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**“HOW TO LOOK BEYOND WHAT YOU SEE”**  
Finnish foster parents’ experiences of intercultural placements  
in child welfare

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## ABSTRACT

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“How to look beyond what you see”. Finnish foster parents’ experiences of intercultural placements in child welfare.

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The objective of this thesis was to describe Finnish foster parents’ experiences of intercultural placements in child welfare. Research questions considered foster parents’ experiences and developmental needs they recognised in their support and training before and during the intercultural placement. Thesis provides experience-based knowledge and multiple viewpoints towards the phenomenon scarcely researched in Finland. This benefits all actors connected to foster care and family placements in communal and private sectors and non-governmental organisations.

The thesis is based on qualitative research. The data was collected with an anonymous online survey (n=25) and three semi-structured interviews. The thematic analysis produced themes related to the child’s perspective, foster parents’ personal growth experiences and the extra work intercultural placements require from foster parents.

Intercultural placements require extra work from a foster parent, compared to fostering general population children. Foster parents’ reactions towards this extra varied. Some foster parents consider cultural specifics as “extra”, an addition to everyday life. Another group seemed to have adopted an idea of mutual learning and gaining understanding through interest towards the new culture. Foster parents acknowledge the need for sufficient and timely support for themselves, the child and the biological parents. They also experience their training not containing enough information about the realities of intercultural placements.

Further research is encouraged considering, for example, children in intercultural placements and good practices among social workers ensuring the cultural, linguistic, and religious rights of children in foster family care.

Keywords: Foster parent, intercultural placement, child welfare, foster care, family placement

## CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION.....	3
2 FOSTER PARENTING IN AN INTERCULTURAL SETTING .....	4
2.1 Finnish foster families .....	4
2.2 Foster parenting as a demanding form of parenting .....	6
2.3 Intercultural child welfare placements in Finland.....	10
2.4 Previous research on the topic.....	11
2.5 The need for new research .....	15
3 PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVE OF THE THESIS .....	17
4 DATA COLLECTION, DATA AND ANALYSIS .....	18
4.1 Data collection .....	18
4.1.1 Online survey.....	18
4.1.2 Interviews.....	20
4.2 Analysis.....	21
5 RESULTS.....	27
5.1 Finnish foster parents' experiences of bringing up children representing a cultural background differing from their own.....	27
5.2 Developmental needs in training and support according to foster parents.....	40
6 ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES AND RELIABILITY .....	43
6.1 Ethical perspectives .....	43
6.2 Reliability.....	44
7 DISCUSSION.....	48
7.1 Foster parents' experiences.....	48
7.2 Training and supporting foster parents in intercultural placements .....	53
7.3 Recommendations .....	55
SOURCES .....	59
APPENDIX 1. The survey .....	66
APPENDIX 2. Interview questions .....	67
APPENDIX 3. A worksheet tool for Finnish foster parents.....	68

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The number of individuals with a foreign background has been increasing in Finland. According to Official Statistics of Finland, this definition covers those of whom have either one or both parents born outside of Finland. In the year 2020 the number of persons with foreign background was 444 000. (Official Statistics of Finland, 2021.) Children having at least one parent born outside of Finland have duplicated risk for being placed outside home than their Finnish-origin peers (Kääriälä et al., 2020, p. 97).

It is defined by law that the child's culture, language and religion are to be taken into consideration when the child is taken into custody and placed in foster care (L417/2007 40. §). While most foster parents are of Finnish origin (Niekka, 2010, p. 17) it remains unclear how these considerations will take action and by whom. Finnish research provides little information about how foster parents experience their role in intercultural placements and whether the dilemma of maintaining the child's different culture in a Finnish-origin foster family is visible to them.

The purpose of this thesis is to approach the theme of intercultural placements by asking Finnish foster parents about their own experiences. In this thesis, the definition of experience is understood as it is phrased in the Cambridge dictionary: *(the process of getting) knowledge or skill from doing, seeing or feeling things* (Cambridge dictionary). Foster parents' experiences benefit social work professionals in the communal sector, private companies, and non-governmental organisations in understanding the phenomenon and developing functioning child welfare.

The thesis allows foster parents to express their thoughts and emotions related to the situation in which the child placed into their family represents a cultural background differing from foster parents' The decision to focus on foster parents' personal experiences serves dualistic interests: it serves foster parents' will to be heard and asked about their experiences (Valkonen 2014, p.128) as well as it

also respects the obligation of not to share classified information about the child or biological parents (Araneva 2018, pp. 194-200; L 218/200014-15. §).

During the thesis process two notes were given by the Deputy Parliamentary Ombusman of Finland, considering the incomplete realization of the linguistic and cultural rights of children placed in foster families. These notes call for immediate action for increasing the quality for Finnish foster family care. (EOAK/3166/2021; EOAK/3502/2022)

## 2 FOSTER PARENTING IN AN INTERCULTURAL SETTING

Key concepts of this thesis are foster families, foster family care as a child welfare intervention and intercultural placements. The demanding nature of foster parenting is discussed among former research from Finland and abroad.

### 2.1 Finnish foster families

The ideal in any family placement is to build good cooperation between the biological parents, foster family and the authorities. This cooperation, at its best, generates the circumstances for healthy upbringing for the child, who is both aware of their roots and receiving rehabilitating care (Araneva 2018, p. 203).

In 2020, a total of 11 386 children were taken into custody and 56 % of them placed in family care (Forsell et al. 2021, p.9.). A child is placed in the lawful responsibility of the municipality of their residence and the social worker designated to them. The municipality can arrange foster family care as its own service or with private companies or trusts. (Araneva 2018, p. 159).

The foster parents' status and relation with the designated social worker of the child prescribed in Family Carer Act (L2015/263). Foster parents, also referred to as family carers, do not become legal guardians of the child placed into their care, nor is this role taken away from the biological parents (in case the parents are the legal guardians before the placement). Lawfully, the foster parents maintain

a role similar to a counsellor in a children's home. Foster parents carry the responsibility for the child's basic care, everyday life and upbringing by following the guidelines agreed in the client plan for the child. (Araneva 2018, p.185; L417/2007 30. §) When a child is taken into custody, the rights of a legal guardian are narrowed. Considering belonging to a religious community, religious upbringing, name, and nationality, the right to decide remains. (Araneva, 2018, pp. 222-223.)

Becoming a foster parent in Finland does not require previous education or working life experience. The Act of Family Care Homes states that foster parents are to be given training before being accepted into their task. (L2015/263 6. §) Since 1995 the PRIDE-program has been the main process used in training foster parents in Finland. PRIDE -training (Parents Resources for Information, Development and Education), formed in 1990's in the United States, accentuates the active and competence-gaining role of the foster parent. PRIDE is both an educational and evaluative process. It consists of multiple interviews, written assignments, and a group process with the other candidates. The participants must also meet the trainers individually and produce written tasks between the nine three-hour group meetings. The PRIDE attendees' health, financial situation, and police records are verified. (Kelly, 2016; Pesäpuu ry; Valkonen, 2014, p. 16.) The foster family home is also obliged to provide suitable accommodation and social environment for the child and all foster family members (L2015/263 5. §).

The core element of the PRIDE -training process consists of the following five competencies:

1. Protecting and nurturing children
2. Meeting children's developmental needs and addressing their delays
3. Supporting relationships with biological families and other close relationships
4. Connecting children to safe, nurturing and permanent relationships and ensure continuity of these
5. Acting in cooperation

(Child Welfare League of America)

During the placement, the foster parent is to have a designated supportive worker making sure the foster parent receives all the support they are entitled to: vacation, supervision of work and sufficient training before and during the placement. (L 263/2015:15. §.) The aforementioned form the minimum of support provided, yet the foster care actors can provide more of it. In practice, the support provided seems to vary significantly, especially after the first years of the placement (Niska, 2014, abstract). Foster parents also rely on each other when seeking advice and usually consider other foster parents as best support since they are considered non-judgemental and understanding the emotional nuances (Nummela, 2022, pp. 57-58, Niska, 2014, p. 7). Peer guidance considering bureaucracy, taxation and other practical things is given and received in person but also in social media. (Nummela, 2022, pp. 57-58)

Professional family care is performed by people with professional training and experience in the fields of social and health care. Professional foster family homes may have paid employees, yet they are not considered institutional care by legislation. The professional experience and resources enable advanced care in home-like facilities. (Ammatillisten perhekotien liitto - APKL ry). The requirements of becoming a professional family carer are at least two full-time family carers, at least one of whom having sufficient professional training and previous experience. A permission to start operating needs to be applied by the authorities beforehand. Professional family carers are also obliged to pass the PRIDE –training process. (L2015/263 6. §; L 2011/922).

## 2.2 Foster parenting as a demanding form of parenting

The ethos of ordinariness is repetitive in recruiting new foster parents in Finland. The word “ordinary” is repetitive in recruitment advertisements (e.g., Attendo; Familiar; Save the Children; the city of Helsinki). Fostering in practice is referred to with “daily routines”, “care and attention”, and “time and interest” (South Karelia Social and Health Care District (Eksote); Familiar; City of Helsinki). This emphasis on ordinariness creates a paradox since foster parenting is also considered a demanding form of parenting. Living a “normal” life seems an

aspiration among foster parents, yet it is hard to achieve in practice (Sariola, 2014, p. 53).

Foster parents are performing a public administration task. This task sets requirements for the circumstances of the foster family home both materially and immaterially. (Araneva 2018, pp. 159-162; L263/2015 5. §.) Sinkkonen (2015) presents the controversial combination of children's problems getting more severe, goals for promoting family placements over institutional care, and foster parents being "ordinary" families with no request for professional training or working experience. Placing children with complex trauma in foster families may, in worst cases, cause placements to terminate due to foster parents running out of their emotional resources. To prevent these terminations, foster parents are in need for sufficient support and training. (Sinkkonen 2015, p. 156.) Especially youth, as a stage of life, can arouse symptoms from past events that unintentionally intrigue children to project their emotional patterns in their relationship with foster parents. Foster parents may also experience the pressure of "fixing the child". (Sariola, 2014, pp. 51-52.)

Araneva (2018) denotes the requirement of foster parents' respectful relation towards biological parents no matter the past events and reasons for the placement. The ability to be constructive affects the build-up of a healthy identity for the child. (Araneva 2018, p. 203.) Väливаара (2009) refers to Becker-Weidman (2008), claiming that good self-knowledge and the ability to understand own and others' feelings are one of the most important qualities of a foster parent. Since children placed into foster families are often experiencing significant difficulties in coping with their situation and emotions, the foster parent must be able to exercise emotional flexibility. (Väливаара, 2009, p. 12)

Finnish foster parents' feelings have been studied in general. Nikkanen (2008) discovered that foster parents have a large variety of strong feelings in their everyday life. The feelings may be complex and controversial. Foster parents are also taking part in sharing the emotional burden of the child and the biological parents. (Nikkanen, 2008, abstract.) Supporting children who experience recollection of their past traumatic events may resonate with foster parents' own



history and awaken difficult emotions. Setting boundaries, creating routines, and supervising the implementation of these is accentuated in comparison with biological parenting. (Sariola, 2014, p. 51.)

Foster parents' greatest experiences of joy are, according to Valkonen (2014), related to the child's personality and characteristics, child being part of the family and taking part in shared actions and moments. Being able to help and see the progress in child's situation is also rewarding. (Valkonen, 2014, pp. 92-93.) Sariola (2014) discovered a repetitive narrative among foster parents. They seem to discuss their deep commitment with shades of a certain surviving: acting *beyond trying* for the sake of children. This narrative may act as a mean of internal support and self-encouragement, but also seek for appreciation for their task in society. (Sariola, 2014, p. 52.)

