcoming challenges:

For the most part, they’ve been really motivated to learn Finnish and to go to school in general and have welcomed help. So that’s been really nice, and I’ve felt like I’m needed here. Like I’m here to teach and they make all out of it. (FI\_T11\_F)

What is notable, in case of teaching migrants, is that teachers’ expertise has wide regional or even school-wide variations. Yet, all interviewees say they need more education. Currently, the availability of teachers’ additional education for teaching multicultural groups varies regionally, most training focusing in the Helsinki area. The main reason for this is that the number of migrants has increased rapidly; there is not enough further training available in the first place, and there are municipalities where schools encounter migrant pupils for the first time. The interviewees argue that the education they have received (whether it is teacher or school assistant education) has not prepared them enough to develop their multicultural competences– they have learnt by doing, but now call for targeted training and thereby recognition as professionals in this area of special education: “Well I’ve learned a lot just by doing it. Of course in education I was taught how to simplify and clarify things and about taking it slowly and about pupils with special needs, but I really don’t think those studies prepare you for this.” (FI\_T12\_M)

### Professional experiences: social workers

Social workers' experience in working life varied from one to 36 years; the average length of interviewees' work experience was some 10 years. Some of the interviewees had extensive work experience with low-threshold NGO work and special youth work. Three of interviewed had experiences in child protection and one as an interpreter and one in mental health issues. One school social worker mentioned that there was plenty of training available on different topics for staff; this may not, however, hold true in all areas or schools in Finland. Some social workers mentioned that the work itself with immigrants has helped them to better understand the asylum and immigration system.

School social workers provide preventive child protection services mainly consisting of preventive pupil/student welfare services, which are statutory duty (Student Welfare Act 1287/2013<sup>5</sup>) and from time to time they provide corrective welfare services. Based on Student Welfare Act, school social workers need to provide pupils an appointment time within seven days when requested, and in case of a crisis, within one day. The work of school social workers is fairly independent when compared to the work of social workers in child protection, for instance. They typically provide services for several schools with hundreds of students.

School social workers are part of the school welfare group, which is carried out as community work by all staff members and all pupils at school as well as by parents' association. School social workers are also part of a pupil's multi-professional team and a pedagogical team which focuses on individual cases and work together with the pupil, his/her parents, and other networked partners. This type of casework may also include targeted group interventions in classes, for example investigating cases of bullying, conducting a welfare survey, and so on. School social workers organise different group activities and thematic days for pupils in co-operation with different partners. School social workers also give consultation and counselling on neuropsychiatric and mental issues. Pupils turn to school social workers with challenges in behaviour, learning or peer-relationships, or when they wish to have some activities for their free time. Youth might also come and reflect on their thoughts with school social workers. Pupils may also share their home affairs with school social workers and also parents can receive consultations and appointment times from school social workers. The cooperation network of school social worker is large: child protection, family work, youth work, police, NGOs, and so on.

School social workers face a wide range of emigration in their work. Not only is it about refugees or asylum seekers; there are families who have migrated because of work. There are also families of mixed nationalities returning to the home country of one of the parents. Further, there are Finnish families resettling into Finland after years abroad. A (normal) school social worker does not meet

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<sup>5</sup> Student Welfare Act 1287/2013. Available in English: <https://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/2013/en20131287>.

with immigrant pupils regularly merely for the sake of them having migrated, but schools with preparatory classes do fall under their responsibility.

Common topics for school social workers' discussion with immigrant children are issues related to attending school and friendships; youth often wish to discuss dating issues when thoughts and views of the parents and the child differs on the matter. Although immigrant families experience education as important, there might still be differences in their conception of time– duration of school days, and why be in school on time. School social workers provide counselling and guidance about Finnish society; with immigrant girls, there is a lot of discussion about the role of women and girls in society. Without specifying the cultural, ethnic, or religious background of immigrant girls, one interviewee pointed out how immigrant girls may start criticising gender roles in their own culture due to the influence of their Finnish peers, which causes conflicts at home. Some conflicts have even escalated to a placement of a child and/or taking into care.

...so, when parents didn't see it right that youth takes influences from Finnish peers. It created conflicts and sometimes they escalate even to a placement of a child for example if there is violence at home because of girl has confronted the rules. There have been emergency placements and even taking into care, of course then there are also some other problems.... (FI\_SW4\_F)

As migrant families have a variety of backgrounds and life stories, they might sometimes be cautious with social workers and other officials at the beginning. When social workers gain trust with a migrant family, it creates confidence between partners that all are on the same page working towards the best interest of the child.

It means the world in student welfare work that there is a relationship of trust in understanding the other and being confidential and listening to that client and his concerns and knowing when there is trust so that even difficult things can be raised and it arises in such a way that I think we value another person and start from the same line to work and be respected, and even if thoughts maybe what this Finnish way of life and school world sounds like suddenly special thinking, attitudes to things, they must be listened to and tried to understand. That's where it builds that trust, and then when it is there, it's easier to talk about difficult things. (FI\_SW5\_M)

The key competence areas of school social workers were perceived to be a developmental approach and continuous learning. Interviewees mentioned as developmental needs to find methods and ways to engage migrant youth in influencing, skills in scaling up cultural and gender-sensitive work to different environments and municipalities, knowledge on different benefits and services (especially for mother tongue counsellors), and psychological and trauma treatment skills. School social workers also raised as capacity needs gaining knowledge on different cultural and religious facts so that these could be better fostered and made visible in a school environment. One school social worker also wanted to have more knowledge about working with refugee children and families in general.

Social counsellors working among unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors act as assigned workers to the young person they support in everyday matters. Their task is to provide guidance throughout the asylum process and manage social security issues and, importantly here, cooperate with school

and with other professionals. They continue working with their clients even after they have received their residence permits, so the young can receive continuous support from the same persons.

### Professional experiences: interpreters

The professional backgrounds and years of experience in the group of interpreters vary. All pointed out they would like to participate in additional training but that there is not much available. When assessing their study programmes, interpreters maintain that the curriculum should also cover entrepreneurship (as many of them work as freelancers), communication in more detail, and even field-specific interpretation such as (mental) health care. As to their professional paths, all have in some sense drifted to their current position; it has not been a professional goal for any one of the interviewees but due to different personal life events, societal circumstances, and professional openings, they have ended up working where they do.

In their everyday work, interpreters are occupied by various types of official situations where a client needs interpretation into his/her native language or has been assigned to such service by an officer wanting to make sure the client understands the issue right. Interpreters are usually ordered via an electronic system where available professionals can come forward and show their interest for the job. Thus, daily tasks vary to a great extent but, as *Marjo* describes, are predominantly demanding by nature:

It's pretty burdensome mentally when the situations pop up and they can be really heavy and you're there for just one hour, and after that you never get to hear from them. We never see a story coming to an end---I've rarely been in a joyful situation with a positive atmosphere. Usually we're only needed when there's trouble, so the emotional stimulus of the situation itself causes a load. (FI\_I2\_F)

Further aspects that make interpreting a challenging occupation is that the pay is low and there is not working community around, as official interpreting is implemented by individual interpreters who are paid on an hourly basis by the agency which takes in orders and transmits them to interpreters available. An issue to be noticed here is that officials follow the principle of the cheapest cost price independent of the service provider's formal education and competence. This means that orders may be competed for by both educated professionals as well as non-educated entrepreneurs. In sum, not only is the level of wages low but interpreters are also alone in organising their facilities and insurances, in managing their well-being at work (including finding peer support and possibilities for debriefing and recovery), as well as in upgrading their skills. Despite these flaws, interpreters feel their work is valuable and find joy in seeing how their presence and assistance helps people.

### Experiences of professionals in reception centres

The reception centres in the sample were established to face the 2015 wave in asylum-seeking around Europe. Some of the interviewees had worked in the centres ever since. One social worker also was involved in different professional networks on multicultural work and acted as a human rights observer in a war zone.

Reception centre personnel had diverse experiences in terms of clients, everyday practices, as well as on receiving support and developing their professionalism. The main distinguishing factor related to the specific profile of their employer.

First, the NGO working with migrant youth operates with 12–25-year-old migrants. The activities especially aim to support the early integration of immigrants through volunteer work, peer support, as well as projects on active citizenship and social impact. All interviewees in this category advocate the voices of migrants at different forums, and they also welcome migrant parents to participate in activities, as requested by the young themselves.

The NGO interviewees exemplified early integration by telling that, in connection with their work, migrant youth learn new skills from each other and from volunteers; volunteers are crucial in fostering cross-cultural dialogue. These social workers provide young people with a safe space and community where they can be themselves and feel welcome.

Two, in migrant adult social work, clients include refugees, quota refugees, and persons who have obtained a residence permit/refugee status through an asylum application. Social workers here act as assigned workers (following Social Welfare Act 2014/1301, 42 §)<sup>6</sup>, so all clients of immigration services have a social worker of their own, accompanied by a social counsellor as a pair. A mother tongue counsellor is asked to help clients if social counsellor requests so, for example in case of paperwork or visiting the police or bank together with the client. In addition to counselling, a mother tongue counsellor also organises information events. In this type of work, the focus is on adults' issues but affects and is affected by clients' offspring, as well.

Third, the interviewees placed in a reception centre for asylum-seeking adults and families describe their work involving a wide range of clients, from babies to the elderly, so there are also many different needs to meet. As reception centre provides independent housing for asylum seekers, children and youth remain mainly in the realm of their own families, and thus the counsellors working there do not have a direct working relationship with children. When they do, it happens in cooperation with parents, for example if parents share issues related to their children. However, an interviewee points out "it would be necessary to work directly with teenagers and young people especially, when at the reception centre...that is missing or rare." (FI\_FGI3\_SW4\_F)

In their everyday work, social workers of the reception centre reported receiving professional guidance regularly, either individually or as a group. Debriefing and defusing methods were also utilised to support their work. It was also stated by some social workers that the general public do not know the real picture and content of working with asylum seekers and immigrants.

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<sup>6</sup> Social Welfare Act 2014/1301. Available in English: <https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/kaannokset/1982/en19820710>.

### 3. The experience of migrant children from professionals' perspectives

#### Teachers' views on migrant children's situation

When asked about migrant pupils' educational trajectories and needs, teachers are quick to say that migrant pupils are all but a uniform group. Some of the pupils have no previous experience on going to school; some have attended a religious school; some have had some education on a refugee camp; and some have studied on a more stable rhythm in an established educational institution. Not only are their educational backgrounds different, but they also differ from one another –as all pupils do– in terms of cognitive abilities, social and emotional skills, as well as motivation: “It's often up to the pupil's motivation towards language learning. If there's a trauma and the child has seen something... learning becomes difficult.” (FI\_T3\_M)

Pupils' backgrounds give rise to pedagogical questions on special needs daily. The teacher takes account of the pupils' experiences in pedagogy. One teacher described how she understands that migrant pupils of all ages may have challenges in learning: “In upper comprehensive school, it slows learning down extremely if the starting point is that you can't read or write.” (FI\_T5\_F)

Despite the challenges, many teachers describe migrant pupils not as a differentiated special group but first and foremost as *children* and as *individual persons*. The Finnish teachers want them to be seen similarly to all other pupils, but through pedagogical approaches, migrant pupils can be supported in learning activities and in life. The teachers describe that migrant pupils' expectations for their lives are similar to those of their Finnish peers: they want to learn, make friends, have a family, build a career, and so on. Moreover, pupils' needs are human: they want to tell about themselves – who they are, where they come from, what their mother tongue is, and what is meaningful to them:

Yeah, like, I, like at first what it comes to my mind is that when you work with pupils, so we talk about all other kind of things and get to know each other and they get to know and they get to tell, what they want here at school. I've been noticing that they also like to tell about their own culture and about themselves and I have given them time for that. (FI\_T10\_F)

In the sample, it also becomes clear that it is important especially for newly arrived pupils that there is an adult present, speaking the same language than the pupils:

It's really important that when a newly arrived pupil doesn't know much Finnish yet, there's a mother tongue teacher who truly understands the challenges in learning, family life and health. So I sometimes get to hear about parents' break-up or other sensitive topics that you can't necessarily share with a teacher who doesn't know your language, or if you just trust the mother tongue teacher more. They do say that children are ready to open up much more... I think a mother tongue teacher is like a cultural antidote who can explain Finnish society to children in their own language and kind of helps in integrating and accepting some things that are new and that you just don't have in your own culture. We can talk about them in class. So really important stuff. The teacher is also like a role model that you can educate yourself although you have a migrant background and you can make it. (FI\_T13\_F)

In the interviews, teachers described gender differences when asked but did not want to stress a distinction between boys and girls nor did they want to point to any specific cultural, ethnic, or religious backgrounds: “Yes, maybe a little, when the child comes from a certain country and religion, so it is possible to see small differences between boys and girls (..) But is not flashy” (FI\_T1\_F). Gender equality seems to be well grasped by those migrant families that have stayed in Finland for a long time already. The interviewees had, however, made some observations on a slightly different position of girls vis-à-vis boys among pupils with a migrant background. For boys, there seems to be more freedom than for migrant girls. It seems that the sphere of migrant boys is more outside the home, whereas girls’ place is inside the home. One interviewee said that outside the home, it is a task for migrant boys “to defend the honour of their family” (FI\_T7\_F). Migrant girls, on their behalf, have tasks at home, helping their mothers in cleaning and cooking. Parents can lay out strict rules for girls on how to behave and who they may meet outside the home. This kind of a narrow role of a kind daughter may prevent the integration of migrant girls. The same interviewee had also noticed that migrant boys may have close (physical) contacts with each other: “so the need for personal space is like smaller for them and they can like touch each other overtly” (FI\_T7\_F). In Finnish culture, physical proximity is generally not close, but people tend to retain distance to each other in public. For the interviewee, boys’ hugging poses a question of whether and how it should be addressed and conveyed to the boys that their practice may give rise to speculations about their (homo)sexuality among their Finnish peers.