The caretaker's feelings create an emotional atmosphere in which the child lives and breathes. Children having past traumatic experiences require stable, sensitive, and securely attached parenting (Dozier, Brick & Bernard 2015, p. 201). Based on her own experiences as a foster parent, Hänninen (2016) associates foster parenting with guiding and assisting the child in learning healthy coping mechanisms and everyday skills. The emotional environment should be positive and supportive of the child. The foster parent's task would also become difficult if their own emotions should take over. (Hänninen, 2016, pp. 164-165.)

Cooperating with biological parents can attract emotions in foster parents. Some foster parents' experience of the fulfilment of the child's "best interest" impacts foster parents' well-being. According to foster parents, social workers may lose focus on the child's best interest when trying to cooperate with the biological parents and keep them happy. Foster parents wish social workers would hear the child's opinions about being in contact with biological parents and restrict it if needed. (Rauhala, 2019, pp. 65-66.) Foster parents may experience bigger problems related to biological parents than problems related to the child (Holikko, 2021, p. 45). Functioning cooperation enabling discussion with biological parents is helping foster parents, yet forming it might take a long time (Valkonen, 2014, p. 26).

Cooperation with social work professionals can also be difficult and affect foster parents' psychological resources. Frequent change among designated social workers can be tiring and affect foster parents' trust towards the social worker. Foster parents may end up in a position of acting as a sort of a solicitor for the child. This role may exist in cooperation with clinical contacts, social work professionals or other networks. (Sariola, 2014, p.55.) Foster parents seem to experience they have only little effect on the situation, and they are not heard when making decisions the way they would like to. They experience the need of adapting a demanding way to communicate for making themselves heard (Laine & Pietilä, 2021, p. 18).

The findings underline the delicacy related to human relations in child welfare placements. As presented above, a social worker may indirectly endanger the foster parents' experience of their well-being when pursuing good cooperation with the biological parents and taking their requests into consideration (Rauhala, 2019, pp. 65-66.). The latter may put the social worker into a difficult position since building cooperation with the biological parents is their lawful duty (L417/2007 45. §).

The criteria for a child's "best interest" can vary depending on the person defining it (Virtanen, 2020, p. 11). Foster families consider the child's best interest would be realised more if the opinions of the child and the foster parent were heard. According to foster parents, the biological parent's rights sometimes override the child's rights, for example, concerning the number of meetings between the child and the biological parent. (Laine & Pietilä 2021, pp. 22-23.) The biological parent may see the termination of custody as the child's best interest. Defining the child's best interest is also recognised as a difficult concept in practice among social workers (Setälä, 2022, p. 56). Lack of clear criteria generates space for interpretations (Korkalainen, 2016, p. 44).

### 2.3 Intercultural child welfare placements in Finland

When a child is taken into custody, the authorities are bound by law to ensure the continuity of language, culture, and religion (L417/2007 40. §). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child also obliges to secure the right for culture, religion, and language (UNCRC 1989, article 30). Freedom of religion and the practice of it is also addressed in the Constitution of Finland (L 731/ 1999 11. §).

A placement into a foster family can be long- or short-term, depending on whether the child has been taken into custody (40. §) or placed as an open-care support measure (37. §). An emergency placement (38. §) takes place in a situation considered so urgent that child welfare open-care measures would not be timely nor sufficient. (L 417/2007)

Taking a child into custody is the supreme intervention, necessary when a child is being neglected in care, lives in conditions seriously threatening their health and safety, or is endangering themselves with substance abuse, criminal behaviour, or other harmful acts. Family care is considered primary among the different methods of institutional care. When a place for foster care is arranged for a child, the authorities must ensure the child's right to maintain contact with family members and other close relations. The child's linguistic, cultural, and religious rights must also be considered. (L 417/2007 40. §) In Finland, a placement is never lawfully permanent, yet the social worker must constantly evaluate and document the circumstances. Re-uniting the family is to be considered if the harmful circumstances preceding the placement do not occur and if it serves the child's best interest. (L 417/2007 30. §)

If the child is decided to place in foster family care, the network of people close to the child is to be investigated for their suitability (L417/2007 32. §). Suppose the foster family consists of people close to the child. In that case, they may share a common language, religion or culture with the biological family and thus have more abilities to ensure the continuity of cultural specifics (Eriksson & Säles, 2021, p. 24).

Should the aforementioned not succeed, a suitable foster family is selected by the municipality authorities. In 2010 it was estimated that there were “some dozens” of intercultural foster families in child welfare. (Niekka, 2010, p. 5) There are no statistics available about the number of cultural backgrounds of Finnish foster parents nowadays. The law does not provide guidance or good practices about how exactly ensuring the child’s cultural, religious, and linguistic needs should occur in the everyday life of a Finnish-origin foster family. Personally, this lack of good practices and consistent instructions in an intercultural setting became visible while working among foster parents for several years.

Some studies abroad use the term *transcultural* when referring to foster parents representing cultural background differing from the children placed into their household (e.g., Brown et al, 2009; Degener et al, 2021). A common term used in the Finnish language is *multicultural* (monikulttuurinen). In this thesis, the term *intercultural* is used, for it comprises the ideas of dialogue, mutual respect and new forms of understanding turning into action. Whereas a multicultural society recognises different cultures co-existing yet not thoroughly interacting, an intercultural society can be seen as flexible and developing through confluence. (Schriefer, 2016). Culture itself is considered in this thesis as a concept that is both wide and recognisable among certain groups of people:

Culture encompasses religion, food, what we wear, how we wear it, our language, marriage, music, what we believe is right or wrong, how we sit at the table, how we greet visitors, how we behave with loved ones and a million other things (Pappas & McKelvie, 2022).

Because of the underlying need for placement, children in intercultural placements have been exposed to circumstances threatening their healthy development. Therefore, they can be considered even more vulnerable than the general population of children in custody. Thus, it is justified to say their foster parents are in need of specially tailored support.

## 2.4 Previous research on the topic

Regardless of the fact Finland's population is becoming increasingly diverse, intercultural placements in Finnish foster care system have been scarcely researched. Jäske et al (2022) states that the general discussion of cultural differences and structures is often happening through the narrative of "immigration being a new thing in Finland" and different cultures are seen as results of immigration. This narrative forgets that a variety of culture existed decades inside Finnish borders. For example, the structural position of both Sámi and Roma people in Finland, and how they have been treated even in recent history, is often left unmentioned. At the rise of a nationalistic spirit in late 1800's, Finland aimed at an alignment of culture, people, and language. This led, at its worst, to separating Sámi and Roma children from their parents, culture and language and being raised in substitute care performed by the majority population. (Jäske et al., 2022, pp. 37-40.) That is, intercultural family placements have taken place in Finnish society long before increased immigration.

So far Taimikko -project, performed in 2007-2009, has been the most thorough developmental project towards the theme of intercultural placements in Finland. Taimikko aimed at spreading awareness of becoming foster- or professional, supportive families among immigrants and intercultural families. It was discovered that the actions taken did not meet the need, nor was there enough information about culture-specific features in family placements in Finland. During the project, culture-related supplementary training material was formed for foster parents' PRIDE -training. (Niekka, 2010, p.5.) However, information considering the use of this material nowadays was not found.

Finnish research considering intercultural placements from the foster parent's perspective found only a little. Some research related to the theme concerned professional foster families (Joutsalainen, 2012) and minor asylum seekers who had entered Finland without their biological parents (Virtanen, 2020).

Foster parents of minor asylum seekers considered their everyday life "normal", yet it was enriched with cultural exchange, a process of mutual learning from each other. (Virtanen, 2020, p. 53.) Fostering minor asylum seekers has many

similarities compared to a child welfare-led placement, yet one important actor does not actively exist in the everyday life of the foster family: the biological parents of the child. Due to long cross-national distances and inadequate methods of communication, the family relations formed during foster family care are accentuated over biological relations in placements concerning minor asylum seekers (Virtanen, 2020, pp.65-66).

Joutsalainen (2012) researched the cross-cultural competences of professional foster family homes in Finland. These foster parents, who had previous working life experience and professional training, considered cooperation with biological immigrant parents demanding, due to limited possibilities in communicating and the cultural differences related to it. The biological parents might have feared losing their child and counteract by seeking control over the life in foster family home. Overall, the professional foster parents described intercultural placements as positive experiences, despite the fact that these seemed to require much from the foster parents. (Joutsalainen 2012, p. 84-87.) The interculturalism itself did not cause conflicts in everyday life of the foster family home (Joutsalainen 2012, p. 54). The active role of professional foster parents' own education and information-seeking was highlighted, and they requested training related to the theme. Their intercultural competence also seemed to correlate with previous experiences in life. (Joutsalainen 2012, pp. 89-91.)

Studies abroad enhance the importance of foster parents' emotional flexibility, especially in intercultural placements. A case study by Puig (2013) explains the importance of an additive approach towards the child's cultural and linguistic background. The language of the foster family was seen as an addition to the child's own language basis. This was the opinion of both foster parents and social work professionals. The flexibility of the foster family and the social workers is an important asset. Flexibility in practice may, for example, consider the concept of family; flexibility creates space for the biological parents to join. (Puig, 2013.) A risk for moral dilemmas exists when the child represents a different religion than the foster family. Ensuring the child's right to religious freedom and build-up for identity requires sensitivity from foster parents along with the ability to support the child neutrally when processing religious identity. (Van Berger et al., 2022.)

" A culture of silence" concerning experiences of racism and prejudice and sharing experiences of these may exist between the child and their foster parents. Foster parents' primary aim can be to offer a safe environment for the child, and cultural features may not be prioritised Foster parents express complexity in search of" the right" to take the child as part of their family. Foster parents are seen in need for additional training, sharing good practices, concerning especially how to support children facing discrimination, and finding ways to incorporate biological parents to upbringing healthy and culture-aware identity. (Degener et al., 2021, p.7).

Finnish foster parents recognize the need for additional training since their past education, profession, or PRIDE- training is not enough to meet the needs of the everyday life of a foster family (Nummela, 2022, p. 92; Anttila and Gencer, 2015, p. 20). Foster parents performing intercultural parenting can be in even bigger need of tailored support since their situation includes the phenomena existing in all placements and the unique features that ensue from interculturalism. For example, it is estimated that half of the children being placed suffer from diverse mental health challenges, which alone demand much from the caregiver (Sinkkonen, 2015, p. 151). Dealing with those challenges, for example, with a limited common language, can be considered to make the parenting task even more difficult. Foster parents themselves have recognized the unique nature of their feelings during placements and wish social workers to be trained to understand their experiences better and thus provide better support (Rauhala, 2019, p. 68).

Even without broad Finnish research data, it can be assumed that intercultural settings can add more pressure to an already complex situation of taking a child into custody. Immigrants in Finland experience Finnish people concerning them more as a threat than beneficial for Finnish society (Nshom et al., 2022, p. 53). The idea of Finnish child welfare can be negative among immigrant communities and have emphasis on taking children into custody. The placement itself can cause shame and contain fears of estrangement and" making children Finnish". (Niekka, 2009, p.11.) Sámi families living in Finland express concerns about the

lack of foster families and child welfare workers speaking Sámi languages (Mäkitalo, 2022, p.54). A Roma participant in research of Stenroos (2014) described being placed outside own community as follows:

The respondent compared the experience to suddenly taking a child from a foreign country, another culture, into the middle of a foreign culture. They described that feeling of difference and loneliness was indescribable. (Stenroos, 2014, p.31)

## 2.5 The need for new research

The important task of this new research is to demonstrate the present state of intercultural placements according to foster parents. Since little Finnish research of the subject exists among non-professional foster parents, this thesis is to act as "a scratch of the surface", research with inquisitive nature.

Development of training and supporting foster parents in intercultural placements requires information about the present state of the matter. Therefore, this thesis is to collect first-hand information from foster parents. As mentioned before, Finnish foster parents recognize the need for training and support in general. Studies abroad indicate the need for specialized support and training for foster parents in intercultural placements. Suorsa (2018) represents researching experiences as a way of certain exposure of to experiences take place, which can aid individuals and communities in gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Suorsa, 2018, p. 103).

Designing additional training for intercultural placements is easier when foster parents' experiences and wishes are facilitated since cultures, situations, and individuals vary. The experience-based information foster parents provide will make visible their understanding of the phenomenon and how they consider themselves managing it. Anonymous research helps to verbalize experiences frankly since foster parents may fear discussing their problems directly with social work professionals might lead to doubts about their abilities (Valkonen, 2015, p. 128).



Discussing cultural differences may also be easier anonymously since the fear of being labelled as narrow-minded person is avoided. Fear of being labelled as a racist may limit discussion about post-colonialist structures existing in Finnish society and stand in the way of progress. This phenomenon has been discussed internationally by the term *white fragility*. White fragility refers to discomfort experienced by the privileged majority population, who tend to feel difficult discussing their privileges, the element of power, and structures affecting their thinking and acts. (Jäske et al., 2022, pp. 42-43.)

Parenting task can be estimated to become even more difficult for Finnish foster parents. At the moment, the youth mental malaise is considered alarming. According to the School Health Promotion study (Helakorpi & Kivimäki, 2021), experiences of anxiety, loneliness and impaired health have become more common compared to previous surveys. At the same time, sufficient and timely mental health services remain unfulfilled. The COVID-19 pandemic has weakened the already difficult situation. (Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health (Valvira), 2022, pp. 2-4.) The need for support from foster parents peaks in early adolescence (Van Berger et al., 2022).

Unsuccessful cooperation in an intercultural placement increases the child's risk of not feeling connected to Finnish society or the cultural group of their parents (Niekka 2009, pp.15-16; Degener et al., 2022). The risk of seeking objects of identification from unhealthy sources can grow (Gröhn& Wadunombi, 2022, pp. 48-50). The discussion of the increased number of juvenile street gangs is currently heated in Finland. Professionals consider a lack of functioning relationships as a predisposing factor to gang involvement among immigrant youth (Gröhn& Wadunombi, 2022, pp. 48-50). Cooperation between foster parents, biological parents and authorities appears even more essential.

The need for support may be seen as a duplex: foster parents may need personal support in understanding and managing interculturalism, and the children need support in growing and forming healthy self-esteem between cultures. Social work professionals can indirectly support children living in foster families by providing their caretakers with information and education. Increased

understanding among foster parents can also ensure the continuity and psychological safety of children interculturally placed (Eriksson & Säles, 2021, p. 24).

### 3 PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVE OF THE THESIS

The purpose of this thesis is to describe Finnish foster parents' current experiences of intercultural child welfare placements and to identify the developmental needs they recognize in their training and supporting.

Research questions are:

1. How do Finnish foster parents experience bringing up children representing cultural background differing their own?
2. What developmental needs do foster parents address in order for them to succeed in intercultural placements?

The results provide increased understanding of the perspective of foster parents in an intercultural placement. These will help to design support and training before and during the placement and thus benefit child welfare professionals in the communal and private sector and non-governmental organisations. Future and current foster parents can also reflect the results with their assessment of their own competencies.

## 4 DATA COLLECTION, DATA AND ANALYSIS

The thesis is based on qualitative research. Target group of the thesis are Finnish foster parents who have personal experience on bringing up children representing cultural backgrounds differing their own. Participants had the freedom to decide whether they fitted the target group or not. Short- and long – term placements were not separated in this research since the culture-related phenomena was considered containing same elements in both. Also, to ensure data as rich as possible, no exclusion between professionals and non-professionals was done.

### 4.1 Data collection

Data were collected in two phases. The recruitment of participants happened online. Data collection occurred among foster parents and focused on their experiences in an intercultural placement. The first data sampling was an anonymous online survey.

Deeper understanding of the subject was gained with three semi-structured interviews with volunteers among the survey attendees. Interviews enabled possibilities to discuss the themes in more profound level and ask participants attach to themes (Roberts et al., 2019). Data collection took place during the spring and summer of 2022. The data collection process was done entirely in Finnish to enable participation for as many as possible.

#### 4.1.1 Online survey

The primary data collection method was a Webropol survey with one open-ended question and an answering text box. The question was “what kind of feelings has a multicultural placement evoke in you?” The word “experiences” was not used in survey since it was anticipated that it would tempt participants to explain their situations too precisely and endanger confidentiality. The survey page is attached as Appendix 1.

Using the term “multicultural” in the survey question was intentional. It’s Finnish equivalent “monikulttuurinen” is in common use and thus considered more familiar and understandable for participants than “intercultural”.

Before the survey link was published, the Webropol survey question was discussed with a foster parent fitting the target group. This was done to ensure the question is easy to understand and, thus the answers relate to the research question. Testing the survey is to ensure the survey questions are understandable and the words and terms mentioned are selected carefully (Ronkainen & Karjalainen, 2008, p.39). After the discussion, some adjustments were made since the foster parent started quickly to discuss intercultural placements in general. The risk of getting too general or assumption-based data was discovered. The question was set to past tense to guide the participants to focus on their own previous experiences.

The online survey was open for six weeks. The link was sent directly by the researcher to 21 local associations of foster parents around Finland. Contact information was found on the website of Perhehoitoliitto, a professional association for Finnish foster parents and family caretakers of people with disabilities and for elderly people (Perhehoitoliitto). The survey link was attached to a short e-mail explaining the topic of the thesis and a request to promote the link in their mailing lists and other communication channels, such as closed discussion forums. Perhehoitoliitto was also contacted directly, and their publicist helped by sharing the survey link in their internal communication.

During six weeks, the survey link was opened 562 times and answering was started 27 times, total of 26 answers was submitted. One answer was left out from the research since the participant told they were not a foster parent, but a professional working among them. Otherwise, the recruitment of participants can be considered successful since no other participants expressed not fitting the target group nor did this become visible in answers.

The lengths of the original Finnish texts varied from two words (the shortest) to 249 words (the longest). The texts were named with S (for survey) and their sequence number, S1 to S25.

#### 4.1.2 Interviews

The survey participants were informed about the option of being personally interviewed. Instructions for leaving contact information were given. Four of the survey attendees expressed their interest in participating in an interview and submitted e-mail addresses as separate answers on Webropol. After the survey link was closed, volunteers were sent an e-mail and asked whether they still wanted to participate. Three of them answered.

Three semi-structured interviews were arranged during June and July 2022, two online and one face-to-face. The first interview (interview 1) took 58 minutes and was transcribed to 32 pages, the second (interview 2) was 42 minutes and 14 pages and the third (interview 3) took 27 minutes and 9 pages. Font Calibri, size 11, and spacing 1 were used in transcriptions. Interview transcripts are referred to with I (= interview) and their sequence number, I1-I3.

Interviews pursued gaining a deeper understanding of research question 1. Interviews were also a tool for gathering thoughts and ideas for developing supportive work and additional training – answers to research question 2. Interview questions are presented in Appendix 1.

Semi-structured interviews contain the idea of the discussion being framed inside a certain phenomenon. A common dilemma in semi-structured interviews is the balance between questions that are both wide enough yet keeping the discussion in the theme selected. Assumptions should be avoided if necessary; thus, assumption-based questions were used with specific delicacy. (Kananen, 2017, pp. 91-93). Some closed-ended questions were used intentionally for a few reasons. First, it served efficiency and economical use of time. Some information about the phenomenon was already gained from the survey, and interview questions were based on the survey sampling. Thus, the assumption of the participants having personal experience with the themes was justified.

Approaching the themes with open-ended questions would have required more time and potentially widened up the research needlessly.

Hypothetical questions are a tool for gaining information about experiences towards a phenomenon (Kananen, 2017, p.99). The hypothetical question about discussing to a PRIDE- group can be considered useful in two ways: it provided information about the PRIDE -training itself, but the answers could also reveal information about participants' experiences towards placements.

As assumed, the three volunteers interviewed were talkative and active, and the interview situation felt natural and discursive. People not willing to share their thoughts might not participate. Even though the focus was on foster parents' own experiences, the discussion might easily lead to other matters. These were the moments when it was clarified if this new theme was somehow connected with the original topic. These new paths of discussion may open new understanding of the topic the researcher might not have thought existed. (Kananen, 2017, pp.101-103.)

## 4.2 Analysis

The data was analysed with thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen because it allows the researcher to search for thoughts and ideas before labelling them (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, pp. 142-143). Six-step guideline presented by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed. The steps are 1) getting familiar with the data, 2) generating preliminary codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing the themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report. (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 87.) In this thesis containing two sets of data, the whole of the data was combined in step 4.

Thematic analysis can be done inductively or deductively, depending on whether the analysis reflects an existing theory or another existing framework (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 141). Inductive analysis was found more suitable for the thesis process because it does not require any existing theories from whereby to contemplate the data – the data itself is leading the identification of the themes

(Nowell et al., 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 8). Open dialogue with the data was pursued, and the important issues were trusted to become visible easily. However, the thematic analysis contains an idea of the researcher being active in making decisions.

The active analysis with both sets of data began with reading the answers through several times and then translating them to English while ensuring the original tone and expressions were kept as similar as possible. Familiarizing with the data can present repeating patterns or phenomena considered significant by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 11). The thematic analysis aims to seek the patterns and ideas behind the words used to thoroughly understand the phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). An example of first impressions was the idea of extra work repeating and thus expressing the whole theme in an early phase. Even though quantitative specifics are not a defining factor in qualitative research, the prevalence of a certain word, phrase or comment can indicate something important about the phenomenon revealed and thus become a theme if it is decided by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 82-83). Referring to cultural specifics as "demands from parents" was also noticed, as well as the idea of "a child being a child" regardless of the culture.

The data was copied into a two-column MS Word document in a row. The original data formed its own column alongside with another column for codes. Whilst going through the material the codes were added next to the original text. The use of MS Word in coding was presented by Kriukow (Kriukow B, 2019). At this step, everything catching the attention of the researcher should act as a code (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88).

After coding, the codes were transferred into their own document. The codes were read through several times whilst similarities, and preliminary themes started to become visible. This step was to assess what were the factors codes had in common and how they could be described (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). Codes with something common were coloured alike, and unique ones were left black. The codes were arranged side by side, with each colour in its own column. Finally, all the codes fit one column. The thematic analysis does not instruct to

force codes to fit a theme and thus it would have been possible to present miscellaneous codes as their own theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 90). Using colours was a personal choice to help visualize the differences between themes.

Each of the five columns was scrutinized and some codes were moved to another column. This step was important to assess the coherence of the themes created and verify if the initial codes were carefully selected (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 90- 91). The columns were given preliminary names to describe the content, and thus, the preliminary themes were formed. The five themes were: Cultural differences don't matter, Extra work and difficulties, Feelings related to children, Experiences of learning and teaching and Experiences of prejudice.