In contrast, another interviewee was eager to raise pupils’ awareness about possibly different conceptions about gender in migrant vs. Finnish society today:

I might write a clause onto the board (..) that John and Jack are buying a house. Then a pupil may point out there’s a mistake. Well, I ask, why is there is a mistake? They say John and Jack are going to move in together. Well, why not? “Because they are boys.” Well, I say, in Finland boys can move in together and girls can, too. (FI\_T 3\_M)

The example shows how societal and cultural issues may be embedded in language teaching, all central for the integration process. Most interviewees, however, withdrew from addressing gender purposefully in their teaching unless the subject of the lesson is directly concerned with the “equal position between men and women [then] it is natural” to focus on gender (FI\_T6\_F). Here, the starting point in teaching is that pupils are children and individuals, not gendered subjects. A conscious gender-sensitive approach in teaching is highly appreciated in the Finnish National Core Curriculum.

Understanding that gender (and the possible limitations it may seem to cause) may be grasped differently in different cultures, teachers plan their teaching accordingly. What is important is that there are also various other levels that they need to pay attention to:

Peer relations are like multidimensional... what is the level of their language skills? What age are they? Are they a boy and a girl? So when you come from these kinds of cultures where the encounters between girls and boys are seen in different ways than in Finland, so that too plays a part. (FI\_T3\_M)

Consequently, to support integration at many levels, teachers support and encourage girls and boys to work together in class. All in all, the aim is that teaching is gender-neutral in Finnish schools. One

teacher said that girls and boys can learn together in groups. It is a necessary skill for the teacher to arrange the learning environment in gender-neutral ways.

### Social workers' views on migrant children's situation

#### School and social services as sources of support

As multiculturalism and diversity are normalised at schools in Finland and building blocks of the National Core Curriculum of Education, the school is a central institution enhancing the integration of pupils. School social workers highlighted that at Finnish schools, all are treated equally independent of their background: "...hardly come across any exclusion or bullying, we deal with such things quickly, and children are tolerant. We Finns are very used to having migrant friends in day care and long-term friendships can already be formed there" (FI\_SW3\_F).

Social workers in the sample reported that migrant children and youth are motivated to study and learn the Finnish language and they have prestigious plans for their future which is seen at school as well as reception centres. It was also stated by school social workers that also migrant families value education highly. Immigrant families are often thankful for the good and free-of-pay education system in Finland. In the school environment, migrant children get the image that anything is possible; they are encouraged to make their own decisions on optional courses, for example.

As a further source of security, social workers mentioned migrant youth's strong motivation and aspiration to be "normal Finnish youth" and school social workers migrant saw children as getting well integrated into the school environment in general: "The majority of children dive like fish in the water in new places and situations ('we're here now and here we do like this') without any problems." (FI\_SW1\_F)

Migrant children want to make friends with Finnish peers and they actively seek social contacts; immigration is not highlighted in the normal interaction between children; children encounter each other as individuals. Often, there are many pupils with a migration background in one school in the first place, and they may all come from various places around the world. Children with a migrant background speak Finnish with courage and enthusiasm, although the level of Finnish may not always be so strong.

Children with a refugee background have usually received at least some education before arriving, so going to school is not something completely unfamiliar to them. Finnish education and pedagogy do, however, differ from authoritative school systems pervading in some parts of the world, characterised by violence, arbitrariness, and intimidation.

Schools and teachers support migrant families' integration. Parents' digital skills are tried to be supported and guidance in digital aid tools for communication between home and school is provided. School social workers also are key persons to share the worries of children forward for example to child protection social workers so that a child or family can get the support needed. If a migrant child has siblings, they also play a crucial role in helping the younger ones in their homework or in conveying various messages from school to parents.



In Finland, knowing English is often not enough – the Finnish language was seen as key to integration. School social workers mentioned that, as a service, school social work may be unknown in many countries, even in Europe. Thus, parents are often amazed to find someone is interested in their issues. In Finland, children's rights are protected and if the rights are violated, the issues are addressed. Social workers considered it important that parents are informed and educated about the rights of the child. It was also commonly agreed that in Finland, gender equality persists and there are no gender-related limitations.

### Intersections of gender and culture

Social workers in the sample introduced several features related to gender, family roles, and culture which they perceive as shaping the social situation of migrant children. As they seldom mentioned any particular countries of origin, ethnicities, cultures, or religions, this report does not provide a detailed understanding of the topic and of the variability in relation to migrants from different geographical locations and with different cultural backgrounds and/or religious affiliations.

First, there seem to be differences in bringing up boys vis-à-vis girls. Social workers mentioned that an (unspecified) 'ethnic' background seems to grant boys more freedom of action whereas for girls, there are more limitations. It is common for migrant girls to remain under the supervision of their fathers; they also help their mothers in housekeeping and childcare while their brothers are free to go and enjoy their leisure time. In some (but not all) cultures, also boys' school success is more highly valued and supported than that of girls.

Continuing with gender roles, second, social workers said that, in some cultures, it seems to be the father's task to manage relations and attend meetings with officials, such as school. In a similar vein, migrant boys, even smaller ones, might sometimes have a demanding role in the family; a role not meant for children. If, for example, the father is not present, it influences the well-being of boys and even shows in learning at school.

There were, third, some specific gender-related norms of behaving the social workers in the sample had observed. Among other things, not all migrant children attend sexual and gender education as part of health education at school as they are a taboo in some cultures. It is also the case that that not all students with a migrant background can participate in physical education classes when swimming in mixed groups; or girls may need to wear long swimming suits. Girls' use of scarfs also typically stems from gender-specific cultural norms, in Muslim families in particular.

Addressing the intersections of gender, family and cultural norms is highly important for all young people:

If it's unequal treatment based on sex---here in the country is not supported and it is right to think that there must be equality. Gender is not a limit, or here it is not... and yes, they are empowered when they understand it. And on the other hand, regarding boys, they can also be under such pressures and expectations on what they should be like. It's not only girls who are empowered by that type of conversation. With the boys, such a contradiction arises between their family expectations and more diverse culture. It applies to both.  
(FI\_SW4\_F)

While it may empower the young that gender is not supposed to limit people's lives in Finland, it is always not welcomed by all young people with a migrant background: not all migrating young people suddenly want to start living like Finnish people in general, and they may not have wanted to leave their 'home culture' or 'culture of origin' behind but have been forced to move. Retaining one's own cultural norms may then show, according to some social workers, in peer monitoring, where youth with a similar cultural and religious background– Middle East Muslim youth in specific– become authorities for desirable conduct. They also show disapproval if members call into question or act against the pervading socio-cultural norms or understanding.

Some girls with a migrant background, who have been in Finland for a long time, have started to think about the role of women in Finland and evaluating their own future; if they should get married and focus on family at an early age already, or focus more on their own, individual goals. In general, well-integrated youth with a migrant background tend wonder about these directions crossing between two different cultures. In a similar vein, cultural issues persist for second-generation immigrants, but in a different light:

Many times it is even harder for second-generation immigrants because they are pleased that are in safe conditions and somehow got their lives started, but that second-generation might be in pain between these cultures even more than that first generation because they don't have the same culture to preserve - they don't know it properly - when a different kind of culture is cherished at home, they don't sit here in Finnish culture either. (FI\_FGI1\_SW2\_F)

Sources of vulnerability: language deficiency and societal prejudice

While migrant children may be motivated to study and even receive support from their parents, dreams of success are not always fulfilled. In visioning future studies, the academic skills of pupils with a migrant background might be veiled due to language difficulties as the development of language skills create a basis for future education.

Well at school you can see that many times young people have very ambitious goals for their own lives. They want to get a good profession and the goals are pretty tough and sometimes it feels like there are few unrealistic goals and when you go through them with their parents then there is always a little pain of restoring that realism to it. Those challenges are related to the fact that there are purely language problems or a history of being outside of school and that learning can be challenging. It does not always progress at the same pace, although the support that young children with an immigrant background receive is quite good. But it's a pretty big contradiction then for those dreams." (FI\_SW5\_M)

Among other causes of vulnerabilities, the social workers interviewed mentioned the asylum-seeking process itself as it causes insecurities for both minors and whole families, which can hinder the study motivation and future planning as well as cause depression, difficulties in sleeping, and many other mental issues. Absence from school is undesirable and might, sometimes, be a step towards the formation of youth gangs, a negative development among all youth:

And probably otherwise the absences now may be due to similar reasons with the native Finns. That we are being out of school and in those gangs. Not just to come to school. Even then, not due to immigration, but you may have drifted into such groups that you are in the

city rather than at school. Yes, there are young people like this among both immigrants and native Finns who are out of school. (FI\_SW4\_F)

Indeed, young people face similar risks and undesired behaviour independent of their national background. One school social worker exemplified this in telling about a racist shouting between different migrant groups at school. Additionally, it also happens that there are children and youth who prefer socialising with other members of their cultural/ethnic group only. Social workers saw this type of segregation as strengthening undesired development and creating risks for problematic behaviour.

While some pupils with a migrant background may feel safe and satisfied in their own cultural networks, and although multiculturalism is deeply embedded in the school curriculum, social workers emphasise that migrant pupils generally long for Finnish friends. Even after spending his/her whole life in Finland, a young person with a migrant background may still face challenges in making friends with native Finns. The case is, the interviewees argue, even more difficult when arriving to Finland at the time of secondary school (ISCED2). Migrant children often face loneliness outside school. The language barrier might be one of the reasons behind difficulties in making friends. School social workers also mentioned that some children do not even want to learn Finnish and they want to survive using English (not an official language in Finland although widely spoken). Another school social worker raised a case where some children can speak Finnish but prefer not to use it at school. Some parents, on their behalf, speak English to their children although it is not their mother tongue and social workers saw this as posing challenges to the language development of the child.

Social workers generally agreed that there is today explicit racism and structural discrimination in Finnish society which hinders and blocks the inclusion and participation of (young) immigrants. They claimed many people have prejudice towards asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants in general, which are built and emphasised through media representations. They see this as a shame as in their view: immigrants they work with are different from the existing stereotypes. Further, social workers think that children's integration into society is usually fast, and it often happens that individuals and whole families undergo changes during the integration process. Counsellors felt powerless at the face of societal atmosphere as they felt incapable of influencing and changing society towards open-mindedness and respect for diversity.

### Interpreters' views on migrant children's situation

In Finland, interpreters tend to work in educational settings only when a pupil's non-Finnish speaking parents are present (an issue addressed in section 4). This is something that troubles *Marjo*:

I've thought about these kick-off meetings between families and teachers before the migrant child enters the school. We go through the school rules, routines, and practices. The child may be present and hear the interpreted version addressed to the parents. But then the next day the child is on her own, and it must be really challenging not to understand what people around you are saying and not being able to express yourself. Well you can point at those pictures but are they enough to express what you think? It is pretty intimidating. (FI\_I2\_F)

The case shows that although entering school is well-planned and thoroughly discussed with migrant parents, the scene is different for the child. Marjo shows concern over migrant children ‘losing their voice’ in not being able to communicate their inner thoughts and feelings when they arrive and wonders why children are not provided with interpreting when they start school in the new country. She seems the same flaw in a slightly older age group: when minors turn 18, it is up to them, not their guardians, to answer for themselves in official contexts like job-seeking. However, an interpreter should be used because language skills do not develop overnight.

Although interpreters do not often work directly with pupils in schools, they do have a good overall understanding of the educational needs of children with a migrant background. *Siri* (FI\_I3\_F) proposes for teachers a stricter take on migrant pupils’ absence from classes, as she says being absent from school makes the integration process slower. She also calls for immediate intervention in case of bullying as well as for a more regular use of learning methods that enhance group spirit and participants’ sense of belonging.

The sample on interpreters also shows that school plays a central role in promoting gender equality:

The school should promote these things and educate girls and women even more about Finnish society. And men too, of course... they have some bad habits to unlearn. The school should take an open stance on this for both men and women. The school is in an excellent position to teach young women and young girls that they have those rights. ---It hinders women’s integration when their success isn’t supported at home. I’ve met many clients who have lived in Finland for a long time. The man is succeeding, studies for a profession or even has a job, but the woman is still where she started cause she has had to stay at home with children. When they have several children, it is the mother’s task to stay at home. They are not supported for gaining success outside the home. ---I see young women who are illiterate and just keep on having children. ---I see that as a major reason why women don’t become involved in society. Integration never happens for them. When they only stay at home, they never get involved. (FI\_I3\_F.)