Table 1 below presents an example of the process of creating themes from the survey data.

Table 1. Example of the process of creating preliminary themes.

Preliminary themes / survey data	Cultural differences don't matter	Extra work and difficulties	Feelings related to children	Experiences of learning and teaching	Experiences of prejudice
Codes	<p>Cultural difference doesn't matter</p> <p>Multiculturalism did not affect feelings towards the child</p> <p>At first thought it didn't matter</p> <p>No special feeling arose</p> <p>Multiculturalism hasn't</p>	<p>Multiculturalism adds extra work</p> <p>Not understanding or not being understood causes annoyance</p> <p>Being expected to teach culture, language, and customs</p> <p>Overwhelming expectations</p>	<p>Sadness for the child feeling different</p> <p>Unsure about how to protect the child from racism</p> <p>The child not having common language with biological parents is challenging</p> <p>Feels good the parents want to have contact with the child</p>	<p>New culture is interesting</p> <p>Family has multiple strengths and skills</p> <p>Multiculturalism is way to learn new</p> <p>New culture is interesting and brings joy</p> <p>Pride for the diverse family</p>	<p>Multiculturalism evokes more feelings in other people</p> <p>Strangers are not open-minded</p> <p>Strangers may act ignorantly</p> <p>The immigration policy in Finland feels obscure.</p>

Interview data was coded in a similar way, yet the themes were already existing. Thus, the interview data analysis cannot be considered inductive as it's nature, since codes were intentionally compared to existing themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85). Multiple thematic interviews provide in-depth understanding towards specific theme since it makes visible various ways of reacting to same thing. Difference in reactions among participants may be seen as a significant clue for the researcher. (Kananen 2014, p. 86.) Since the concept of "extra work" kept on repeating in the survey material, finding out about the factors making intercultural



fostering worthy of all the extra, was intriguing. That is because most of the things considered" extra" cannot be taken away.

Thematic analysis often requires repetitive return to raw data, re-evaluation and adjustment of choices made (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). After completing the interviews and analysing the interview themes the data was looked over several times and decided to form new sub-themes inside the main themes. This was made to ensure the finding of detailed information about the main themes and prevent them from being too general in nature (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 92-93). The following table 2 presents an example of creating sub-themes among the theme Experiences of difficulties and doing extra.

Table 2. Codes, sub-themes, and themes in Experiences of difficulties and doing extra.

Authentic quotation (S=survey, I=interview)	Code (s)	Sub-theme	Main theme
" We were ought to teach culture, language and customs -- - I should have taught [language] even though the parents did not speak it but mother wanted me to" (S7)	Should have taught culture, language, and customs	Concrete changes	Experiences of difficulties and doing extra
" The most challenging thing was to keep the language as well as the culture and religion in mind" (S10)	Keeping language, culture and religion in mind is challenging	Concrete changes	
" It's easy because we have no special demands related to culture" (S16)	Easy because no culture-related demands	Cultural differences	
"In many things I can't... I can't like... trust the things told me – I really don't see it like they're lying on purpose, but the things are seen in a different way" (I1)	the feeling of trust affected  Things are seen in a different way	Cultural differences	

In step 4 (reviewing the themes) it is evaluated, which themes were selected for thorough discussion. This step of thematic analysis is to decide whether to focus on the entire data or select the most important themes to focus on. (Flick, 2014, 423.) Presenting the whole data can be useful when the research concerns a new phenomenon or something not known much about (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.8).

To ensure the visibility of a variety of experiences, the whole data was chosen to present. Some combinations were made to compact the amount of information.

In step 4 it was decided to combine themes Cultural differences don't matter and Experiences of prejudice under the theme Feelings related to children, since they closely relate to it. References to skin colour and other characteristics mentioned in codes of Cultural differences don't matter can be considered as indirect attitudes towards the child. When discussing the phenomenon of prejudice, the child is considered in the most vulnerable position – the one who is prejudiced. Enhancing children's perspective is important since their well-being is the major focus of all work related to child welfare. Foster parents expressed multiple examples of their concerns about the child growing up in two families and between cultures. Therefore, the child-related themes were combined as the theme **Thoughts and concerns related to children**. The term "experiences" is not included in the theme name since foster parents do not have personal experience about being children interculturally placed.

One of the most important things in qualitative research is to see, what the data is willing to present, and this can be an intuitive process for the researcher (Kananen 2014, p.115). In an early stage of the process, the relation of survey categories "Extra work and difficulties" and "Experiences of learning and teaching" appeared most interesting. They had started to look like as two different ways of reacting to the same phenomenon: the same "extra" undoubtedly existed, yet the experiences presented in different kinds of words, reactions and emphasis.

Theme **Experiences of personal growth and mutual learning** consist of survey theme Experiences of learning and teaching and additional information from the interview data. Interview data presented positive experiences, well-functioning mindsets, and characteristics.

Theme **Experiences of difficulties and" doing extra"** contains the survey category with additional information from interviews. The idea of extra was presented repeatedly in survey material, and interviews offered a chance to gain

an in-depth understanding of what this extra can consist of. The expression "extra" was kept in the theme's name since it contains the discourse of something additional and thus describes the dualistic nature of the phenomenon. The material seemed to contain both facts and attitudes. This means, there are undoubtedly things existing in intercultural placements there are not in fostering general population children, such as bureaucracy related to nationality. Still, the idea of "extra" can also be seen as a mindset.

**Experiences related to acts of social work professionals** were collected among all themes to gain answers to research question 2. Interview data provided ideas about developing foster parents' training and support during placement. The importance of underlining the existence of social work professionals in foster parents' life is justified by the fact foster parents are, whether they like it or not, in an active relationship with social workers and other social work professionals, who also are responsible for supervising and supporting foster parents. Discussing experiences related to former experiences of cooperating with social workers, social counsellors and PRIDE-trainers was considered to give information about what was found useful according to foster parents and what was not.

## 5 RESULTS

The first chapter presents foster parents' experiences of intercultural placements. Their experiences consist of the concerns they express towards the child being placed, experiences of personal growth and mutual learning: gaining understanding through interest towards the new culture, and the extra work intercultural placements require from the foster parent. Experiences related to support from social work professionals are also presented to explain what is being done now and how foster parents experience it.

The second chapter presents the developmental suggestions foster parents pose. Foster parents acknowledge the need for sufficient and timely support for themselves, the child, and the biological parents. They also experience their preparatory training not containing enough information about the realities of intercultural placements.

### 5.1 Finnish foster parents' experiences of bringing up children representing a cultural background differing from their own

#### Thoughts and concerns related to children

Participants consider children with a different cultural background to be in a more difficult position in foster care than children of Finnish origin.

Being foster is one thing, these children are living under a magnifying glass (I1)

The part of the child growing up in foster care as a member of two different families became visible in different ways. Children were mentioned needing help in building self-esteem, setting personal boundaries, and facing prejudice and racism. Children were also mentioned to be in a difficult position because of bureaucracy. Due to the residence permit process, the child may not, for example, be able to travel with the foster family. This can cause limitations for family activities and feelings of inequality. One participant mentioned living without any travel certificate for two years.

Foster parents expressed concerns about prejudice, unwanted attention, and racism in children's lives. There were multiple mentions about the children being stared at, asked awkward questions, and even touched by strangers. Touching, mentioned by several participants, was seen as an act of curiosity, yet disturbing. Acts of prejudice and racism were seen as difficult things for children, but also causing insecurity in foster parents. Some participants mentioned they were concerned beforehand if they could protect the child from racism. Taking part in an intercultural placement might have required time to assess one's own abilities.

At first, I was desperate and wondered if I could meet all the needs (S12)

The child may be the only person of colour in their school or the whole area; thus, the possibility of being unnoticed is thin. Foster parents recognized they received unwanted attention themselves and empathized with children most likely receiving much more of it.

Felt annoyed when going to the store, and even strangers would come and comment on the beautiful hair of the child (I1)

Foster parents consider it important for the child to know their roots. Having more people around the child may make the child feel encountered and accepted. Some participants presented this as one form of holistic acceptance of the child.

And also, that we want to take their family into consideration, like comprehensively take the child, their background, into account (I3)

The acts or absence of biological parents were seen to affect the child. The child may feel embarrassed of the acts or omissions of biological parents. If, for example, the immigration process should be delayed due to the biological parent, the child may feel the need to explain the parents' actions. Lack of contact sometimes affected the child's interest in the culture of biological parents.

In these [placements] with less contact from parents, there's also less interest towards cultural things --- might be so, that even if we try to show movies about that culture or something else, they [children] might just be like "I don't want to" (I1)

The child's capability to communicate with their primary language was seen important. Their primary language was mentioned as the basis of communication and social and emotional development.

It was important to us to develop and keep up with the language, so that they would have even one language to manage properly, take care of things, communicate, study and so on. If they are left semi-lingual then they can't study in any language (I2)

Inadequate language skills of the child, especially concerning their primary language, were seen to cause the child difficulties in communicating with their biological parents, limiting their social lives, and causing extra work for children at school:

because of not knowing the language, the child did not understand anything during the lesson, and no one could help with homework (S7)

Foster parents may put many resources into creating possibilities for practising, even if the child would not motivate. Participants mentioned the fear of the child being left semi-lingual if they would not learn Finnish or have opportunities to maintain their primary language.

They didn't teach the child's language here in a group that would've matched their level - - there was nothing offered their own language outside of school- - we tried to motivate them into this discussion group in their own language, but they didn't want to attend -- when they found a friend with same language, we would pick this friend up at our place and arranged sleepovers (I2)

Cultural details considered setting boundaries into a child's life, such as religious guides to clothing, were easier to understand if the child seemed to have the right to choose whether to implement these. The risk of the child ending up in a loyalty conflict was recognised if the biological parents' requests would significantly differ from the lifestyle of the foster family. The child was seen as forced to choose which habits to adopt.

a big conflicting pressure [for the child], where do I belong, on whose side I'm on or whose ways to live I'm following. Maybe I'm thinking most about that, the sort of peace to grow so children could think by themselves, what is good for them (I2)

The more tightly they hold on to that and the more different is the, the child's own culture and especially if they are strict with it, then obviously the child has conflicting pressure (I1)

It was mentioned, the foster parent might want to avoid confrontation with the biological parents in a loyalty conflict situation. This "stepping back" was

explained as providing the child all the basic care they needed, yet the child's role in the family might turn out to be more distant.

If the own culture is very strong, I may not have the means to engage into our family so strongly, because it is so strong, the own culture, and the urge pushes towards it..it may be easier to take a step back like.. I can't brainwash anyone (I1)

Helping the child to adapt to Finnish society was seen as long-term helping. Participants wished the children to have a reasonable basis of skills and knowledge about Finnish society when becoming independent. Participants considered this as an asset they were willing to provide. Participants expressed understanding towards the premises and parental resources of the biological parents and hoped they could prevent harmful patterns from passing to forthcoming generations.

it might be easier to deal with all the things here-- if we try to sort of like build support here in Finland (I2)

it's our job to break this cross-generational chain--if we like, integrate to this society, then it will bring something to the next generation, or the next (I1)

This adaptation and the rehabilitating aspect of family care was mentioned to have more to do with the reasons for the placement, for example, past traumatic events or neglect, rather than culture.

Negative feelings, like if I'm frustrated or annoyed about something, they are more like if the child has been neglected or not paid attention to (I2)

It was mentioned that children representing different nationalities may give each other's peer support when living in the same foster family. Discussions concerning the origin, skin colour or other characteristics were also considered fruitful.