In the extract, *Siri* argues that the school, as an institution, is in the position to affect gender and power relations and girls’ and women’s agency and active participation in society, and that it should do more to take advantage of this position and teach pupils the meaning of gender equality in order to enhance integration of children with a migrant background.

### Migrant children’s situation from the perspective of reception centres

Asylum-seeking families may stay in a reception centre environment for some five years, during which children are born and raised. In the reception centre, families have a room or two for themselves and share the kitchen and bathrooms with other residents. During the years of residence, counsellors encounter different emotions among the residents; adults’ tiredness is constantly present also in children’s life. Asylum seekers are frustrated and sometimes even angry over their situation; on the other hand, there are lighter days when they forget their status. Asylum-seeking children are open for contact with reception centre counsellors. Children have a hard time staying in their family rooms and they often use the corridor space for their plays, where they create their own culture of being. For children, a balancing factor to everyday life is attending the municipal school; under school-aged asylum-seeking children can attend day care or pre-school.

Staying at a reception centre for years as an asylum seeker becomes costly to society not only because of the facilities but also due to the professional support and other services surrounding it. The process also becomes costly financially, and mentally, for those asylum seekers who cannot practice their previous occupation fully. As asylum-seeking children receive day care placement free of charge, social workers stated that the adults do not always understand that it is a benefit provided by society and normally a payable service. Not paying for it has in some cases caused only loose commitment in using the service. After receiving resident permit, the asylum seeker has a legal right for social security benefits and services. The social workers interviewed pointed out that many people, in general, have misinformation about the financial support that asylum seekers and immigrants receive.

The views of reception centre personnel in the sample was generally in line with those of individual social workers (reported two sections earlier). For example, both see asylum-seeking children as mainly optimistic despite all the difficulties they have experienced. Social workers saw children's ability to adapt and find positive things even in difficult situations as a great resource: "Most of the youth are really, it's amazing how they can be so diligent about schooling in this life situation" (FI\_SW6\_F). Not always do asylum-seeking parents even have the resources to support their children in schoolwork due to their insufficient skills in Finnish, illiteracy, or overall stressfulness of the life conditions.

As for asylum-seeking teenagers, who can already understand the situation better, the asylum process was seen as unreasonable burdensome and difficult. Moreover, for them, encountering a new culture, a new system of rules and norms, seems especially challenging; for instance, some counsellors felt that they do not always find ways to motivate or persuade youth to leave for school. As the asylum-seeking process is prolonged, normal ways of supporting coping lose their effectiveness.

As to differences between perceptions of gender in different cultures, the NGO specialising in migrant youth work has made a deliberate effort on community-building on the basis of encountering individuals and giving and receiving peer support. Young people are welcome as they are, not as representatives of a certain nationality, culture, or gender, which shows in the positive atmosphere and in encounters between youth, volunteers, parents, and workers. As a result, the interviewees argue the young perceive it as their second home where they experience belonging. This approach enables participants to think and criticise learnt perceptions of gender and culture together.

In the eyes of social workers in the NGO, it is challenging for migrant youth to find work which corresponds to their education. They also criticised vocational counselling at schools, claiming too much attention is given in individuals' counselling to the fact that Finnish is not marked as their mother tongue and that, consequently, migrant youth are automatically referred to vocational education instead of high schools.

#### 4. Working with children and their families

When asked about the practical aspects of working with children and their families, the interviewees generally showed close engagement in and high expertise in their field across professions. The section

is organised into two: Relationship and communication with parents and Professionals' roles and tools in working with children and their families.

## Relationship and communication with parents

### Teachers and parents

When teachers were asked about how they perceive parents' or caregivers' role and engagement in their children's education, two types of answers reoccurred. First, the family backgrounds of migrant pupils are not uniform as parents are a heterogeneous group; yet, two, communication with migrant pupils' parents tends not to be straightforward.

As to the first point on migrant parents differing from each other in how involved they are in their children's education, teachers said that it is the same as with native parents: some are more involved and more interested than others. Similarly, if offered additional support for learning, some parents are suspicious as to what it means. While this is not uncommon among native parents, either, it may be a sign of a different type of understanding on learning difficulties than what currently exists in Finnish pedagogy, one that does not accuse the learner of not learning but tries to accommodate teaching to meet the learner's needs. Teachers do recognise some thought lines and attitudes among parents that they see as relating to differences in cultural and/or ethnic backgrounds; some parents, for example, underline the joy of having their children attending Finnish school. They give high value and full support for learning, and they also expect their children to do the same. On the other hand, a few teachers note there are parents with demands or unrealistic expectations on the teacher, or, at times, on the child; for instance optional language studies may seem attractive and useful for the parents' perspective but not for the learning and study load of the child still in the process of acquiring skills in the Finnish language.

Language is a central point of concern also in teachers' communication with migrant pupils' parents. The single factor that teachers recurrently mention as a challenge in their work is the lack of a shared language between them and migrant parents. By this they refer to parents' poor skills in Finnish and, often, English, and to the overall feeling that they cannot be sure whether the parents have understood them right. Often, it happens that class teachers ask for S2 teachers' help in communicating with parents: "Communication with parents is really challenging. It is not impossible, but I do also help other teachers a lot when they come to me and say that now the mother or father has misunderstood this and that." (FI\_T3\_M)

In addition, it is not merely the difficulties in a certain language but a difficulty in reaching the parents through any communication channels. Migrant parents do not regularly participate in parents' meetings and, for reasons the teachers say they do not know, do not easily respond through digital media.

### Social workers and parents

Some migrant parents understand Westerns ways of thinking about child protection well but for others, it is more difficult to comprehend. Some migrant families find it difficult to work with social workers who are women with power for decision-making. Immigrant families might further be generally cautious when talking with social workers, and social workers evaluated that gaining their

trust was a challenge. Immigrant families might also lack knowledge about the Finnish service system and the work of different professionals which causes mistrust in co-operation. One school social worker evaluated that it is rare for immigrant parents to do the initiative for contacting the school social worker.

They very rarely actively raise issues themselves unless there is such a clear experience of racism in the past, so if they experience such an attitude, then they might get in touch, but very rarely do the parents themselves take initiatives to co-operate. It must be because of their caution or perhaps they feel the system is too complex with all its clicks and everything, and whether they know how to handle things that they might prefer to keep in the home sphere and not dare to bring issues to school. (FI\_SW5\_M)

On the other hand, there are also migrant parents who take initiative towards the school but to a direction that is not appreciated in the Finnish education context: trying to buy grades for their children and affect school regulations. This might happen if the families used to be clients of private schools abroad. Further, some parents who want their children to aim high show respect towards hard sciences only and acquire extra lessons for their children after school, for instance in maths. As one social worker argues, “parents boast over their own success at school, like they were so good in this and that, but they don't understand that here the level of requirements is different and that success is hard especially if there are problems with language.” (FI\_SW1\_F) Such parents may also be demanding in terms of their children’s leisure time activities and goals.

School social workers in the sample report that they have sometimes had to make a child welfare notification, which has created a lack of trust and conflict between school social workers and parents.

And then here a little one says that he has been beaten with a stick or something and I have to make a child protection notification behind the parents' back because the child has talked about something like this and... Sometimes if there’s been violence at home and then it’s so hard for parents to understand that if a child talks about this then why aren’t they even contacted. This is probably what has led to the worst conflicts with parents, that they don’t want to have anything to do with me. Things like that must be sorted out then. These issues are worked through with child protection, but yes, it may leave parents with such distrust and then there’s the fact that they cannot, for example, forbid their child to see a school social worker, according to the law. (FI\_SW1\_F)

School social workers reflected on migrant parents' attitudes towards the new culture and its habits, which might also create a major challenge to their and their children’s integration and participation. Also children and youth can have negative attitudes towards following the generally accepted roles at school.

Probably the biggest challenge I have encountered when families are involved in the work that there are such attitudes among parents that different culture should not be recognised. That they should be able to live here following similar laws than in their country of origin, for example... Or if there is a young person with a migrant background who somehow experiences that s/he will not take these rules and this culture into account. In a way, maybe a little bit of the same that some parents have. Not to try or give a chance to try to adapt to the rules at school. That little bit of making your own rules, which somehow looks like is linked with the migrant background. (FI\_SW4\_F)

School social workers further raised a concern about migrant parents' digital skills which are crucial when keeping in contact with the school as the majority of daily and/or weekly communication with the school takes place through digital applications.

Despite the ever-emerging need for social workers, the human relationships and interaction involved are the very reason that makes it meaningful: “In my opinion, young students who come from different cultures, are the best thing that has ever happened to me. I go abroad many times a week when I sit on my couch and listen to their stories” (FI\_SW1\_F).

School social workers argued that, in building connection to children and their caregivers, it is important to take into consideration the family history of arriving to the country. Even when they have lived in Finland for several years, the journey they made as asylum seekers or as migrating for other reasons remains a significant experience.

#### Interpreters and parents

Interpreters in Finland tend to work with parents and families more often than with children only. Their work may cover various educational and health-related contexts, such as meetings between parents and the teacher, child health care, or psychiatric consultation. However, the interviewees gave no indication of interpreting ever occurring between pupil(s) and teacher in class without the parents' presence. The interviewees point out cultural differences in how straight-to-the-point negotiation may be; in Finland, professionals' communication can be very straightforward without much warming up, which may come as a surprise to those migrant parents who are used to certain politeness rules—saying nice things to one another, even in an excessive manner—before addressing the ‘real’ issue at stake. One interpreter also introduced the issue of ‘cultural bonding’: some migrants do not perceive the interpreter as a professional but, rather, a friend who speaks the same language and who they think can be addressed in an informal, straight, or even intrusive manner before, during, or after the interpreted session.

#### Reception centre staff and parents

In social work among migrant adults, families have an assigned worker (in accordance to Social Welfare Act 2014/1301, 42 §)<sup>7</sup> to whom they can turn to in any questions and receive guidance. Interpreters are used in client meetings. Social counsellors conduct home visits and sometimes also goes to different places with families, such as hobbies. Social counsellors working with migrant adults mainly work with parents, but they also take children into account and want to get to know them as well, as it is then easier also for children to contact the counsellor if needed.

Due to lack of resources, social counsellors feel they have not had enough time for teaching useful skills (e.g. digital skills, filling in applications, and paying bills) to their clients. Especially digital

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<sup>7</sup> Social Welfare Act 2014/1301. Available: 710/1982 englanti - Säädoskäännösten tietokanta - FINLEX ®.



skills were mentioned among the needs of migrants as plenty of services, including home-school - communication, are now online.

The interviewees in reception centres point out asymmetry in the roles of parents and children. They note that migrant children might have a role of an adult at home for different reasons and they help their parent(s) in communicating with Finns and also take care of family's daily life and chores:

But then I think that it is seen that many children ... When they are a little older and they learn the Finnish language, they take care of a lot of things here for the whole family, act as interpreters and mothers and fathers rely on these children, it is worrying and we have tried that the children do not interpret and... (FI\_FGI3\_SW1\_F.)

Also, these children usually do not receive support from their parents in school homework due to language barriers and do not get any financial support for hobbies, either.

Many social workers also stated that integration of teenagers might cause specific challenges as they already face puberty in all its colours, and if integration of children is or has been faster than parents, the outcome may shake family dynamics:

For parents, it's easy when that child learns faster than an adult and can take care of those things, and for a long time it will probably go pretty well unless there aren't heavy things that bother that child, but then when a child comes to puberty there will be problems as it has somehow made the distorted the... power relations in that family, or such things. It is then difficult for parents to take authority in other matters as well when through that language the child has somehow gained a stronger authority in some way. (FI\_FGI3\_SW4\_F)

The reception centres' counsellors were concerned about the lengthened situations of asylum seekers, and in these abnormal situations normal ways of coping were not seen as effective. Asylum-seeking children might have days of absence from school due to the family situation and mental overburden caused by the situation. Some children are born while their parents are living at the reception centre which then becomes the only environment the children know. In the words of one interviewee, the situation is unsustainable and the society needs "not to continue that type of marginalisation development, so it would be important that children could use their potential and parents' (poor) wellbeing would not paralyse children, that parents could get support for themselves" (FI\_FGI3\_SW4\_F).

## Professionals' roles and tools in working with children and their families

### Teachers

Teachers mentioned several useful skills in teaching migrant pupils. For example, teachers are skilful to form confidential relationships with migrant pupils and their families. Their awareness concerns different cultures, languages, and individual backgrounds.

One school assistant illustrated what it can mean to balance at the intersections of cultural differences, family habits, and the law on child protection. According to her, some migrant parents can sometimes give "an automatic little slam" (FI\_T2\_F) on the child's face. The school assistant did not evaluate this as a harmful act that would cause insecurity and break the child's physical integrity. She did not

see slams as an evidence of violence but as a thing that “belongs” to the other culture. The boundary between Finnish and other parents is here constructed as a natural cultural distinction.

### *Useful skills*

Teachers have skills to adapt and teach in rapidly changing situations. Some of the interviewed teachers mentioned that they have an ability to recognise pupils’ multidimensional backgrounds as well as empathy towards pupils’ traumatic experiences. They also pointed out they need to learn more about trauma in so far as it may hinder pupils’ learning.