At times it's delightful to hear them [foster children] talking together, about who came from where --- it's like peer support (I1)

The broad question-setting in the survey allowed participants much freedom to discuss the theme as how they understood it. It became visible in multiple answers that the question-setting might have been understood if foster parents

had a certain attitude towards the child due to different cultures or skin colours. The object in the survey-question phrase was "a multicultural placement", yet some participants might have replaced it with "the child" when discussing it. These answers seem to reflect the values foster parents possess towards all humanity.

Nothing. A child is a child regardless of culture. (S2)

During the placement, the so-called multiculturalism has not been reflected in our lives in any special way and thus has not itself aroused any emotions - - we are all human beings and the way to be and to live is not dependent on religion or color (S14)

Some answers did contain a description of the idea of this "not mattering" changing over time. This may be related to the idea of increasing knowledge of the subject, making visible new aspects related to interculturalism - the idea of it being something more than a respectful or tolerant attitude towards different skin colours or religions. When the knowledge of the subject increases, the amount of responsibility related to acts of caretaking adults can increase as well.

At first, I thought it didn't matter, but over time I realized that it requires a bit more from the caregiver (S7)

I thought about this a lot when I answered the survey – it has never been a big deal to us, like "oh wow, we're intercultural". On the other hand, it may be pretty good because as persons we're like we've always been, but I also wonder, could it have been better for the sake of the child, acknowledging it (I2)

Interview participants discussed this theme with an idea of the social workers deciding whether their family matched the child's needs best. Thus, they did not think they were in a position to choose nor list qualifications for the child being placed in their care.

I don't see this as a matter of choice. The child might not know what's happening, not making the choices. So, what's the difference then if the child's from India or Syria or whatever? - - My halo is not any brighter - - There just happens to be a child in need of care and they [authorities] ask us whether we would provide it (I2)

### Experiences of personal growth and mutual learning



Both survey and interview participants presented examples of making changes in concrete things, such as food and music, but also in search of rethinking, understanding and communicating. The themes of diversity and migrancy had also become more familiar.

I learned diversity, about Muslim culture and about being African (S9)

Learning about diversity and different cultures might have spread towards people close to foster family. Also, the understanding of processes related to seeking asylum and immigration policy was increased.

I think our foster children have also made our parents rethink their racist opinions (S20)

In some answers, the particular features related to the child's culture seemed to assimilate into the existing culture and habits of the foster family and create something new. Learning about another culture was expressed as a positive and valuable thing. The word "interest" kept repeating. Some mentioned they were excited in advance when they heard the child placed into their family would represent a different culture.

Interest in other cultures and customs. Only positive emotions. (S11)

Multiculturalism is wealth, joy, the practice of new learning, the will to support the child's own culture (S5)

The child's characteristics, considered untypical for Finns, were mentioned as source of joy and something foster parents wished to emphasize.

I was very happy, the best placement. And the most emotional --- the immense joy and power of music in blood. Danced, cheered and was expressive. (S9)

Besides learning in the level of knowledge, the answers included references of concretely adjusting themselves into new situation. Dealing with unfamiliar things, such as taking proper care of different type of hair, was presented as something they simply needed to seek more information about. Foster parents might also seek information to be able to discuss cultural issues with children and answer their questions. These mentions did not contain references to demands nor being required to do so.

We ourselves have familiarized ourselves with the history of these fathers' home regions and acquired literature, so that we know a little about these backgrounds and can tell them if necessary (S20)

Despite learning themselves, foster parents described the child learning from foster parents. Gender equality was mentioned as one example.

My husband shows that men also do housework and make food but also repair cars and renovate (S4)

As a woman, I was very peculiar to them since they were used to something very different. For example, how a woman dresses up, looks after herself and how she acts towards her husband (I2)

One of the survey participants pointed out the thought that multicultural discussion does not only happen between the majority population and minorities. This can be considered as recognizing the difference between multiculturalism and interculturalism.

The layout of the question is vague and broad, because I see multiculturalism already among our so-called native Finns for family roots, lifestyles, diets, religion, etc.(S13)

This idea was also brought up by one of the interview participants. The concept of culture was seen as a holistic idea and linking to appreciating the child's characteristics. Finding things in common and discussing differences acted both as a way of getting acquainted and making the child feel more accepted.

It's the same with everyone, things important and meaningful to them try to take into consideration and emphasize, the same way with Finnish origin children. - - try to find things in common and shared interests and topics to discuss and such. I mean, the child does come from another culture even when they come from another family (I2)

Foster parents' own ability to pursue and maintain discussions with biological parents was considered important. It was mentioned requiring an active role of the foster parent. Discussions, sending pictures and asking biological parents' opinions, when possible, were mentioned as concrete examples.

A way to connect has always been found. We have had challenging parents and difficult situations, but we've always managed. (I2)

Emotional flexibility and open-mindedness were often mentioned as helping characteristics in interviews and survey data. Interview participants presented re-

considering their own thoughts and not taking cultural differences personally as well-functioning mindsets. Interview participants considered the will to understand the parents' perspective, having helped build constructive cooperation. Understanding the placement's root causes was helpful, as well as the biological parents' perspective in difficult situations. The idea of biological parents not intentionally causing the situation could protect the foster parents from negative feelings taking over.

You should know how to look beyond what you see (I1)

I don't think anyone decides to get children, move to Finland and get the children into custody on purpose (I2)

Interview participants think intercultural placements may not be suitable for very pedant or strict persons. Cultural differences may cause surprises, and plan changes caused by linguistic misunderstandings or cultural differences. Participants mentioned that the need to be always right could turn against foster parents themselves since the "right" state of matters is usually a matter of opinion.

If you're strict or pedant, those are good qualities but.. you can't paint anything with a small brush in our family! -- I'd say this is so interesting one won't need to watch tv! (I1)

#### Experiences of difficulties and doing extra

The material agrees about intercultural placements requiring extra work from foster parents when compared to fostering Finnish -origin children. The extra work consists, for example, of dealing with unfamiliar things and having to put more effort into communication. The everyday life of a foster family may be affected by surprises springing out of misunderstandings, cultural differences or bureaucracy.

Sometimes I got to laugh, and things were funny. Sometimes irritating and annoying. Communicating with the parent was difficult and frustrating. (S19)

Mutual frustration towards insufficient interpretation services was mentioned. Not understanding or not being understood was recognized as a factor adding tension to communication needlessly and making small everyday matters difficult. Sometimes it can be difficult to define the source of irritation, whether it is the biological parent or the whole situation itself.

Annoyed by the ineffectiveness of interpretation services and the fact that the parent did not become understood and vice versa. (S4)

It was also mentioned that the foster parents' attachment towards the child might take longer to form since getting acquainted with limited language may not feel natural.

Attachment to the child has taken longer for another foster parent and one reason is this multiculturalism and the fact we are just beginners in foster parenting. (S22)

We couldn't talk casually and because of that I felt we were very distant. (S18)

Biological parents may have difficulties in accepting the placement. They can also have prejudice towards foster parents due to cultural reasons. Biological parents posing a racist attitude towards the foster family were described as feeling unfair. The biological parents were seen as being able to act the way they wanted, and foster parents had no choice but to settle into the situation.

The placement would have been long-term, but the parents didn't want a white Finn to raise their child - - the only feeling that arise from the situation was a momentary frustration about the fact that they often complain about racism and yet are not any better themselves. (S8)

Biological parents may have close contact to foster parents, and due to the language barrier, this may feel labouring. Biological parents may also need support of their own, and when lacking contacts in Finland, the foster parents may feel natural to rely on.

You try to explain that everything's OK, in Finland you can trust the police and there are safehouses -- and when the phone call comes, you need to go somewhere else to talk (I1)

Interview participants mentioned they formed a kind of an extended family with the child's relatives and might help parents in their own matters. The latter can build trust but also be tiring. The risk of exposure to vicarious traumatization was recognized, especially if the biological parent relies on the foster parent in dealing with their previous experiences, often unfamiliar to a Global North citizen.

The cross-generational chain may contain horrible things we can't even imagine --- I have had to, at some point, limit the discussion when I realized I was starting to get traumatized as well (I1)

Sometimes foster parents may decide to help the biological parents in their own matters to gain good cooperation and make things easier for the child.

When they come into this country and have no-one, trust no-one and don't know the language, it's like, for the sake of the child (I1)

One survey participant mentioned having spent much time and effort transcribing medical texts and child welfare processes into parents' own language. The foster parent felt responsible for taking care of these matters to ensure proper care and support for the child and the biological parent.

It was worth the trouble, the child got sufficient support and rehabilitation with the parent as well (S23)

Some answers seemed to include a thought of cultural specifics being something coming from outside of the foster family (from biological parents or social workers), and they were referred to as, for example, *requirements*, *demands* or *the things parents wanted*. Social workers setting boundaries against these demands of biological parents was presented as a solution.

The parents' requirements can be quite demanding at times and the social worker doesn't always know how to restrict the parents. (S7)

These demands seemed to be in collision with the own culture and habits existing in the foster family. Foster parents might feel they were forced to become something they were not if the requests of the biological parents should be followed. One of the most obvious examples of this was the comment:

I just wanted to shake the hysterical social workers to their senses, who somehow strangely imagined now it's up to everyone to become Muslim and do everything as the parents want (S15).

The reconciliation of different lifestyles, values and habits was presented as difficult. It might also lead to non-functioning situations if the preferences of all parties were tried to be taken into consideration simultaneously. It was mentioned that all parties should be flexible similarly, so foster parents would not be the only ones making compromises.

In a jungle of compromises, no one is satisfied. (S1)

Keeping cultural features, such as language and religion, in mind in everyday life was described as challenging. Some expressed the idea of keeping the foster family's own culture as unchanged as possible, relieving.

Fortunately, it was finally agreed that each family lives in its own way and if a child of a Muslim family moves to a non-believing family, the child lives according to family rules and the child's religious education/ upbringing is carried out by the school or the parents elsewhere. (S15)

Some participants seemed familiar with the concept of extra work and recognized it did not concern their own situation significantly. They mentioned their situation lacking the extra and that it was positive.

No special requirements related to culture/ religion came into our lives. (S12)

It's easy because we have no special demands related to culture. (S16)

The difficulty in defining the roles, lawful rights and acts and separating them from hopes and wishes was discovered. This phenomenon may become a source of "extra work" itself. Biological parents might pose wishes impossible to implement by the foster parents.

We ought to teach culture, language and customs --- I should have taught [language] even though the parents did not speak it, but the mother wanted me to. (S7)

Some answers seemed to reflect a sort of tiring into the subject. Feeling of trying hard and doing their best was expressed in multiple answers.

Sometimes it's hard to face multiculturalism as a positive thing when you're tired and trying to make everyday life go smoothly. (S5)

Multiculturalism is a pretty annoying thing at the moment because it's forced to us from everywhere, so it's started to become a burden. (S6)

The collision between exact plans and cultural habits, such as perception of time, was mentioned as a concrete example in interviews. For example, one of the interview participants told a child took part in a cultural event with the biological parents. The length of the visit was agreed upon with the social worker

beforehand. The main event had not even started when the foster parent arrived to take the child back after six hours.

Some cultural differences may cause feelings of moral conflicts to foster parents. It was mentioned that the acts of parents might sometimes make the foster parent feel they were being lied to. On the other hand, these differences between words and acts were recognized as seeing things in a different way and not lying on purpose. One interview participant mentioned an example of a biological mother posing a wish for the child to call her new spouse "father", and the child appeared confused about this. The foster parent had mixed feelings about how to support the child in the situation and, on the other hand, how to cooperate with the mother constructively.