Teachers mentioned the following useful skills when working with immigrant children and families:

- Language and cultural awareness as a pedagogical approach (linguistically responsive instruction and culturally responsive pedagogy as defined in the DivED<sup>8</sup> project in Finland).
- Ability to response to different situations that may occur unforeseen.
- Transversal competence and ability to embrace a wide range of transversal knowledge.
- Ability to form confidential relationships with migrant pupils and their families.
- Openness and flexibility.
- Sense of humour and situational awareness.
- Collaboration and interactional skills.
- Pedagogical skills.
- Preparedness for a continuous change.
- Recognising themselves as meaningful persons for pupils’ identity construction.
- Sensitive approach in pedagogy and interaction.
- Willingness towards continuous learning.
- Ability to recognise pupils’ multidimensional backgrounds and empathy towards the traumatic experiences of the pupils.

Teachers also mentioned the following development needs at their work with immigrant families and children:

- The continuous need for further education about intercultural competences and encountering diverse backgrounds, such as traumas.
- The need of professional guidance of work.
- Strong concern about pupils’ welfare and success at school and in life: they need more support than teachers can offer.
- Knowledge on how to teach pupils with traumatic experiences and how the experiences may prevent learning and motivation.

### Social workers

Social workers presented school as a key institution in providing and referring children and youth to different support services needed. It was evaluated by school social workers that the support

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<sup>8</sup> See <https://dived.fi/en/>.

measurements and services at school are pretty good overall and that there has been a great improvement of support services across time.

School social workers said that they are daily in contact with teachers as well, as there are cooperation structures at schools such as weekly pedagogical support teams (including school head, special needs teacher, study counsellor, school psychologist, nurse) and student welfare meetings. Student welfare work means joint action including all members and participants of the school (e.g. cleaners, janitors, parents as representatives of parental associations). Special needs teachers often cooperate with teachers of Finnish as second language and with special needs assistants. At primary school, a class teacher has an important role for pupils and their families for several years, as one social worker exemplifies:

At elementary school, there is the classroom teacher and under his/her leadership the classroom functions, so it is an important thing for the pupils that it is the one and same adult who is usually present for several years. And it's such a safe person in general who has shared things and showed emotions, it's an important thing for children's development. And for parents, it is also an important thing that there is someone safe who is with the child for several hours a day. (FI\_SW3\_F)

All in all, social workers gave positive feedback to teachers for their work in following up students' welfare, taking action, and sharing worries with school social workers when those arise. As part of the student welfare work in some schools, there are social counsellors (Bachelor of Social Services), who guide different group activities and give individual counselling. Also, some schools have recruited special needs assistants with an ethnic background. They can, for example, better "understand certain issues that can worry the teacher, so they can also interpret these issues" (FI\_SW3\_F).

At schools, there are student union activities and different youth-led projects. Social participation is supported more at schools nowadays and it is seen as an important element for creating a healthy and supportive learning environment in addition to pedagogy.

Inclusion, in general, is a trend idea today, so to speak. It is, of course, to be supported... Yes, in general, it is not related to immigration but to the school culture in general, that there is more and more of these activities alongside traditional teaching and pedagogy. I don't know then how that change is seen in classes, but in everything that happens every day at school, after school and in the breaks and other contexts, so yes, I think that inclusion is supported quite well and resources are invested there. (FI\_SW5\_M)

There was a practice mentioned by a few school social workers that when new pupils join the class, the teacher assigns some other pupils to accompany the new ones for the first days so that the newcomers feel welcome. In some schools, there are special days for the creation of group spirit at the beginning of the school year for all pupils, where also youth work and parish representatives are present. School social workers also meet new pupils (and sometimes parents) with difficulties in integrating into the new school. School social workers also do individual student welfare work with children, their parents, and other members of the support network. This type of individual work might also include targeted group intervention in selected classes, for instance investigating cases of bullying, conducting welfare surveys, and so on.

Below, a social worker praises lessons on Finnish as a second language where pupils with a migrant background come together:

They kind of start to lead that class in a way that, sometimes the teachers laugh that they talked about something completely different from what they were supposed to, and that there was a good conversation and when the students have the same experiences in that migrant group--- they dare to bring up their cause and make whatever questions. They dare to better bring out their insecurities and not-knowing and that they are very curious and take a stand on things, and when we start thinking about issues from a student perspective, in a way where students feel they need help, support, information, then they become better targeted when they better dare to bring out their own needs for information. This is one point of view that it is, of course, contradictory in the way that the same students are of course in those big mixed-groups, and that is an important part, but then they also need this group of their own where they dare to think about their special issues. (FI\_SW5\_M)

In the above extract, the social worker argues that, while mixed groups are central for integration, teacher-led moments with other pupils with a migrant background serve a great purpose in enabling learners of Finnish as a second language to open up on various, even sensitive topics.

School social workers also mentioned success stories as some pupils have completed studies on their mother tongue and on Finnish as a second language successfully and moved forward to high schools and universities. In general, social workers viewed migrant families as supporting their children in educating themselves. Some school social workers evaluated that the support services for migrant parents are accessible. School social workers preferred interpretation services for parents who cannot communicate well in Finnish or English. There was also a project mentioned which provides low-threshold, voluntary-based and peer to peer social service for immigrant families; they also provide information about the Finnish education system.

School social work is voluntary for pupils, and parents cannot prohibit their children from meeting the school social worker. If teachers refer pupils to the school social worker, the teacher has already mentioned this to parents earlier or will talk to them together with the school social worker. Discussion with children and school social worker is confidential and not shared with teachers. Also, parents can directly contact the school social worker with different questions and issues. One school social worker positioned herself working as a middle person in-between teachers and parents:

In general, I try consciously to go between [the teacher and parents] and take it all on me so that the teacher who has daily dealings with the parents ...to protect the teacher from hatred. That is, in a way, trying to protect the relationship between the teacher and the parents so school social workers are dealing with more uncomfortable cases. (FI\_SW1\_F)

### ***Useful skills***

Some of the interviewed social workers were active in updating their skills for example on trauma work and multicultural counselling, and they were involved in different multicultural and international networks. It was mentioned that updating one's professional skills is something one should actively aim for, because not all employers, in municipal social work especially, actively promote and provide opportunities for that. School social workers working under the education sector

in bigger municipalities were pleased with their training opportunities which they saw as plenty. Social workers in some workplaces, like reception centres, receive regular work mentoring.

Social workers mentioned the following useful skills when working with immigrant children and families:

- client-centred development approach and growth mindset
- empowerment approach in counselling
- skills in listening to the needs and opinions of immigrants
- skills in understanding the different type of family dynamics
- the cultural and gender-sensitive approach in counselling
- skills in encountering people as individuals
- working with interpreter (live, phone or application)
- communicating in plain language
- staying patient
- admitting that not all situations can be solved with your help and support
- having an acceptive and permissive attitude (not a judgemental one)
- asking for collegial help and support when needed
- fighting against stereotypes
- knowledge on the social security system (services and benefits)
- respecting difference.

Social workers also mentioned the following development needs at their work with immigrant families and children:

- to have easily accessible information on service guidance for asylum seekers and unaccompanied minors, and on banking issues especially for refugees
- to acquire knowledge on social insurance benefits, especially for own language counsellors
- to develop skills in scaling up cultural and gender-sensitive work methods
- to gain knowledge on trauma and psychology in more general
- to learn working methods and approaches with refugees
- to learn about different cultures and religions.

### Interpreters

The role of interpreters in working with migrant families is diverse. Depending on their exact position and job title, they may offer more or, typically, less extra-linguistic support and guidance for example in matters related to taxation or job-seeking. In school contexts, they report working primarily with parents and not directly with children. The following chain of events would thus not have taken place without the guardian's contact with *Jade*, a mother tongue counsellor:

The child was falling over, and the teacher saw it and ran to drag the child by the arm. The child got hurt a little, but this prevented the pupil from falling over. The child thought that the teacher was trying to rip her arm. (FI\_I1\_F.)

Afterwards, the two family members came to Jade's office, the child crying and wanting to quit school. Jade asked about the mother's wishes on what to do, and the mother said she wanted Jade to make a phone call to the teacher with her present, because her own language skills were insufficient

to carry out such a conversation. After the phone call, it turned out that the situation at school yard had been misunderstood by the child. In the end, the child was happy to go to school again.

As the example shows, language assistance which is more than interpreting can help participants to reach mutual understanding on challenging issues. Whereas an interpreter cannot escape the official role of producing a precise translation, a language assistant (close to the position of a mediator in some other European countries) may contribute more to the interaction by mediating between different persons, languages, and cultures, and thereby support migrants' agency. Additionally, ordering interpretation is a task of the officers, so in the example above, without Jade, the mother would have needed to take action herself and only hope the teacher calls out an interpreter.

Another example of the fine line between literal interpreting and culture-sensitive mediation relates to the use of humour in talk. In different cultures, people tend to read and appreciate humour in diverse ways. Whereas in culture A a certain utterance may be interpreted as humorous and not as literal, in culture B it may be taken as controversial and even threatening. Take a scene with a family, social worker, and interpreter (produced originally in FI\_I1\_F). The child acts naughty, and the mother reproves by saying she will „cut the child's finger". The interpreter interprets the utterance literally. The Finnish officer calls out child protection. The parents are puzzled.

To solve the misunderstanding, the issue is three-fold: the migrant family needs information; to be told that in Finland, social workers and other officers care for the safety and well-being of children, and that threatening with violence is unacceptable. The social worker needs culture-sensitivity; to be told that it was not a threat to be taken literally but an idiomatic expression rather regularly heard in the family after unruly behaviour. The interpreter, finally, needs support; as the interpreter cannot step away from the strict role of literal interpretation, a mediator could help to reconcile different roles, norms, and cultures.

As we see, there are different shades needed in 'interpreting'. When an interpreter was to give an opinion on the idea of introducing 'mediators' in Finnish school contexts in the research interview, the response was, however, that it is not desired. The fear was that mediators would steal interpreters' jobs and that it would diminish the value given to professional and precise interpreting.

#### Reception centre staff

Social workers evaluated their work with migrant children and families as rewarding and as a living library as all the clients have their own story to share. Social workers have seen positive development in their clients with respect to learning new skills or language or becoming decent citizens, which has been rewarding for the staff to observe.

Especially social workers who can follow minor asylum seekers' processes from arrival to the granting of resident permits saw their work as rewarding because these youth develop their skills a lot in a short time. Social workers working with asylum-seeking minors were amazed at the youth's resilience to cope with all the stress and their ability to proceed with their life path despite all the difficulties.

When asylum-seeking minors turn 18 years old, they stop receiving counselling in the same way they used to. Counsellors saw that this independence breaks off, for some minors, rather fast and there are many things to be learnt before this step.

In a reception centre, there are multidisciplinary team meetings and client and social work teams, where difficult cases are solved together. Asylum seekers can attend vocational school's language courses and many of them also work<sup>9</sup>. Asylum children attend day care or school. There are different activities at the reception centre organised by NGOs and the third sector. On the other hand, “we have tried not to build a lot of activities inside the reception centre as its bubble, but to get people to participate activities of the municipality.” (FI\_FGI3\_SW4\_F) Such a specific outward support measure was one where a parish project where asylum seeker can receive a support person to accompany the asylum seeker in different hobbies.

When an asylum seeker receives a resident permit, counsellors in the reception centre help to fill in different official applications. After receiving a municipality placement, clients move to municipalities and are referred to immigration services of the municipality. A transfer negotiation is held between the reception centre and immigration services if the client needs acute support.

Municipal immigration service and the social counsellors working therein are usually contacted from day care directly, as at day care they know that counsellors often meet families. Social counsellors also attend different meetings with clients especially if clients cannot go alone to meetings or they are not able to take care of things by themselves.

Low-threshold NGO has invested in a safe and gender-sensitive atmosphere for youth and counsellors to get to know youth individually and listen carefully to their needs so that they can develop their activities based on those: “It is not only an open space where you come and go. We ask the young how they are and phone them if they haven't been around for a while or we have not heard from them.” (FI\_FGI2\_SW2\_F) While migrant youth participate in NGO activities, they learn new skills from each other. NGO also provides support for migrant parents.

Social counsellors working at NGOs saw it as rewarding that youth experience the NGO as their second home which means that their investments as counsellors have paid off. Some social workers mentioned that they have learned a lot while working with families and children from different cultures and backgrounds: “After all, they come with their own culture to our activities. And this enriches our activities.” (FI\_FGI2\_SW2\_M)

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<sup>9</sup> There are some limitations for work if you are an asylum seeker, see more: <https://www.infofinland.fi/en/moving-to-finland/non-eu-citizens/coming-to-finland-as-an-asylum-seeker>.

## 5. Framing integration and evaluating policies

### Teachers on integration policy

Teachers in the sample argued that the Finnish school is, by nature, inclusive, meaning that pupils with various skills and backgrounds are welcomed into one and the same classroom. They also pointed out that support for learning is, in its most simple and everyday forms (learning in small groups; remedial teaching), available for everyone independent of their background. Here, co-operation between teachers is a norm, as is co-teaching by a class/subject teacher and S2 teacher/special needs teacher, or S2 teacher and school/special needs assistant.