I'm annoyed, it feels like defrauding--- I wonder, who has the right to define how the child experiences who the father is --- and if it belongs to the culture—who am I to say who is the father to whom (11)

Interview participants considered linguistic issues the major source of extra work in an intercultural placement. Difficulties in communication may exist in cooperation with the child, the biological parents or both of them.

When we didn't have a common language, needed to guess things like a detective, had to live with Google translator in pocket all the time—because of that, it was a little difficult, the everyday life (12)

Foster parents mentioned that children usually have issues related to other things, such as developmental disabilities. These things were sometimes difficult to recognize. For example, the child's linguistic development was mentioned to be challenging to assess.

Separating, is this because the child's features or special needs or the fact they are just used to different kinds of things (12)

In an intercultural placement, the child's special needs can be more difficult to discuss with biological parents if there are limitations considering the communication. Different cultures can also include non-conscious attitudes regarding mental health issues or developmental challenges.

### Experiences related to support from social work professionals

Support from social work professionals is seen as important. The designated social worker has a defining role in overseeing the process and setting guidelines and boundaries when necessary. Supportive workers (social counsellors) are important in handling everyday situations and reflecting on foster parents' own feelings. Having reflective discussions with social counsellors, in which the foster parent could explore the thoughts awaking in themselves, felt good.

I like our supportive workers, it's good to brainstorm thoughts with them and ponder, if something awakes in me (I3)

Foster parents also consider biological parents having enough support important. Support for the biological parents was seen to help the situation of the child and the foster family as well.

I thought that, luckily, we have social counsellors for us and them [biological parents] (I1)

Developing new forms of support, such as social counsellors working with foster families, biological parents, and social workers, has reduced the number of tasks earlier drifted to foster parents.

There was a lot of extra work before, now that social counsellors have arrived and we have social workers, things have changed a bit -- and I think they have more support for biological parents as well (I1)

The support provided was, in some cases, described as insufficient or social work professionals did not know how to act or supervise foster parents according to biological parents' wishes. It was mentioned that concrete ways of supporting were needed since praising and encouraging are only one part hole of support. Difficulties may have been visible, yet professionals did not know how to react or how to advise foster parents. This could cause frustration.

We often heard how well we handle things in challenging situations, but it didn't help in practical matters (S19)

It seemed that, throughout the placement, social workers and all recognized the puzzles, language challenges and everything else, but there didn't seem to be any solution to these (S19)

It was also mentioned that social workers had difficulties restricting biological parents' acts. The restriction was sometimes seen as a means of easing the



situation from the foster parents' point of view, and the social worker not managing their task if not restricting the parents. Feelings of being alone with difficulties were mentioned.

We tried hard – we made many changes to our lives so that this young person would settle into our family, but in the end the challenges were so big that we could no longer cope. Feels we were left very alone with it (S18)

According to this data, culturally specific needs are underrepresented in training for foster parents. Interview participants were asked how multicultural placements were discussed in their PRIDE -training. All of them said the theme was mentioned in their PRIDE- training only briefly or not at all. One interview participant vaguely remembered referring to Roma people when discussing cultural differences. The participant assumed this was because Roma culture is a familiar example for Finnish people.

We had this group exercise imaginary children were given to each of us. I can't recall if it was us or someone else, but we had to come up with a background story for the child and I recall someone brought up the child could have an immigrant background. But besides that, it [the theme] was not brought up, absolutely not (I2)

If the theme was mentioned in PRIDE, it was not explained further. One recalled they were told in PRIDE to live normally as they wanted, and the biological parents would care for language, culture and religion.

it [the theme] could be more visible in PRIDE --- we were asked what kind of a child we would be ready to take but they didn't open up, what might it mean (I3)

## 5.2 Developmental needs in training and support according to foster parents

Participants regard PRIDE- trainers would inform future foster parents about the differences in intercultural placements. They claim foster parents should have the right to choose whether they want to become intercultural or not.

You can choose and definitely, you should choose, if you don't feel like you'd like to stand out (I1)

It was suggested PRIDE- training could have an additional meeting for those interested and someone with personal experience of the subject would attend to it. Future foster parents are encouraged to think carefully whether they understand what they are about to get involved in:

Think about what you're getting yourself into, what you're about to agree - - with multiculturalism, I'd emphasize this sort of.. Can you manage this? Do you have this idea you can manage the differences? If you have even a tiny bit of doubt it may get bigger in time, and you may start to see cultural differences even in places where there actually aren't any. I would, on the other hand, say this to all new foster parents (I2).

Difficulties considered "normal" in placements (such as the child settling into the family, finding proper ways and frequencies to communicate, and adapting to family rules) can be mistaken for the results of cultural differences. It was mentioned that the possible doubts and small disturbing things would probably grow bigger over time, so it is important to discuss the theme and try to prepare beforehand. During PRIDE training, general working with the theme was considered necessary. For example, assessing own values and habits and discussing hopes and expectations were mentioned. The careful assessment could make visible foster parents' own cultural features obvious for themselves. For example, one interview participant mentioned not considering themselves religious until discussing their church-related traditions with the child's biological parents.

I've had to think about my own values and habits beforehand, like "why am I doing or thinking like this"? Not like "this is the way I'm doing and that's it" (I2)

The role of a social worker, overseeing the decisions made, needs to be defined and explained in order to build understanding between biological and foster parents. Social work professionals can also ease the situation by providing biological parents support so they will not have to seek it from foster parents. Lack of knowledge or obscurity in defining roles and duties may lead to situations in which the foster parent feels being in charge of some social worker's responsibilities. The biological parents' thought of foster parents making all the decisions can add needless tension between them.

In a way, all the power and the role in dealing with those [possible difficulties] is not mine, but the social worker has big significance in

how things are defined and what the policies are, so I'd turn into that direction—I'm just the one working according to the client plan (I2)

Foster parents wish to have clear instructions and written support plans for themselves and the child. These were wished to exist before possible difficult situations occurred. The plans should also be detailed enough so the foster parent will know what to do and how to support the child even in complex situations. Especially the difficulty in maintaining the child's primary language needs to be discussed, and the person in charge needs to be decided.

Make sure you get the support when.. Like, make sure it's all agreed on paper beforehand. What means of support can be arranged for you, your family? And also, that in the client plan, everything is written down. All of what the child is entitled to, whether they get teaching in their own language or is it arranged in other way, maybe support weekends in a family with the same language or what (I2)

Peer support, such as support groups, might not be sufficient considering complex situations in intercultural placements. Confidentiality sets limitations to the topics of discussions with other foster parents.

It's gone so silly; you can't say almost anything. All you can talk about is the process of growing into foster parenting. You can't like.. discuss the difficulties (I1)

Foster parents cannot imitate the cultural circumstances of the birth family, no matter how hard they try. They also expressed feelings of failure when they did not know how to act upon maintaining the child's primary language or culture.

No matter how hard we'd like to live according to parents' wishes, we are not from that culture so in the end, we can never understand all of it (I2)

## 6 ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES AND RELIABILITY

This chapter is divided into two subsections. The first subsection discusses the choices made during the thesis process in order to ensure ethical thesis procedure. The second subsection assesses the process by reliability criteria.

### 6.1 Ethical perspectives

Since the need for this thesis had been forming during a decade working in child welfare, I was surprised about the discomfort occurred when forming the thesis plan. It was recognised soon as a combination of the delicacy of the subject, discussing the non-functioning elements in Finnish child welfare and the *white fragility* in myself and potentially in the participants. As I recognised a risk for unwillingly criticising some acts of foster parents, social work professionals and biological parents, I also came very close to the importance and delicacy of the whole phenomenon. For the sake of children, adults must be able to face uncomfortable situations and discussions.

Taking part in the research was entirely voluntary, and participants had the possibility to consider their attendance in their own peace since the recruitment was done online and no personal contact with the researcher was formed except with some participants in the interview phase. This respects the ethical principle of treating participants. (Finnish National Board of Research Integrity 2019, p. 11)

The ethical principles of research with human participants advise not to collect any unnecessary data, and studies should not collect personal information if it is irrelevant. (Finnish National Board of Research Integrity, 2019, p. 16.) This thesis follows these guidelines, as no unnecessary information about the participants was not collected. Interview participants had the freedom to choose which e-mail address they would leave as their contact address, so they had a chance to remain completely anonymous. Their names were not asked.

Foster parents have signed a contract prohibiting sharing confidential information, such as any information about the child's or biological parents' situation (Araneva, 2018, pp. 194-200, L 218/2000 14-15. § ). However, human error is always possible. The participants in both survey and interviews were reminded that they could not include any classified information in their answers. If this should have happened, I was prepared to print these survey answers out from the Webropol system, censor them, and delete the original from Webropol. Having the survey data and the interview material translated into English was a good addition to fading out dialectical specifics and recognizable phrases from the original Finnish texts.

## 6.2 Reliability

The trustworthiness of qualitative research can be assessed with five-aspect key criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and reflexivity. (Stenfors, Kajamaa & Bennett, 2020).

**Credibility** in qualitative research can consider, for example, the chosen methodology for gathering data and if it is suitable for gaining answers to research questions. (Stenfors, Kajamaa & Bennett, 2020). In qualitative research, more value over the quantity of data is put on the saturation of data, which refers to a sample so comprehensive that new information is no longer received along with new data (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2016). High saturation can be considered to increase credibility if the saturated data is assumed to contain all aspects considered relevant to the research question (Stenfors, Kajamaa & Bennett, 2020). In this thesis, data saturation can be considered successful considering survey data since repetitive patterns were found among the data and specific themes were identified. However, a larger number of interviews could have been beneficial.

Survey data contained some very short answers, which can contain risks for misunderstandings, or the amount of information can be small. This possibility was assessed when designing the survey, and I decided not to guide the participants with their answers or pose any reflective questions. The survey link

was opened over 500 times, yet only approximately 5% submitted an answer. It would be beneficial to know why. Some of the link openers might not have fitted the target group. The link could have also been opened by the same participant several times. Nevertheless, the number of clicks can also be considered a sign of the topic attracting interest among foster parents.

In this thesis, adding interviews to data collection is a way to enhance credibility. Because of their discursive nature, interviews allow the researcher to ask for justifications and significances from participants and correct possible misunderstandings (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002, p.75). Data was gathered directly from people having the most first-hand information about it: foster parents with personal experience.

**Dependability** means the research, when remade, would present similar outcomes as this thesis. As Kriukow (2019) mentions, qualitative research has its own difficulties when it comes to validity since respondents can rarely give identical answers to the same questions. The research may be hard to replicate, but the audit trail makes visible the choices made based on the data given. (Kriukow A, 2019). Peer-reviewing the analysis process in thesis seminars has supported dependability.

**Transferability** refers to the idea that the results can be generalized into a wider concept and consider another group of participants (Stenfors, Kajamaa & Bennett, 2020). The researcher can increase transferability, assessed by the reader of the research, when enough information about the research setting and the primary need for the research is provided (Consultores, 2020). Personally, reflecting on the *gut feelings* and observations collected during a decade of working in child welfare and creating a framework for new research was challenging. Balancing a decent amount of information about the target group and the phenomenon was a long process. I wanted to be as descriptive as possible with the characteristic requirements and other tacit knowledge related to foster parents since their task is easily evaluated and judged from outside. The results of this thesis contain many similar elements to studies taken place in Finland and abroad.