Teachers showed appreciation towards the integration measures applied in Finnish schools nationally. However, they were clear in saying more is needed at societal, municipal as well as school levels. Crucial factors enhancing the school conditions of pupils with a migrant background and in need of additional support for learning include structural and financial support: how work is organised and resourced has a direct effect on both teachers' working conditions as well as children's well-being. Specific attention should be paid to increase language awareness among subject teachers to ease the transition of pupils from preparatory to regular class: "I'd like to see that migrant pupils are taken into account better in class. And at times I'm really impressed about how [some teachers] can adapt their teaching and find all sorts of wonderful new things though." (FI\_T5\_F.) Further, one school year in preparatory instruction is hardly enough for a smooth transition to regular class; support should continue in some form whenever needed.

Teachers in the sample also pointed out that some measures should be taken to reach out to work-based migrants. While their children are subjected to integration measures through the school system, they themselves are often left with no one apart from the employer. Teachers do their best in also showing empathy towards these parents by helping them to understand and tackle various issues in the new society they are settling into.

### Social workers on integration policy

Social workers in different organisations and with different titles collaborate with many other organisations and are members of different multi-professional teams. School social workers are part of school cooperation structures but also work closely with municipal child protection and, in some cases, adult social work. School social workers also co-organise events with NGOs.

Social workers described integration both as a process and a result. While it is a goal their profession aims at, it involves the personal experience of people with a migrant background becoming full members of society and finding each one's own place in society.

Social workers were generally concerned about the segregation of immigrants from native Finns; yet, they were optimistic about successful integration and inclusion happening at school level among children and the young. In their view, peer support is important for both adults' and children's integration. Most social workers stressed the view that people are more similar to each other than different from one another, and that this serves as the baseline for dialogue.



Social workers saw themselves as working towards fostering the participation of migrants and providing them with the resources needed for better integration. Some social workers highlighted that integration is a two-way learning process:

And then again, on the other hand, integration that not everyone ... Doesn't need to make themselves Finnish in every aspect, that they can let those beautiful things in their culture flourish so we can take something from their culture and then again, they can take what they want from our culture. (FI\_SW1\_F)

Well maybe it's just finding your place... that you have to be yourself and that you don't need to become Finnish to be and act and live here and influence... integration...that it's like a two-way process or that it's not that someone is integrating you and then you are a ready-made package afterwards... (FI\_FGI2\_SW3\_F)

There was a joint conception among social workers that the long integration process is filled with different emotions at different stages of integration.

Many times that strong emotional reaction can come at either end but when they arrive there can be a few-months honeymoon, but then gradually the truth reveals that you didn't just bump into this and you have to go back to that normal routine, it's pretty heavy for many kids. (FI\_SW1\_F)

It was also jointly agreed that the progression of integration depends on the person's attitude and activity. Finnish language proficiency was mentioned as the key for integration as well as for fast transition to education and working life. Different perceptions of gender roles might be difficult for immigrants to adjust to with the need for open dialogue and idea exchange in an accepting atmosphere: "All of a sudden, when they come here to Finland and there is equality here, that's a big change." (FI\_FGI1\_SW1\_F.) As Finnish society builds on gender equality, recognising and accepting gender equality is important for successful integration.

School social workers highlighted that all pupils are equal and there needs to be a school-level policy with a sensitive approach towards all students. School social workers saw youth as individuals and persons, but they also highlighted the importance of understanding different cultures and different ways of seeing things, for instance the expectations for children and special questions in each culture. School social workers also referred to the school's overall objective and its importance to set a joint goal for a tolerant atmosphere and environment for all: "I believe that at our school's general goal and atmosphere of tolerance is conveyed to the students. I think it has a positive effect on youth with migrant background also." (FI\_SW4\_F)

## Interpreters on integration policy

In Finnish society, interpreters work in an operational level and are not officially key figures in shaping integration policy<sup>10</sup>. This is unfortunate as interpreters gain a multifaceted perspective on migrants' reality of settling into the new society, a phase where policies and programmes intertwine with lived, everyday practices. Moreover, as *Marjo* points out, a number of interpreters have a migrant or multicultural background themselves, which already grants them unique experience and expertise on the process (FI\_I2\_F). Such is the case with *Jade*, who argues, on the basis of her own experiences, that every newcomer from another country should have a tutor, a personalised figure to welcome and guide the newcomer in everyday issues and especially in bureaucratic ones (FI\_I1\_F).

The possibility to use interpretation services in the early stages of the integration process is crucial in *Marjo's* (FI\_I2\_F) opinion. When language skills are still poor, interpreting is the key to support people's agency, active participation, and equity. Moreover, the initial phase is critical in a broader sense, as *Siri* points out:

I want to emphasise that the early stages of integration are the most important. If those don't work out, neither will the rest of the stages. After that it will be really difficult for anyone to be part of society if it didn't start off well. (FI\_I3\_F)

*Siri* also poses severe critique towards Finnish society and Finns' attitudes towards migrants. This relates to what she claims is a prolonged practice of attaching the label 'migrant' or 'migrant background' to people who differ from a more homogeneous mass of white native-born Finns in terms of their name, appearance or place of birth despite acquiring Finnish education and work experience:

It does make integration more difficult when you see that you are not welcome. It'd be really nice if one day migrant people were on the same level with the rest of Finns. Although the law gives you the same status and rights and all, I've seen it myself that employers favour native Finns over me even if I am more experienced. (FI\_I3\_F)

While relating more to society at large and the labour market especially, *Siri's* point simultaneously feeds straight into the educational system and shows that developing agency and active participation is central to the construction of fair and equal societal structures and practices. *Marjo*, too, has identified some challenges in Finnish integration policy in general and in educational contexts in specific:

In Finland, integration measures and services are fragmented at least in cities. One reason for this is the tight information policy, which does have its benefits, but it is hard to tackle and understand if you come from elsewhere and don't speak the language. (FI\_I2\_F)

The fragmentation of services also affects children. For example, when school officials do not receive information from other sectors (such as labour service or social and health care) about changes in

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<sup>10</sup> An exception to this is the state-of-the-art review of interpreting in Finland commissioned by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (2020).

migrant parents' circumstances (e.g. starting a Finnish course, going to work, or falling ill), they do not manage to see the whole context around the pupil and are prevented from suggesting measures the school could take to enhance the pupil's learning and well-being.

A further point found in both interpreters' and teachers' sample is that integration policy should reach out to all migrants in Finland. At present, there is no national programme nor established common municipal practices to enhance work-based migrants' integration, while individual municipalities, enterprises and projects do work to develop these.

### Integration policy from the perspective of reception centres

Integration programs are part of the general work of social workers working with immigrants at different settings and services; integration policies are merged with the work approach. The work involves close collaboration between different institutions, networks, and actors. Social workers mentioned some specific projects usually run by NGOs and parishes where they refer immigrant families and youth to as supplementary services. Otherwise, asylum-seeking children and youth attend normal day care and school as well as adult asylum seekers attend Finnish language courses outside the reception centre. There are also compulsory courses on Finnish society for asylum seekers, organised by immigration services.

Low-threshold NGO cooperates with the municipality, other NGOs, health and social services, academia, schools, and politicians. Social counsellors bring quota refugee youth to visit the NGO. NGO recruits volunteers from higher education institutions to work with youth. Also, the NGO organises different educational activities with experts for their network.

The integrational work conducted in reception centre was considered pre-integration as the target group for these services are asylum seekers, and for them the Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration (1386/2010<sup>11</sup>) is not yet effective. Integration work was also seen as challenging by these social workers working with asylum seekers as society's structures and the system does not support the full integration of asylum seekers. Social workers working at the reception centre experienced a further flaw in current policy:

As a measure, society is focusing on improving access to information on the voluntary return, which, from the point of view of reception centre counsellors, is not an option for asylum seekers, as the return of asylum seekers is not due to lack of information on voluntary return but there are other reasons. (FI\_FGI4\_SW4\_F)

Family group home's social counsellors raised their concerns relating to negative attitudes of Finnish people which are hindering or blocking immigrants' integration. They saw that policy-level talks and goals are not visible in action. Social counsellors emphasised that, despite their difficult situation, asylum-seeking minors usually have a high motivation for integration as well as education and

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<sup>11</sup> Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration 1386/2010. Available in English: <https://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/2010/en20101386>.

hobbies. There is pressure for minor asylum seekers to grow independent rapidly, before turning 18 years old.

And then the fact that the young person sees that what his part in that matter and how he can influence certain things, that what he should take responsibility for, maybe these are issues where the young people have to practice quite a bit. But of course not everyone.  
(FI\_FGI1\_SW2\_F)

In reception centres, asylum-seeking families prepare their meals and do groceries by themselves, which was seen as activating the residents for independence and agency in the new environment, and as thereby fostering integration.

Social counsellors among adult migrants work closely with day care and usually social counsellors attend meetings with day care teachers. Social counsellors also work closely with schools and especially with preparatory class teachers. There is an assigned, own nurse for immigrants at the health clinic who is a close partner when conducting a three-step health check-up for quota refugees. Social counsellors help in booking different health appointments and attend those as well if needed. Immigration services also work closely with child protection and their service providers (e.g. family workers). Counsellors also refer clients to different NGO services for immigrants. Social workers at immigration services co-operate more with employment office, responsible for organising Finnish language courses.

The reception centre nurse works closely with maternity clinics. The reception centre social counsellor co-operates closely with day care and schools, for example on children's absence. Teachers also directly communicate with asylum-seeking parents. Children in the reception centre might also receive family work services from child welfare/protection, and they can visit the school nurse and social worker. The reception centre's counsellors often use interpretation services. There is also co-operation with NGOs, higher education institutions, and different sports clubs for organising activities for children and families and coordinating volunteer work. The reception centre social workers have organised network meetings at the reception centre and, at the same time, introduced the facilities to other professionals, which helps them understand the situations of asylum seeker families and children better:

When there was a meeting on the child's issues the teacher has come to our reception centre to have that meeting and at the same time, we have introduced the reception centre and the environment from where the child attends the school world. Quite practical issues arise if the family lives in one and the same room and the child should do homework in the same room where everyone else in the family lives in and that rhythm... All such challenges become much clearer when they can see it for themselves what the starting point is and all that affects the child's concentration at school, for example. (FI\_FGI4\_SW4\_F)

## 6. School during the pandemic

### Teachers

The teachers in the sample described that the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent changes in teaching modes (remote or hybrid, combining live and remote activities) affected pupils, especially

their learning possibilities and peer networking. In Finland also more generally, COVID-19 has affected everyone's (pupils', teachers', whole families') lives in multidimensional ways. When it comes to the needs of pupils with a migrant background especially, it has been found that their needs should have been recognised in more effective ways in all educational levels (Goman et al. 2021).

One consequence of the pandemic was that after-school activities were closed. For pupils with a migrant background, these afternoon hours are important for learning Finnish in interaction with peers in a casual, yet professionally organised and monitored educational environment. This club lockdown was a major factor decreasing contact with peers in general and with Finnish-speaking peers specifically. Further, pupils lost the support for homework they had received thus far during the afternoons.

While COVID-19 affected pupils and forms of teaching, it also affected teachers. The pandemic was reported to be the single biggest factor affecting teachers' professional careers ever. Many studied new technology and worked long hours, some caring for their children at home simultaneously (some, but not all, day care centres also experienced lockdown). On a further note, a teacher with 20 years' experience in teaching in vocational school, pointed out that the number of students with a migrant background has gradually grown.

As a reflection, the remote teaching practices discovered and utilised during COVID-19 are valuable for a country like Finland with long distances and decreasing population. They have opened up new possibilities also for teaching pupils with a migrant background who need preparatory instruction or language teaching in their (possibly rare) mother tongue. Remote teaching is an option if teaching cannot be organised face-to-face which, however, is what teachers view as the best way of teaching and learning.

### Social workers

Social workers in the sample reflected on the state of emergency caused by COVID-19 in the following ways. School social workers have met families via Teams instead of face-to-face meetings. In these video meetings, emotional language is missing, and usually migrant parents want to survive with their broken Finnish in the meetings; meetings are focused on the agenda and many issues may stay unsolved due to barriers in communication. During the distant teaching period, school social workers noticed that pupils forgot how to interact with peers and their friendship skills had decreased from what they were like in face-to-face settings. One social worker noticed that even when all other classes transitioned to distant learning due to the pandemic, the preparatory class for migrant children retained its normal activities and schedule, thereby highlighting their specificity as different, as a separate group from the majority of pupils.

### Interpreters

In times of COVID-19, interpretation has mainly taken place through telephone. As interpreters say, this may pose more challenges in some situations for the interpreter (and possibly for the client) as the interpreter gains no para-linguistic hints, like facial expressions, on whether the message and the contents become understood or not.

## Reception centres

In reception centres, the personnel interviewed had observed families to have more problems during the pandemic as daily routines have changed in the new circumstances. Children in the reception centre play with mobile phones more often as there is a lack of other activities, for example. Some social workers had started remote working and experienced that more stressful than being physically present at the workplace, as there were now no spontaneous discussion opportunities with colleagues, and they suggested creating such opportunities more intentionally now when working away from colleagues.

## 7. Recommendations

### Recommendations by teachers

The teachers in the sample were explicit in demanding support for their work in the form of training provided by the employer. Training on multiculturalism, culturally sensitive pedagogy, teaching traumatised children, among other themes, is needed both during one's study years as well as continuously in working life. At present, there is not enough further training available for all teachers; moreover, as there still are municipalities which encounter migrant pupils for the first time who start from a scratch although there is already a lot of expertise and good practices in the country.

Establishing more consistent training for S2 teachers in particular would also serve to recognise and appreciate them as professional experts in this special educational area, which should show in their wages, which, on its behalf, could help to solve the growing need for working hands on this field.

Educational structures should be affected by increased cultural awareness, and both school and administrative personnel should represent the diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds of people living in Finland.

A minor yet decisive voice heard in the teachers' sample argued for ensuring psychiatric help for every child in need independent of his/her language skills. There seems now to be variety in the possibilities of receiving help in different municipalities in this regard, which affects negatively in some teachers' everyday work, not to mention the child's learning and overall well-being.

A practical recommendation by teachers is that more teaching material is prepared for the various needs of preparatory instruction. The need is shared across the country, taking a lot of teachers' time. The material should consist of compatible elements that can be applied in a flexible manner to suit learners of different age and level of language skills.

### Recommendations by social workers

#### Programmes and policies

There were different policy enhancements mentioned among social workers relating to integration programmes. To begin with, minor asylum seekers were seen as a group that is not well known— or seen— in society. To continue with, parents' unawareness of Finnish society and the Finnish school system was seen as possibly even hindering children's development and building of agency:

In other words, it starts with educating parents about the whole project and in a way the school can't target them, but if other services are dealing with immigrants, just like informing parents about the Finnish school system and the situation in the municipality and, for example, school actors, i.e. ... For example, some don't go to special education, so it can be that ... When here the special education belongs to anyone and it doesn't mean anything yet for future schooling, or that the child goes to a psychologist or meets even ... Get a psychiatric care or else, then it ... seen in a completely different way in our culture if a psychologist examines, for example, a child's learning or something else. People have so different perceptions of things, so somehow trying to tell immigrants more accurately and comprehensibly about our system, how could it help them to somehow figure out where they have come to. (FI\_SW1\_F)

Further, social workers' interviews included recommendations for improving language courses' content to also include service guidance and counselling elements since also the international clients of employment services (not immigration services) need guidance for better integration and understanding of the Finnish social security system. Some social workers argued this type of client-centred case management and counselling approach should be applied by different professionals in different settings.

Another issue social workers wish to enhance is increasing social activities outside official meetings. A successful experience on this was told by a social worker who had organised a peer support group for migrant women after their language course. The group held thematic meetings over a joint dinner. These meetings were experienced as meaningful by the participants who did not have any other social activities after the language lectures. Thus, also migrant adults need different hobbies and activities in groups. Different types of volunteer work could be utilised more in integration work:

It would be great if this kind of voluntary agency could be found like we're now going and doing this for this group. It always just needs someone who starts it ... And then it's not just one trick and how to do it, but it takes a long time (commitment) that ... you go in the middle of Finnish forest and light a campfire and fry the sausage, then it's probably an earth-shaking experience for some who hasn't done it. (FI\_SW2\_M)

Social workers argued for a need for different low-threshold hobbies, such as football, for migrant children and youth. If children are clients of child protection, they can receive financial support for hobbies but as (the offspring of) clients of adult social work, they cannot, which makes it more difficult to participate in peer activities.

Financial resources and the lack of them worries social workers in general. This also shows in their concern about the great numbers of children both social workers and school psychologists have as their clients. They constantly wish for more staff to ensure proper encounters with pupils of different ages as well as providing them with sufficient amount and forms of help.

As to school policy on bullying and discrimination, social workers wished that if bullying or outright racism becomes evident at school, the minimum requirement is addressing it immediately and making clear that it is not acceptable.

Finally, a handbook on asylum seekers (cf. Child Protection Handbook<sup>12</sup>) would be helpful in guidance and counselling work, including responses to different practical issues.

### Collaboration

Social workers saw integration as a two-way process, and they highlighted the richness of joint learning which many of them explained that they have experienced in their work.

What I would like to see developed is that somehow I would bring it even more in a certain way, I would not differentiate immigrant children in any way, but somehow I would bring their cultural richness here to our Finnish families. Somehow, that kind of family connection, which is seen stronger in their families, that is missing here. (FI\_SW3\_F)

People and families learning from one another should be complemented by institutional collaboration. In addition to teaching at school, an increase in different social programmes was recommended so that immigrant children would be more acquainted with Finnish schooling and peers; social workers highlighted the importance of enhancing participatory *everyday* activities at schools instead of thematic days celebrating diversity.

It was also recommended that special youth work could be more integrated into school and NGOs capacities utilised at schools. More resources for teachers and social workers (including counsellors) were seen as important so that they could encounter children more individually. There were also wishes raised for closer cooperation with schools and child protection services. One school social worker raised her opinion about ongoing social and health care reform in Finland and wished that school social workers could stay under the education sector for maintaining similar freedom to plan their work as they now have.

There were many recommendations for school study counsellors considering a need for a resource-based counselling approach taking into account individual dreams and school performance without paying so much attention to what is marked as the person's mother tongue. There is also a gap in the transition from secondary school to university where more support could be given to immigrant youth.

Social workers hoped that there were more persons with a migrant background or knowledge of different cultures working with immigrant families and children. It would be important to bring experts from different cultures to school regularly to aid learning in different mother tongues but also to normalise diversity. Besides, at schools, teachers could utilise immigrant pupils' cultural knowledge when addressing different cultures and religions while respecting respective pupils' opinions on whether they wish to take such a role.

### Communication

Social workers advocate the recruitment of different language assistants to the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (*Kela*) and say this would help them to focus on the actual contents of their

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<sup>12</sup> Lastensuojelun käsikirja - Lastensuojelun käsikirja - THL



work. Now, they feel, a lot of their work is burdened with Kela benefit issues and giving financial advice instead of social counselling.

Social workers also pointed out that the study material in preparatory instruction should be more practical and closer to the needs of current life. Social workers also reminded that teachers need to show understanding towards migrant children's overall conditions when they do not necessarily have proper gear for physical education lesson or do not managing everything in Finnish.

For migrant parents to better understand communication from school, the messages should be interpreted for parents for example via some application before sending. All social workers saw the importance of interpretation services for encountering migrant parents and children in their own language. It must be remembered that when working with an interpreter, sufficient time needs to be set aside as the conversation will last longer. When it comes to parents' meetings at school, it would be good to use paper information sheets for sharing information about them or call parents on the phone because the use of digital information applications is not regular among migrant parents.

### Recommendations by interpreters

Interviews with interpreters included some insightful comments on how to enhance integration in schools and elsewhere. As to school, some interpreters suggest providing children with interpreting when they start school in the new country to guarantee a good start with self-expression and experience of agency and involvement. However, one interpreter was hesitant towards the idea of introducing language or culture mediators into Finnish school contexts in a European vein. The fear was that mediators would steal interpreters' jobs and that it would further diminish the value given to educated professionals' competence and to precise interpreting.

Other school-related points raised by interpreters included (1) that preparatory instruction could be extended as one school year is hardly enough to gain a holistic picture of the pupil's overall situation, (2) that there should be a stricter take on migrant pupils' absence from classes, as being absent slows down the integration process, (3) that immediate intervention should take place in case of bullying, (4) more regular use should be made of learning methods that enhance group spirit and participants' sense of belonging every day, and (5) schools should take a more explicit stance on stressing gender equality to support children in making full use of their potential.

Interpreters also raised high concern over the centrality of cost-efficiency in the public sector today which they read as a general and unfortunate misunderstanding that 'anyone can act as an interpreter'. Instead, they argue for more support for educated interpreters and a real appreciation towards interpreters' competence as a guarantee for best results in interpreting situations and the official processes of which they are a part.

### Recommendations by reception centres

Some social workers working with asylum seekers argued that the process for waiting for asylum is inhuman and should be shortened, considering minor asylum seekers especially and the protection of their rights as children. They raised a voice to setting a national time limit for asylum-seekers receiving asylum (e.g. two years maximum), and to permitting resident permits automatically for

those who stay in the country for at least five years, or who have acquired a certain level of Finnish in a given time and lived a decent life without committing crime.

It was also reflected that some immigrants experience the language requirements for employment too high and that these limits should be reconsidered as there are jobs that can be managed even with less developed skills in Finnish.

There were also recommendations mentioned for supporting families better in their integration which would also directly affect children's integration and wellbeing, for example taking parents' wellbeing into account better at reception centres and supporting parents' language learning as now the pressure is on children.

It was also stated that if youth work was integrated better into reception centre activities, it would bring the needed extra resources for the centre. Especially asylum-seeking children living in reception centres would need help after school for home assignments in Finnish when parents are not capable of supporting them. Increasing teachers' knowledge of life in reception centres is important in helping them build an understanding of what the conditions for learning are.

Family group home's counsellors were not aware of how asylum-seeking minors were paid attention in schools and they wished they would receive attention as other pupils most likely do have questions they would like to openly ask. This would help to in finding friends, diminishing prejudice, and strengthening the feeling of belonging.

Social counsellors working with asylum-seeking minors also wanted to have more close partnership with different cultural groups and they also saw that they could play a bigger role in contacting representatives of these groups. It was also recommended by one social worker that when developing something for asylum-seeking youth, it would be worth interviewing immigrants with an asylum background who are already well integrated, because asylum-seeking youth usually feel difficult to share their wishes and thoughts. Social workers stated that there should be more various activities for asylum-seeking youth for their different needs and that the activities should be organised closer to geographically.

## 8. Conclusions

### Summary

The main task of the report on professionals' perspectives about migrant children's and youth's conditions and experiences in schools and reception centres is to increase understanding of the multidimensionality of the phenomenon. Overall, a unifying description for promoting inclusion is that, in this context, there is a strong need for multiprofessional co-operation between institutions with a high degree of resources (time, finances, and human resources) as well for a need to keep professionals' intercultural competence up-to-date through continuous education. Even though abundant measures have been taken in school and social care especially since 2015 when an unprecedented number of migrant minors arrived in Finland, the interviews show that the prevailing system does not offer the best solutions. In addition, professionals describe they feel powerless in the

face of societal atmosphere, structural racism, and individual citizens' stances towards migrants. Four key findings should be underlined:

1. The professionals in this research revealed a substantial concern about the welfare of migrant children: they need to be valued as holistic persons with their experiences and identities of their past, present and future – migration is not the one and only essential element in defining them. Integration measures and preparatory instruction is based on, mostly, learning Finnish or Swedish. However, focusing on developing skills in target language hinders the personal ways of being children with their needs for constructing an understanding of themselves as persons and dealing with what is meaningful for them in their living, education and learning contexts. Children need to be seen in a more holistic way in building their hybrid experiences between identities of where they come from and where they now are; and binding them together as a life story concept of who I am. The professionals kept repeating that language does not grant a thorough experience of involvement in society but essentially offers possibilities for action.
2. Professionals, teachers of newly arrived pupils in specific, lack adequate education that is defined on a national level and offers recognition for as experts specialising in the field. Currently, their profession lacks recognition, decent payment, and education on meeting the needs of traumatised children; linguistic and cultural awareness; and theoretical plus pedagogical understanding of how children's past affects their positioning and motivation as learners.
3. The perspective of children raises questions on accessibility. Since, firstly, preparatory instruction is merely a suggestion in the Basic Education Act, all migrant children do not have access to it or access to it on the same level. Two, municipalities' resources, know-how, and agenda vary a lot. Third, the teachers working with migrant children do not receive nationally coordinated education, which renders both teachers and children in an unequal position in terms of accessibility.
4. School-aged children with a migrant background lack Finnish-speaking friends. Professionals were unanimous in voicing their deep worry about this and did not know how to make the situation better in general.

### Situation of migrant children in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic

As to the situation of migrant children nationwide during COVID-19, it has been found that their needs should have been recognised in more effective ways on all educational levels in Finland (Goman et al. 2021). Their needs and situations were described in a similar way also in the interviews; however, some positive impacts were also discussed. For some migrant pupils, the accessibility for individual support or accessibility of mother tongue language learning has increased to some degree. However, accessibility was somewhat linked to the technical equipment in times of lockdown or quarantine. Despite this, in all situations the support needed for learning, or other special needs, were guaranteed to pupils by individual measures.

Professionals developed effective remote pedagogies and the best solutions have stayed in use even after schools' reopening. Especially communication and interaction with caregivers was possible through different software; by contrast, before pandemic, migrant families did not make much use of the digital communication application used in schools.

The repeated worry of migrant children not having peer relationships (with Finnish-speaking children) was maintained during the pandemic. Children could not meet each other at school, and

they also lacked after-school activities for informal networking. In addition, the after-school activities and many hobbies have been closed for a year, which has further decreased the possibilities of meeting Finnish peers.

Continuous changes on a week-to-week basis has complicated the planning and implementation of permanent educational and social work, which has confused both professionals and children. Dissemination of information in all respective minority languages has challenged professionals and the families, as well.