**Confirmability** requires a transparent process of data turning into results. Confirmability can be increased by thoroughly describing the analysis process and using enough direct quotations. (Stenfors, Kajamaa & Bennett, 2020). Different stages of data collection and analysis are reported as well as the decisions made in every stage. Results are presented with a high number of direct quotations to allow readers to assess the results themselves.

**Reflexivity** refers to a careful assessment of the role of the researcher (Stenfors, Kajamaa & Bennett, 2020). Neutrality was considered before and during the data collection and analysis by noticing the risks of biases. Even with an inductive approach to analysis, research questions can unintentionally guide the analysis process in a certain direction. (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.9). In this research, with a researcher's experience-based presupposition of intercultural placements not functioning in an ideal way, it was recognized that the focus of the analysis might lead to seeking explanations for this. Because of this, the survey question was kept as simple and neutral as possible. The question "what feelings.." does include a presupposition of *some* feelings awakening, yet it is for the participant to decide whether these feelings refer to positive, negative or neutral ones.

The whole thesis idea was built on the assumption that intercultural placements have their own unique features having an impact on foster families. In my working life reality, it had been more common for these features to be more often negative than positive. During the research, it was important to stay open for positive experiences yet not to emphasize them needlessly. As a researcher, I had to intentionally step outside my working life role and surrender to dialogue with the data. This thesis would have been both exciting and useful to carry out with a peer student: it would have increased the transparency of the analysis process and provided more perspectives.

As mentioned in chapter 2.3, a foster parent is expected to show good cooperation skills. They should also present understanding towards the biological parents. If they, however, feel it difficult to live up to these expectations, they may feel ashamed or embarrassed. As Kriukow (2019) denotes, the respondents may

give untruthful answers if they feel the research somehow threatens their self-esteem (Kriukow A, 2019). In this thesis, the anonymity of the survey and not collecting personal information hopefully prevented this.

During the interviews, I was aware of my own presence and of the fact that I might intervene or lead the participant with my questions or comments. To avoid researcher bias, I decided to talk as little as possible and focus on posing deepening questions rather than commenting. I also kept in mind that I shouldn't nod or gesture too enthusiastically if I agreed to avoid making visible what I thought was "a right answer".

There was a possibility that the data would include negative or even racist attitudes towards biological parents or show some other negative characteristics of foster parents. As a researcher, I was bound to show neutrality and pay equal attention to all results. This research is about observing the phenomenon, not about posing a certain image of foster parenting or Finnish foster parents. Patton (2014) refers to this with the metaphor of "something terrifying swimming under the surface" and the researcher being tempted to leave it unmentioned for the sake of "good results". According to Patton, the best way to tame this creature is to lift it up and observe it. (Patton 2014, p.555.)



## 7 DISCUSSION

The discussion chapter is divided into three subsections. The first two contain reflective discussion about the results of each research question. The third subsection includes recommendations, suggestions of what improvements could take place and what topics related to this phenomenon should be more thoroughly researched.

### 7.1 Foster parents' experiences

This research demonstrates that Finnish foster parents experience various emotions when fostering children with a cultural background differing from their own. Various emotions and experiences underline the need for multiple means of support to suit as many foster families as possible.

Foster parents' different reactions to the idea of "extra" became visible. When reflected in the definitions of multiculturalism and interculturalism presented earlier, these differences in reacting towards the idea of "extra" may also embody foster parents' stage on their development of understanding from multicultural to intercultural. As explained in chapter 2.1, in a co-existent world of multiculturalism, the cultures do not mix, like in answers containing shades of resistance towards changing the own life of a foster family (Schriefer, 2016). In practice, this means the child is in a position of moving between two different cultural "bubbles": adjusting themselves to the culture of the current place. This awakes questions of whether the child is the one who should have resources for repetitive adaptation or can cultural features exist only in certain places or with a certain company. The need for foster parents' sensitivity, highlighted by Van Berger et al. (2022.), was lightly discussed by thesis participants when referring to "stepping back" and avoiding confrontation with the biological parents in cultural matters.

On the other hand, expressing cultural changes as a process of learning and developing might be considered as interculturalism in practice. As discovered by Virtanen (2020), this mutual learning, cultural exchange, acts as dialogical learning. Both parties give and receive new from each other's culture and enrich the life of a foster family. (Virtanen, 2020, p. 54.) According to some of the thesis participants, cultural exchange experiences seemed to reinforce positive tones in placements. These participants also brought up the flexible attitude towards the concept of family and taking the biological parents into consideration in their everyday life, which also became visible in Puig's (2013) research.

The idea of extra being also a mindset can be considered a significant finding. When cultural specifics require readjustment from the foster parent, they have two alternatives: either consider this as "extra work" or seize the opportunity to learn new and gain something themselves. According to the famous quotation by Viktor E. Frankl, the ultimate right to choose one's attitude always remains in any given circumstance, even if the individual would have no effect on the situation itself. That is, foster parent themselves has a significant role in defining how the cultural specifics affect foster parents' own thinking and attitude. As presented by Joutselainen (2012), professional foster parents considered their experiences of intercultural placements positive, even if it required more from them (Joutselainen 2012, p. 87). The occupational shade in professional foster parents' upbringing might ease the adaptation of continuous learning mindset.

An interview participant concluded "small things becoming bigger in time" and that one might start to consider things as cultural differences even if they were something else. This may also mean that if the idea of extra work is implemented, the amount of extra can also grow more significant. Considering this idea of extra, an important question is the visibility of the phenomenon towards children placed in the foster family and how they could be protected from blaming themselves.

A vital idea presented among research participants is that a foster parent is to be interested in a child's cultural features in any case. Preferences for food, unique family habits and customs also exist in Finnish-origin placements. Religion, or the lack of it, is presented in numerous ways among Finnish people. One interview

participant pointed out they would get acquainted with a Finnish-origin child in a similar way: ask the child to talk about the culture of their birth family. Hänninen (2016) refers to this with an idea of foster parents' *curiosity* towards the child, which helps in empathizing and understanding the child and their history. (Hänninen, 2016, p. 201) Curiosity, according to Henriques (2022) can also act as a method of distancing oneself from a stressful situation and provide new perspectives (Henriques, 2022). Changing the mindset of extra into curiosity and learning appears a significant turning point and something to be developed in the support of foster parents.

Supporting children in developing healthy self-esteem in between cultures concerns foster parents before and during the placement. Prejudice and racism and how to protect the child from these are phenomena white population Finns have no personal experience of. Foster parents may feel responsible for integrating the child into Finnish society – and on the other hand, feel responsible for maintaining the child's primary language, religion and cultural habits in everyday life.

It was mentioned that the child might adapt to the foster family's culture more easily if the parents do not have a strict attitude towards their cultural habits. Paradoxically, it was also mentioned that children might not be interested in their culture if their parents were distant. These findings indicate the difficulties biological parents are experiencing when regulating their distance towards the foster family and the child; the definition of *sufficient contact* appears to be extremely difficult. This also echoes the risks in cooperation between the social worker and the foster parent mentioned in chapter 2.2.

Foster parents wish the child would maintain the right to make their own decisions. Making decisions about religion and committing oneself knowingly can be considered more natural among teenagers. Religious and cultural self-seeking is highlighted as a developmental task in youth (Van Berger et al., 2022). The idea of making their own decisions can be considered harder to perform when fostering toddlers or small babies with limited abstract thinking, understanding and expressing their own opinions. The element of power also correlates with the

age of the child: a small child is dependent on their caretaker and susceptible to influences. When placed in families, children are usually very young, typically under six years old, and have little understanding of their rights and the situation (Laine & Pietilä, 2021, p. 1; Laine & Pietilä, 2021, p. 62). This denotes the importance of clear instructions for foster parents and their abilities to discuss their values and beliefs, which was also recognized in interviews.

According to research participants, the child is wished to have the “best of both worlds” and not to be forced to choose between two different ways to live. A good question is, how could this idea of “two different worlds” be avoided and this bipolar setting turned into something more flexible?

One profound idea to assess is if the purpose of foster care is to raise these children as “typical Finns” – and what does that even mean? In the CODE convention 2022, Tony Addy referred to this phenomenon in his presentation. Addy mentioned that most of the population considers nations’ culture as one homogenous idea. Integration, according to Addy, is doomed to fail if trying to integrate people into this imaginary idea. Addy presented eye-to-eye contact and learning through each other's stories and differences as a more constructive alternative. (Addy, 2022.) This being said, if Finnish foster parents feel pressure about succeeding in integration, they might try to pursue something impossible to define. However, succeeding in creating discursive cooperation between the foster parent and the biological parent could be more beneficial.

Jäske et al. (2022) refer to the idea of cultural power and discuss cultural identity as a social structure – something created and decided by someone with power. Labelling someone as a Finn also contains an idea of *non-Finns* existing. Cultural identities tend to be strict and clearly defined, and people not being able to moderate into simplified definitions disturbs this social structure. (Jäske et al., 2022, p.51.)

Some foster parents verbalized that cultural differences did not matter to them nor evoke any feelings. Children were mentioned to be similar, regardless of culture. This may be a sign of true open-mindedness. However, these answers

can also represent the anti-racist term *colour-blindness* in practice. Colour-blindness refers to the idea of ignoring racist structures and phenomena in society. By fading colours and races entirely, the experiences and existence of BIPOC (black, indigenous and people of colour) people are dismissed. The idea behind colour-blinded thinking may be considered well-wishing, yet it can also allow matters to exist the way there are. (Jäske et al., p 88., Fitchburg State University)

It is also important to remember that cultural differences may be insignificant to the foster parent, yet the child may still need support in building their cultural identity. Children may experience racism without their caretakers knowing it since the topic and personal experiences may be challenging to discuss with foster parents not experiencing the same. (Degener et al, 2021). Jäske et al. (2022) discussed the idea of a BIPOC child being raised by their white population parent alone. Their interviews presented that these children felt more confused about their cultural identity if the parent would raise them by the narrative of being “just like any Finnish child”. They conclude that the parent’s personal experience of belonging to an ethnic minority group is not crucial concerning the child’s identity. Yet, the will to understand, support and research the phenomenon is important, especially if the parent represents the general population. A BIPOC person has the right to define themselves as Finnish or in other terms, but this definition cannot come from outside. (Jäske et al., 2022, p. 111).

This means, the foster parents are not in a position of deciding whether the child’s identity is “just like any other” or not. Equally, the child has the right to identify themselves as a Finn or something totally different. The importance of agency among children in foster families is to be increased. Studies abroad address the need to educate foster parents in supporting children facing discrimination to prevent the “culture of silence” between foster parents and children (Degener et al., 2021). Children should have the right to define their cultural identity and enough psychological space to express it. Foster parents, biological parents and social work professionals can enable or inhibit this.

In our case, we may want to belong among Finnish cultural identity and, at the same time, among other cultures, languages, and

religions. Usually, the surrounding environment doesn't allow us to be both! (Jäske et al., 2022, p.56.)

The additional nature of the language spoken in the foster family, formerly discussed by Puig (2013), was also recognized in this research. Some participants expressed worries and helplessness about the child's lacking abilities in their primary language and described Finnish as an addition. On the other hand, some participants mentioned the child had lost the common language with the parent, yet it was left unmentioned whether something could or should be done to restore it.

## 7.2 Training and supporting foster parents in intercultural placements

Foster parents taken part in this research consider their training insufficient for their situation. This echoes the developmental needs for foster parents' training in Finnish and international studies. (e.g., Nummela, 2022, p. 92; Anttila and Gencer, 2015, p. 20.)