## Discussion

The central concept in this report and the overall project, integration, is used in Finland to refer to the policies and practices related to helping new arrivals in Finnish society settle in. Drawn together, the results of the data analysis show that the prevailing integration measures do not guarantee the experience of participation in the sense of *active agency* and *involvement* of individuals. In the Finnish conceptual framework, there are two concepts on ‘participation’. The first one is *osallistuminen* ‘participation’, which refers to taking part and being present in measures, actions, and activities that are planned in advance. The second term, on its behalf, is *osallisuus* ‘inclusion and involvement’, which is used for measuring the experience of wellbeing and ability to affect or change one’s own social contexts. The interviewees’ descriptions are in line with the latter one: professionals call for agency where migrants’ wellbeing is observed from ‘the inside’ – what their own sense of their involvement in Finnish society is, even with or without the target language.

This leads us to reconsider the concepts of hybrid identity and intersectionality. There is a need for more recognition and understanding of identity construction as *multidimensional*. Despite such categories as ‘migrant’, ‘migrant mother’, ‘migrant boy’, and the like, people need to be encountered as individuals in everyday situations as well as at all levels of integration policy – not as representatives of gender, nationality, or culture. This consciously gender-sensitive and multicultural appreciation is also rooted in the Finnish National Core Curriculum of Education.

The interviewees’ message is clear on this: children need to be seen as they are– similar to their peers with their hopes for the future, making meaning on the basis of their past, and in search of identity in the present. They have stories about themselves and want to be heard; however, they must be approached in sensitive and respectful ways. Further research must aim at increasing the understanding of best practices both theoretically and pedagogically.

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## CHILD-UP WP5 local report - children's perspectives. Finland

Henna Jousmäki, Seinäjoki University of Applied Languages

Tiina Hautamäki, Seinäjoki University of Applied Languages

Maiju Kinossalo, Seinäjoki University of Applied Languages

### 1. Methodology

WP5 focus group interviews (FGIs) with children concurred with the second and third wave of COVID-19 pandemic in Finland. After postponing research first from early spring to early autumn 2020 and again towards the end of the year, interviews were gradually being conducted from 16.12.2020 onwards until 26.5.2021. The classes represented ISCED1 and ISCED2 level schools in semi-rural towns in the Finnish areas involved in the CHILD-UP project (Southern Ostrobothnia; Tampere region). The interviewees studied in schools that were involved in WP4 and WP6, as well. The interviews with children were carried out in conjunction with classroom observations in WP6; three teachers participating in WP5 interviews as professionals also co-operated for observation (WP6) and children's interviews (WP5 and WP6).

However, there was a higher number of teachers in WP5 professionals' interviews who were not willing to engage their classrooms and pupils in WP5 and WP6 because they saw it as (1) too time-taking and demanding for them, especially because of the process of acquiring permissions from guardians (as it is not, they said, easy to connect with them in the first place), and (2) distracting children's safe routines and learning which they said were constantly under pressure as many pupils were newly-arrived and were only familiarising themselves with their new everyday life.

The state of emergency caused by COVID-19 posed further challenges for data collection. In Finland, there was a national school lockdown from March to May 2020; further, during August 2020–May 2021 individual schools and classes closed for quarantine when needed. COVID-19 stopped fieldwork for some time in spring 2020; during August 2020–May 2021 researchers and other outsiders were still not welcome into school premises. Recurring quarantines postponed and eventually cancelled fieldwork in one central school at the end of the academic year 2020-2021. This said, two new classes were reached towards the end of the academic year after persistent requests and negotiations.

As a result of these hindrances, seven classes in five schools were involved and seven FGIs conducted in them (see Table 1). While not reaching the target number set to 30 classes, the sample size is an achievement because the societal situation was severely fragile, impacting all parties' everyday life in multiple ways. Here, necessity became a virtue and all opportunities to collect all kinds of data were welcomed, even when it meant that access was granted only remotely and only for interviewing the teacher, or only for observation and videorecording classes without FGIs with the pupils. The

impacts of COVID-19 on research methodology and ethics are discussed in more detail at the end of this section.

The group size in FGIs was small in general, ranging from two to four pupils. The modest size is due to the fact that the groups in question were not big to start with, because the collaborating teachers usually worked with individuals and small groups designed to aid and support learning of speakers of Finnish as a second language<sup>13,14</sup>. The share of boys and girls in the sample is fairly even. The sample includes pupils with a migration background; with at least one parent being born outside of Finland. The countries of pupils' or their parents' origin vary; common areas include South East Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. Often, not everyone was present as there was a strict national COVID-19 -based guideline urging all with any flu symptoms to stay at home.

*Table 1: Description of the sample on children in WP5*

Country	Finland
Region(s)	South Ostrobothnia; Tampere region
Number of schools	5
ISCED level(s)	ISCED1, ISCED2
Number of classes	7
Number of FGIs	7
Number of participants per FGI	2-4

The topics of the interviews derived from consortium-level guidelines. In this report, the interview findings are presented under three main headings: School as a lived space; Intercultural relations at school; and Identity and belonging. Among the key questions asked were:

- What do you like/don't like in your class?
- What do you like to do with your friends on your free time?
- What is the atmosphere like in your class? E.g.: Does everyone help others and receive help when they need it? In case of conflicts, how do you act, and how do you overcome challenging situations?

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<sup>13</sup> For more on the educational system in Finland, see the WP3 report at [http://www.child-up.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CHILD-UP\\_Report-on-legislation.pdf](http://www.child-up.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CHILD-UP_Report-on-legislation.pdf)

- What does it mean to be active and to be involved in school? How does it show?
- Do you have a favourite subject to study? What makes it fun or inspiring?
- Is there something that makes learning difficult? How so?
- Who do you talk to in times of trouble? What makes them easy to talk to?
- What does education mean to you?
- What do you think about assessment in school? Is there something you would like to see changed?
- Which languages do you use at school and on your free time? How are different languages and different language backgrounds taken into account in teaching and assessment?
- What does ‘culture’ mean to you?
- How are different cultures taken into account in teaching? Do you learn from each other’s cultures?
- What kind of future plans or desires do you have? Where would you like to live in the future?

The interviews were conducted in remote settings where the interviewed pupils gathered together in class and the interviewer was connected via video and audio through Microsoft Teams software. Once recorded, the interviews were saved and placed on an institution-internal hardware disconnected from the Internet and used by project personnel only. Technical challenges were met in all schools. In some schools, it was not easy for the teachers to acquire a laptop with a built-in microphone and camera to carry out the focus group interview. Some school equipment did not co-operate cross-organisationally in the use of software and applications, and when they did, sound quality tended to be poor because of the non-portable built-in microphone.

The language of the interviews was Finnish apart from one where interpretation to and from Arabic used. In this case, the interpreter also participated from remote settings. Some of the questions proved difficult for children to answer; they asked for clarification or answered, ‘I don’t know’. This was particularly the case in the interpreted session. It remained unclear whether difficulties resulted solely from the questions or was there something in the interpretation or in the remote technology that caused challenges. As a safety measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19, all teachers and for ISCED2-level also pupils wore face masks, which made identifying who is speaking challenging. Overall, the interviewees did not talk extensively; they usually kept their answers short even when asked to elaborate on them. It seems likely that in face-to-face settings with the researcher and interviewees in closer physical proximity, interaction would have been livelier and more relaxed– the remote format made the situation somewhat formal and mechanic. In the following, these changing circumstances and their meaning for the research framework are described in more detail.

#### A note on the effects of COVID-19 on research

As described earlier in this section, WP5 activities were severely challenged and limited because of the COVID-19 pandemic in Finland and in other countries participating in CHILD-UP. During the pandemic, co-operation with schools changed and diminished to some extent as teachers were faced with a major shift in their everyday work: a constant worry over health and well-being of themselves and their pupils, as well as a giant leap towards technology-aided remote teaching. Participating in research was not a priority for them. Acknowledging this and the fact that teaching is a demanding profession even without a state of emergency (Kauppi et al. 2020; Lerkkanen et al. 2020), researchers choose to act in a sensitive and respectful way and granted teachers a “time-off” from research. Such



an ethical approach was valued by teachers who were then willing to welcome research activities at a later, more stable point.

As the state of emergency continued and evolved, it became clear that the plans for data collection needed modification. As remote activities were not listed in the original research plan, a fair amount of time was dedicated to the revision and translation of documents, such as ethical statements required at the levels of both CHILD-UP consortium and the Finnish partner organisation, and consent forms for both pupils and their caregivers.

The pandemic and its consequences on research methodology were unforeseen for the project overall. In qualitative research based on interviews, rich data is usually gained through implementing face-to-face interactions in a discussion mode (Torrentira 2020, 6). Remote interview is a different field, and many practical issues need careful reconsideration in both preparation and implementation.

Gaining interviewees' trust is essential in all interviewing, and in remote settings, everything that is communicated may contribute to the building of trust – especially through *the ways in which* it is communicated. In remote research settings, participant(s) need to be properly informed before asked to give their consent, not only about research as such but also about the practicalities of interaction and about the storage and access to the recording possibly made. This will enhance participants' trust in the situation. (See Hautamäki et al. 2021 for a more thorough discussion on this.)

In WP5 interviews with both children and professionals, some interviewees have shared not only personal but even sensitive issues, which shows that trust has been gained and that both the interviewer and the interviewee(s) have been highly committed in carrying out the shared task even without sharing the physical space (Torrentira 2020, 5).

In practice, before starting to record an FGI interview session, the researcher greeted the participants and ensured they were ready to talk and to be recorded as agreed earlier in a written form. They were also reminded about the confidentiality of the interview contents as well as of the fact that the aim is to discuss and that there are no wrong answers. The participants were further informed about the moment when the recording starts.

Considering the massive reorganisation of research activities because of and during the pandemic, the FGIs progressed well, and covered issues described earlier in this section. This was only possible through a conscious and an ethically informed approach where researchers balanced between the aims of the project, local and national safety guidelines, organisational guidelines, as well as research participants' needs and wishes.

## 2. School as a lived space

The children interviewed for the study pointed to similar sources of (dis)satisfaction in school contexts. Most explicitly stated that the best thing in going to school is seeing friends. They valued the atmosphere where everyone is welcome, appreciated, and treated equally by pupils and teachers alike.

In addition to the importance of spending time with friends in school, the interviewed pupils gave high value for the possibilities of learning. The favourite subjects of the interviewees varied from arts to social studies, biology, and physical education. For the more recently arrived pupils, learning Finnish was a priority. All pupils saw school as a springboard for their future lives, studies, and professions, although not everyone knew what they wanted to do when growing up:

The dream is to go to school, learn Finnish very well and go to university afterwards. At the moment we have no clue as to what field to study, but we search for it every day and make a decision later. (FI\_F1\_CH\_1\_B)

Some were more nervous about their future plans:

I don't know. [laughs] Cause I don't know if I want to get married or not and I don't know if I have the guts to study to be a dentist, or what will I be when I grow up. It's sometimes really stressful to ponder upon all these things. (FI\_F5\_CH\_1\_G)

A difference between girls and boys showed in their visions for the future: it was only girls who pointed to relationship status as playing a role in their future. Although the sample is small and no final conclusions can be drawn of gender differences on the basis of this, even this slight difference should be paid attention to in study counselling: it seems that girls especially need to be encouraged to study for a profession as it may be demanding for them to plan or even imagine studying further if higher education has not been desirable for girls earlier in the eyes of the older generation (Telve 2020, 85). Today, there is reason to show that in Finland, a democratic welfare society, it is possible for women to build a family *and* a career.

Pupils' agency in joint planning of class activities seems scarce on the basis of this sample. Even ISCED2 level interviewees were not familiar with the concept of active participation in its broadest sense (Finnish 'osallisuus' *involvement*). It was a common experience that it is the teacher who does the planning of lessons, carries out the teaching, and chooses the methods for learning. One interviewee favoured using a variability of methods to help individual learners:

Like you don't just go to school, like you're welcome to come and learn. Not just like you're forced to do something, but that different people learn in different ways. So when the teacher says to me, 'Write', and I learn by listening, it becomes difficult to me. I get nothing but writing benefits someone else. But that we all have to do it. (FI\_F4\_CH\_2\_G)

Moreover, speakers of Finnish as a second language made it clear that there are differences among teachers of different subjects on ISCED2 level in how they take pupils' language backgrounds into consideration in their teaching, in the kind of language they use. This alone makes some subjects more difficult to learn than others. One example of this is maths: while numerical calculation itself may be fine for learners of Finnish as a second language, verbal assignments tend to be much more difficult because they build on understanding Finnish.

The interviewees also emphasised the asset of learning in small groups where it is easier to make questions and show uncertainty than in bigger groups. The teaching of Finnish as a second language

often takes place in rather small groups, and respective teachers were also recurrently mentioned as trustworthy and empathetic sources of support.

When asked about assessment in school, interviewees described it as a top-down announcement where they themselves have no say. Studying hard seems pointless when the work does not pay off in good grades. Self-evaluation, an increasing practice on all ISCED levels, was not experienced as a useful or effective method in general, and many said they do not see the point in completing self-evaluation forms. Focusing on exams and grades was not welcomed, either – learners of Finnish as a second language pointed out that exams are sometimes difficult linguistically; knowing the substance does not help if one does not understand the questions. Also, they criticised the emphasis given to exam grades over participation and activity in class in the final evaluation.