Foster parents acknowledge the need for sufficient and timely support for themselves, the child, and the biological parents. Some foster parents experience a lack of support and feelings of being left alone with difficulties. It was also mentioned that the problems were visible, yet no one knew what to do. These experiences can reflect the complexity of intercultural placement, the difficulty defining the child's best interest in controversial situations, and the phenomenon's delicacy. The difficulties of intercultural placements are visible, yet social work professionals lack concrete actions and good practices they could transfer into the everyday lives of foster families.

Research participants highlight the importance of preceding plans of support and detailed discussions. They express the specific need for securing the primary language of the child.

Based on these findings, a worksheet tool to help foster parents to assess their need for support was made (appendix 2). Its primary purpose is to help foster

parents assess their alternatives in a conflict situation containing cultural features. Simple yes or no – questions help to assess whom they should contact in their specific situation: whether the situation could be eased by updating the client plan with the social worker or could some additional support be arranged by the designated support worker of the foster family. Foster parents may feel they do not want to disturb the social worker by contacting them with their own matters (Valkonen, 2014, pp. 42-43), and thus they can benefit from aid in separating their own matters from the child's ones.

The instructions, roles and responsibilities mentioned earlier are to be discussed in the client plan, which is the responsibility of the designated social worker. Clarifying the contents of the client plan can protect foster parents from carrying needless responsibility. This can also ease cooperation between the foster parents and the biological parents. If the roles and duties are clearly facilitated, the biological parents' potential belief of foster parents making arbitrary decisions can be avoided. In two recent notices, the office of the Parliamentary ombudsman of Finland concluded that social workers are to document concrete means and principles concerning the child's linguistic needs in the client plan (EOAK/3502/2021, p. 5). The social workers are responsible for promoting culture-specific needs and cannot delegate planning the actions to foster parents and must supervise the implementation of the actions. (EOAK/3502/2021, p.14; EOAK/3166/2021, p. 95).

In theory, it would be easy to ask the designated social worker to guide foster parents in every situation. However, this is not realistic, considering the resources available. Also, due to the holistic nature of culture, there are numerous immaterial things and everyday life situations that are impossible to discuss and agree on in advance when making the client plan. This means including all potential situations in the client plan is not possible nor realistic considering the resources of the social worker. For example, the child not eating pork due to religious reasons can be agreed upon in the client plan, yet the implementation of it in practice can contain surprising situations. For example, the child can express a repeating interest in tasting pork, and the foster parent might not know what to do nor how to discuss the theme with the child. In this example, the foster

family needs guidance from their supportive worker, who can also help constructively discuss the theme with the biological parents.

The worksheet tool can also be used in reflective discussions between the foster parent and their support worker. In that case, the questions can be pondered in peace and take time to define meaning for different alternatives. For example, the questions considering settling into the position of biological parents can open up important discussions. As presented in the results, empathizing with biological parents' situation is also helpful for foster parents themselves in coping with difficult situations and emotions. Also, the previously mentioned curiosity can also be directed to the acts of the biological parents or the emotions of the foster parent themselves.

The acts and decisions of the designated social worker may also need interpretive and reflective discussions. The idea of assessing social workers' success at their task through their restriction of the biological parents became visible in previous studies (Laine & Pietilä, 2021) and this research. For example, a social worker trying to work according to the biological parents' wishes was described as "hysterical" and willing to "turn the foster family into Muslims".

The foster parents may not know or understand the lawful rights of all parties. The situation may also contain classified matters the foster parent will not know. Also, separating foster parents' own feelings and reactions from legally guided decisions can be difficult. As a social work professional, the designated support worker of the foster family can discuss aspirations of different actions, the assets and concerns visible to the social worker and help the foster parent find ways to adapt to a situation they might not fully agree.

### 7.3 Recommendations

#### Developing PRIDE -training to suit intercultural needs

Foster parents pose developmental wishes towards social work professionals, which should be taken seriously. The thought of adding more intercultural perspective to PRIDE- training is worth considering. Due to the unique nature of



culture, PRIDE -training cannot discuss cultural features concerning a certain group of people since features of all cultures existing in Finland are impossible to teach to future foster parents. Instead, their abilities in self-knowledge, emotional flexibility and understanding the procedures can be enhanced. The themes presented in the results of this thesis can act as a good basis for different kinds of experiences and emotions worthy of discussion during the PRIDE -training process. Similar themes are also represented in the additional training material created in Taimikko- project (Niekka, 2010, pp. 39-40). Public information about how widely the aforementioned, already existing, material is utilized in Finnish PRIDE training was not found when completing this thesis.

Abroad, the PRIDE -training program has been supplemented, for example, with sections considering trauma-informed care and strengthening cooperation between foster parents and authorities (Kelly, 2016). As mentioned, foster parents are in need of additional training to support children facing discrimination. Providing Finnish foster parents with increased Anti-racist competence could add to the core competencies of Finnish PRIDE- training. Anti-racism refers to raising awareness, learning through discussions and understanding one's own structural position in society. These help in taking action to reduce racism. (Ministry of Justice.) Anti-racist acts should not consider only individuals, but structures are to be actively changed to promote equality and ensure human rights for all members of society (Jäske et al., 2022, p.110). A deeper understanding of anti-racist acts should be provided for foster parents to help them understand it is more than just tolerating people representing something different.

#### Structural strength to social work

The role and acts of the designated social worker were highlighted as a supportive factor for the whole placement. It is a well-known fact that social workers in child welfare are working with insufficient resources. A discussion of Finnish child welfare being in crisis has been ongoing for years, and social work is recognized as highly stressful work (Sievänen, 2021, p. 3). Attempts to resolve this have occurred, such as nominal wage increases and legislation limiting the number of clients per social worker (L 417/2007 13b. §). This is progress, yet more is to be done. It has already been discovered that limiting the statutory

amount to 35 clients per social worker does not secure enough personal meetings between the social worker and the child placed in a foster family (Laine & Pietilä 2021, p. 59). When lacking resources, social workers must prioritize their work and focus on clients considered most urgent. It can be assumed that the culture-specific needs of interculturally placed children are at risk of being put on hold at the expense of more pressing matters, such as coordinating psychiatric support for the child.

Discussion about the cultural specifics and creating concrete means for securing these also requires functioning communication between the social worker and the biological parent. If this would not occur, the social worker cannot know the cultural specifics for securing. Again, this would require social workers to have enough time and resources to get familiar with each family's situation and discuss important matters with the biological parents thoroughly.

As mentioned in the results, support from social work professionals is considered essential. General means of support, such as peer support groups, may not be suitable in complex intercultural situations, increasing the support needed from social work professionals.

In some Finnish counties, child welfare open care services have strengthened multi-disciplinary competence by recruiting UAS masters as special social counsellors to share the workload (Piispa, 2022). Utilizing special social counsellors in foster care could also provide specialized support to all parties of intercultural placements and aid social workers in targeting their work input efficiently. For example, a statement published by Local Government and County Employers KT (Kuntatyöntajat) listed UAS Master of Social Services among emerging professions and skills needed. Other ideas related to this thesis were increased knowledge of cultural sensitivity and the idea of promoting multi-disciplinary cooperation in complex situations:

Demanding customer work competence consists of social justice competence, multi-professional working competence, professional competence of social work and social counselling, and skills in motivating and cooperation (Kt.fi)

Functioning multi-disciplinary cooperation could also ensure decent supervision of foster families. Supervision of foster families is noticed to be insufficient and regionally uneven by the Parliament Audit Committee (TrVL 1/2021). Supervision practically being the responsibility of a single social worker is an unstable and risky structure and may leave gaps in securing the adequacy of rehabilitating care in a foster family. Supervision and support for foster families are considered closely related to each other. (Laine & Pietilä, 2021, p.2.)

#### Further research on the subject

Further research and professional discussion about good practices in maintaining and developing means to secure cultural needs in foster care appear immediate.

This research does not provide information about the experiences of children being interculturally placed, nor about their biological parents' experiences. More information about the subject is needed. Especially concerning healthy identity development, increasing knowledge of intercultural approaches among foster parents can be considered essential to assess. How placements into Finnish-origin families affect children: what are the assets and threats? Providing foster parents with an in-depth understanding of the relationship between language and identity could help foster parents cope with the idea of "extra work".

It feels that, in my case, different languages are related to slightly different personalities because one language was for playing and another for building relations with my family (Jäske et al., 2022, p. 71).

Foster parents pose wishes towards social workers. Their responsibilities are legislated and, therefore, indisputable. Social workers are in need of better tools and practices to aid them in culture-aware decision-making. In order to make legal decisions based on the child's best interest, they need guidelines matching the real-life difficulties of their work, for example, in maintaining the linguistic rights of a child with no native-speaking close contacts. Existing good practices and social workers' experiences of their role in intercultural placements appear essential to research.

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## APPENDIX 1. The survey

Hei perhehoitaja!

Onko sinulla kokemusta monikulttuurisesta sijoituksesta?

Opiskelen Diakonia-ammattikorkeakoulussa Sosionomi YAMK –tutkintoa linjalla MA in Global change and community development. Opinnäytetyöni koskee perhehoitajien tunteita silloin, kun sijoitetun lapsen kulttuuritausta on erilainen kuin perhehoitajilla. Toiveeni on, että opinnäytetyö auttaa lisäämään ymmärrystä aiheesta ja siten tukemaan perhehoitajia työssään.

Pyytäisin siis, että kirjoittaisit minulle omin sanoin vastauksesi allaolevaan kysymykseen.

Vastaus voi olla pitkä tai lyhyt, pitkään pohdittu tai hetkessä kirjoitettu. Jokainen on todella arvokas!

Vastauksen voi kirjoittaa tai kopioida alla olevaan laatikkoon.

Alkuperäiset vastaustekstit tuhoetaan opinnäytetyön valmistumisen jälkeen. Huolehdiathan, ettei vastauksestasi tule ilmi henkilötietoja tai muuta salassa pidettävää tietoa!

Täydennän tukimustani mahdollisesti teemahaastatteluilla. Mikäli olet halukas osallistumaan haastatteluun (Teamsin välityksellä tai kasvotusten pääkaupunkiseudulla), voit jättää yhteystietosi erillisellä vastauksella samaan vastauslaatikkoon, näin yhteystietosi eivät yhdisty vastaukseen.

Minuun saa tarvittaessa yhteyden sähköpostilla:  
 nelli.kainiemi@student.diak.fi

1. Mitä tunteita monikulttuurinen sijoitus on sinussa herättänyt?

Research question	Survey theme	Interview questions
1.	<b>Experiences of difficulties and “doing extra”</b>	-Tell me about situations in your everyday life in which you can tell the multiculturalism itself is causing emotions? -Why is an intercultural placement worthy of the extra work? -What characteristics does an intercultural placement require from foster parents?
1.	<b>Feelings related to children</b>	-How does it feel when thinking about the placement situation from the child's perspective?
1.	<b>Learning and teaching</b>	-What changes have you noticed in the atmosphere of the whole family? -Other changes?
1.	<b>Experiences of prejudice</b>	-How does it feel to face questions, assumptions or prejudice?
2.	<b>Support and development</b> (not a survey theme itself)	-How were intercultural placements discussed in your PRIDE-training? -What would you say about intercultural placements, if you had the chance to speak to a new PRIDE group? -How have social work professionals helped? What should they do differently?

## APPENDIX 2. Interview questions

APPENDIX 3. A worksheet tool for Finnish foster parents.

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