While the interviewees valued the mostly positive atmosphere and group spirit of their classes, they also pointed to ‘the other side of the coin’ of their lived reality at school: the pleasant atmosphere is at times disrupted by individuals – pupils or even teachers. In addressing these emotional and relational disruptions, interviewees were quick to say that they do get along well with teachers and other pupils and disagreements and conflicts are not commonplace and should not be generalised. However, even occasional experiences of unfairness need to be considered when aiming towards enhancing pupils’ participation and well-being.

Among singular experiences of conflict and disagreement, the interviewees mentioned teachers who they perceived as treating pupils differently depending on whether or not pupils have a migrant background.

There’s one teacher who we judged as behaving in a racist way towards us. Cause if a Finn next to me in class is using the mobile phone for playing in class – I took my phone to check the time – the teacher yelled to me from the other side of the classroom, in front of everyone, that I should put my phone away and “don’t use your phone in class and focus on the lesson, this is why you never learn anything.” I once asked for remedial teaching cause [the subject] is difficult to me and the teacher was like, you should focus more in class to learn something. The teacher did not grant me remedial teaching.  
(FI\_F2\_CH\_1\_G)

If something unpleasant happens at school, most interviewees said they would turn to their siblings or friends in and outside school for support; some girls further mentioned they open up for their mothers in case of trouble and said the mother will then contact school if they so wish. Some said there was a particular teacher who they can trust in all kinds of matters, because the teacher was perceived to understand a) young people and b) multicultural issues. Sometimes, however, interviewees said they let the issue be (reproduced from FI\_F2\_CH):

Girl 2: Usually I don’t tell [teachers] if [other pupils] say something cause adults make it a big thing I think. I don’t feel like going to the teachers’ office all the time.

Girl 1: Makes too big an issue.

Girl 2: Yeah, make too big an issue. Like five times a week to the office, what’s the point. For one word only.

Interviewer: So you don’t usually bring it up or complain or anything?

Girl 2: Right.

Interviewer: So for you it stays unresolved?

Girl 2: Yeah.

Girl 1: Unless the teacher notices something has happened.

Girl 2: Yeah. Sometimes they do and then they come and talk to me but I'm like whatever, leave it, or stuff like that.

In the sample, pupils seem unwilling to make a case over one insulting word (the precise word in question is not uttered during the interview) even when it is a recurring insult. They know teachers do not approve insulting in class and are worried they will act to make it stop. In terms of agency, lending oneself to insults can be described as either self-harmful agency or giving agency away – in any case, the practice of not telling prevents intervention and creation of safety while strengthening inappropriate behaviour and inequity in school. However, all said they can turn to their parents for support and guidance. On the other hand, issues at home and in personal lives may also involve something that pupils prefer to remain silent about in school (reproduced from FI\_F3\_CH):

Girl 1: It depends on the teacher. Like I said I don't trust them cause I've noticed that in other schools, when pupils have told them, they've had to go to this social... like, what are they? Child---

Interviewer: Child protection.

Girl 1: Exactly, them. [laughter]. They've reported it to them. So that's why I don't trust. But if the teacher is someone who doesn't really proceed with things, that's when I can talk about things. But I don't really trust teachers that much to be honest.

Girl 2: Yeah. I could easily talk about positive events and I'd be happy to do so but with negative I try to be a bit cautious especially in Finland, you know. They take everything so seriously.

Although reproduced from different interviews, the two previous cases paint a gloomy picture where pupils with a migrant background are caught in not-telling for the sake of the consequences. This is a serious hindrance for children's well-being as well as empowerment and agency.

A timely challenge to everyone's well-being has been COVID-19, affecting pupils', teachers', and whole families' lives in multidimensional ways. When it comes to the needs of pupils with a migrant background especially, it has been found that their needs should have been recognised in more effective ways in all educational levels nationally (Goman et al., 2021).

One consequence of the pandemic was that after-school activities were closed. For ISCED1 level pupils with a migrant background, these afternoon hours are important for learning Finnish in interaction with peers in a casual, yet professionally organised and monitored educational environment. This club lockdown was a major factor decreasing contact with peers in general and with Finnish-speaking peers specifically. Further, pupils lost the support for homework they had received in the club. The pupils interviewed in the sample were rather pleased to have been entitled to return to their studies at the school premises again for social relations and better learning.

### 3. Intercultural relations at school

When asked about how different cultures are addressed in teaching, the interviewees pointed to two specific classes where the topic is most frequently considered: religion and English. As such, multiculturalism lies at the bedrock of the Nation Core Curriculum in Finland (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016) and is embedded in the teaching of transversal skills across different subjects (Jousmäki et al. 2020).

All interviewees were explicit in saying they themselves endorse multiculturalism and that it is self-evident for them that everyone's background, including ethnic and religious, is respected. In a similar vein, multilingualism was a norm for them, an everyday practice, although in some schools there was more diversity among pupils than in others. As to mainstream pupils, the interviewees said that not all of them show respect or tolerance towards diversity, which shows in bad humour and impoliteness or even bullying in the form of intrusive looks and commentary. As one interviewee explains: "In some classes we can't... It just makes you angry that there's nothing we can do [to address disagreement, unfairness, or bullying] and then in other classes we can talk about it together" (FI\_F4\_CH\_2\_G).

In some groups, thus, there seems to be overt yet unaddressed bursts of prejudice and racism:

Joint understanding. Some people don't understand your background. Some people don't understand what you've experienced. Like if you've experienced racism, they make a joke out of it – even some in this school. And they circulate the joke and everything, but it doesn't feel---like if you've experienced racism yourself. How would you feel if I started doing the same things to you that you've experienced? (FI\_F3\_CH\_1\_G)

Such situations need to be addressed by the teacher to help all pupils find common ground and build joint understanding about what is acceptable behaviour and what is not, and why.

Interviewees who were more recently arrived ISCED2 pupils or pupils with only elementary skills in Finnish did not address outright racism and prejudice. They did make a strong point that making friends with native Finns is challenging (this was also noted by professionals, see Local report: professionals in Finland). The following excerpt (from FI\_F1\_CH) illustrates migrant pupils' disconnection from their Finnish-speaking peers:

Boy 1 or 2: In class, we do have a close relationship with each other, but I meant Finnish people, we can connect if they come to us and we can talk to each other and...

Interviewer: Does it mean that it is sometimes difficult to make friends with Finnish pupils?

Interpreter: [interprets]

Boy 1 or 2: [answers]

Interpreter: Yes, it is indeed difficult to make friends with them.

Interviewer: What could help to do it? What do you think the reason is?

Interpreter: [interprets]

Boy 1 or 2: [answers]

Interpreter: It doesn't mean that they don't like us, no. We just don't have common things to talk about. It is because we don't have anything to talk about.

Interviewer: I see. Do you wish the school would help you out in that, to find common ground? Or do you hope that some of the school personnel could help you to do that?

Interpreter: [interprets]

Boy 1 or 2: [answers]

Interpreter: Of course, it's fine and normal, we don't have anything against that if that's what the school wants.

The example shows that while the atmosphere in one class may be pleasant with migrant pupils actively participating in activities, at school level migrant pupils may be marginalised. Further, the interviewee does not actively support an intervention by school staff even when asked to imagine such a possibility. This kind of weak agency (Hökkä et al. 2010), or lack of agency, is something professionals should become aware of to be able to support the positive development in peer relations and in shaping one's own conditions of participation (see also Spets & Laitinen 2014).

#### 4. Identity and belonging

Even if born in Finland, some interviewees seemed to identify closely with the 'migrant' background of their parents: "I don't think everyone even knows that I'm not Finnish cause I've been here like... or I was born here but..." (FI\_F6\_CH\_1\_B). Having been born in Finland and speaking Finnish on a native level yet not perceiving oneself as Finnish—or vice versa—exemplifies transnational identity where hybridity is the norm and different cultures live side by side:

Interviewer: What do different cultures mean to you? ---

Speaker 1: Well, I think... It's like important to me that we're like... that I maintain [culture X], that I can talk about it and like the traditions still exist in our family. (FI\_F6\_CH\_1\_B)

Hybridity also shows in language practices. The sample shows that young migrants use various languages in their everyday interaction. The language of education is, for most, Finnish, and so is the language used with peers in school. In their leisure time, interviewees said they use a language that suits the friends they interact with – whether they speak Finnish, English, or a shared migrant language. Migrant or heritage language played a foremost important role in interaction with parents and older relatives; with siblings, however, translanguaging was fairly common, incorporating useful elements from all language repertoires they have access to. Importantly, all interviewees used different languages as *a resource* to serve their communicative needs.

Hybrid identity thus conjoins feelings of belonging and heritage as well as language use. Additionally, also socio-economic and religio-cultural features play a role for the interviewees when asked about their future prospects. One interviewee hoped to be working as a doctor and being married with children. "I've had enough of life as a single woman [laughter]---to have a family of my own and live in an Islamic country, be a doctor and gain my own wages" (FI\_F3\_CH\_2\_G).

This is quite unlike to a persistent stereotype of the subjugated woman in a radically Islamic context – living in the home-sphere under the control of her husband and male relatives. The example illustrates the core of ‘hybrid integration’ and individual’s agency in shaping one’s social conditions.

It was indeed common for the interviewees to vision living somewhere else than in Finland in the future. In the sample, this did not depend on the years of living in Finland nor on the level of Finnish, as even some of those born in Finland or speaking fluent Finnish imagined of a life elsewhere. In addition to social, economic, religious, and cultural factors, one reason for dreaming of living abroad in the future related to emotions and feelings of belonging, of “having it easier to be who you are”, as there, “people understand you better” (FI\_F3\_CH\_1\_G). This can be read as disappointment or critique towards mainstream Finns for not understanding or respecting difference. By contrast, on the basis of the sample, hybrid or transnational identity seems to embed multicultural awareness:

I think [different cultures] are interesting. It’s good to sometimes... It’s good for people to take a moment to read and gain knowledge about other cultures so they can acculturate. (FI\_F3\_CH\_2\_G)

Although moving abroad was a desirable prospect for the interviewees, some were realistic about the matter:

Sure, I would like to go back to my home country but at the same time I wouldn’t want to go back cause things are bad there. I’m afraid of my and my family’s safety. I’m used to Finland. Like I wanted to live in Finland for the rest of my life but I’m too lonely here as we have a lot of relatives in like Germany. I can’t go back to [country Y] and I don’t want that either, but like Germany is a place my family would like to go to, but at the same time, cause I’ve lived here almost all of my life, so it feels terrible to think that you’re going to start everything from a scratch. Anew, there. You forget the language you’ve learned here and everything you’ve come to learn. (FI\_F2\_CH\_1\_G)

Pupils’ transnational aspirations are important to consider in so much as they relate to social conditions and societal structures. It should be better understood how school and social work, and other sectors in society, can support all pupils’ feeling at home as they are. This is key in empowering them with agency and in enhancing their participation as active citizens.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

The interviews with ISCED1 and ISCED2 level children with a migrant background pointed to that each transnational youth experience is unique, yet they all share some similarities. The migrant background grants pupils with multicultural awareness and appreciation of diversity and of all people. Thus, they portray features needed for constructing a sophisticated and sensitive culture built on mutual respect. The value of this should be better taken into account in Finnish schools to empower all pupils with their own particularities for agency and learning. Moreover, it is worthwhile recognizing the potential embedded in these pupils for the building of future society in Finland. While the finding that pupils with a migrant background have transnational aspirations may not be surprising, it should be read with a serious mind. Can Finland, as a country with decreasing population afford to lose any one of the young persons it has educated? The reasons behind young people’s will to move abroad stem, on the basis of this sample, from prejudiced attitudes and atmosphere in Finland

towards migration and diversity. Therefore, the question to ask in educational contexts is, how do we ensure everyone feels safe and welcome? The following recommendations can be given:

- At school level, anti-racism and anti-racist practices should be explicitly promoted to ensure equality and equity among all pupils in their learning environments. The school needs to prepare pupils for the future and to provide them with skills needed in an increasingly interlinked and globalised world. The school should also serve as a role model of a diverse working community and municipalities should normalise employing multicultural staff.
- In class, teaching and learning should be built on open discussion and mutual respect. Every pupil needs to feel they are involved and that they matter. All voices need to be heard for example through role play to support group spirit, ensure mutual understanding, and guarantee a safe atmosphere for learning, self-expression, and co-working.
- Especially girls with a migrant background should be encouraged to study and make use of their academic potential. It must be underlined that in a welfare society, like Finland, it is possible to have both career and family, and that in democracy, everyone is entitled to exercise agency over one's own life choices.
- For teachers, more education on anti-racism is needed. It is only by becoming aware of colonising and discriminative practices in the past and present that a teacher can start shaping space for respect towards diversity in the classroom.
- Teachers would benefit from training in trauma counselling to be more prepared to encounter and support traumatised pupils and to understand the consequences of their undesired experiences for their learning and involvement in school.

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