

Finnish comprehensive school principals' descriptions of diversity in their school communities

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ABSTRACT

Changes in Finnish society have been rapid – from national homogeneity and unity to greater diversity. Traditionally, schools have represented an institution that has had an important role in maintaining national objectives. In this article, we examine how Finnish comprehensive school principals describe their understanding of diversity in their school communities. Supporting diversity in schools is part of the pursuit of equality, equity, and justice in school and society. Principals' ways of conceptualizing diversity are crucial as they have a significant impact on school improvement, and school organization has a positive effect on teaching and learning. In qualitative analysis, the principals' descriptions and reflections on diversity in their school communities formed a total of four thematic categories: Categorizations of diversity, Principal's work, Visibility of diversity, and Attitudes and concerns. Finnish principals most often related diversity to visible and practical features. Their attitudes were mainly positive but reflected a somewhat shallow understanding of the concept.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to study how Finnish comprehensive school principals describe diversity in their school communities and to clarify with which phenomena they associate it. To achieve these ends, we needed to gather new information about Finnish principals' perceptions of diversity. For a long time, Finland's political ideals and goals were to establish national unity and homogeneity, which meant that issues concerning minorities were considered to be of lesser importance (Paavola & Talib, 2010). Changes in Finnish society have been rapid. Finland is among those European nations that transferred swiftly from an agrarian society and lifestyle to urbanization and an industrialized culture. This led to a development in which between the 1960s and the 1990s the Finnish education system not only aligned itself with the state, but also education increased its role and importance as a route to higher social status and wealth (Simola et al., 2017, p. 25).

According to previous research, Finnish principals primarily seem to have a positive attitude toward diversity, although at the same time their perceptions appear to be

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somewhat simplified and partly outdated (Jantunen et al., 2021; Jantunen et al., [forthcoming](#); Lipiäinen et al., 2020). In this study, we examine what principals think about diversity in their schools, and we also focus on the conceptions and understandings regarding diversity that emerge from their descriptions.

Principals' ways of conceptualizing diversity are crucial as they have a significant impact on school improvement, and school organization has a positive effect on teaching and learning (Leithwood et al., 2020). Additionally, due to the harmful nature of various categorizations like stereotyping and othering, the way diversity is conceptualized is also of importance (Abacioglu et al., 2020; Dervin, 2016, p. 45). Diversity leadership is connected to developing education that is more equitable. In Finnish education policy, the shift in the equality and equity debate has been from social-democratic agrarian traditions toward market-liberalist thinking. The social-democratic tradition emphasized the similarity of students and was based on the notion of 'good enough' schooling, which everyone had a right to receive, no matter what their socio-cultural background. In contrast, market-liberalism emphasized the differences between students, their capacities and needs, and presented a more individual idea of schooling. In Finland during the 1960s and 70s the comprehensive school system was introduced to replace parallel and grammar schools, and in this period the market-liberalist view of education had little influence. However, in the 1990s, a time when right wing governments prevailed, market-liberalism in education became a focus of discussion. Since the 1990s, individualism has gained considerable ground in education due to globalization, competition, and the development of a more individual-centered society (Simola et al., 2017, p. 33, 41).

The current thinking is that the role of a leader in education is central in developing a school community that values diversity and experiences it as a richness and an asset (Räsänen et al., 2018). If diversity is not recognized, it can lead to a situation where various groups and structural inequalities remain unnoticed. Finnish school leadership offers an intriguing point of view concerning diversity, because many aspects of diversity, as well as recognition of diversity, have rapidly increased in Finnish society (Furseth, 2018; Sahlberg, 2015). There is abundant research about education, leadership and diversity in societies that favor diversity (such as the United States), but there is a research gap concerning countries and societies where diversity is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Schools, and especially comprehensive schools, have a long tradition in promoting national unity. Finnish nationalism, occasionally referred to as 'the Topelian illusion of unity',¹ arose in the late 19th century, and it is not unusual that, at least to some extent, Finnish principals and teachers still maintain these traditional values in schools and teaching. Topelian patriotism and his worldview has had a strong influence on the construction of Finnish identity. When the Finnish national compulsory education system was formed in the 1970s, the main objective was not for children to learn mathematics and literacy per se. What was more significant was developing a strong ethos composed of shared values that strengthened Finland's national identity. Increased nationalism was in fact a European trend around the 1970s, several European countries seeing the aim of school education to be social cohesion across religious, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. Additionally, a major goal of national education was to build and maintain the nation-state, as well as raising loyal citizens (Johnson, 2007, p. 14–15). Consequently, historically the Finnish school system has not been consistent in its

support of diversity. As a societal institution, comprehensive school is aimed at raising children according to official educational goals, transmitting cultural heritage, and taking care that students grow up to be productive members of society (Johnson, 2007, p. 13). Today, political instability and economic and global population crises have led to sharply increased numbers of immigrants in Finland, as well as migrant and otherwise diverse student populations, especially in urban settings. For these reasons, research concerning diversity in schools within the framework of leadership is essential.

Theoretical framework

Diversity in education context

Diversity as a phenomenon and as a concept is complex. As a concept, it is formed of many implicit and explicit meanings that, for example, contain unspoken references to certain minority groups (Dervin, 2016, p. 26–27). Diversity can be understood as an umbrella concept that gathers together the features of widely different communities and people. What makes it complex is the normative frame of white, (Anglo) cultural identity which is associated with Western societies, and diversity as a concept has become synonymous with the differences measured against that frame (Sharma & Lazar, 2019, p. 1). In the field of education, diversity is often used with reference to gender, world-views, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, languages, competence, and ability (see e.g. Coleman, 2012). Nevertheless, diversity is a transformative vision, which as a theoretical concept is needed in order to engage with difference, to address inequalities politically, to approach complex demographic changes, and as a pathway to educational equity, inclusion, and social justice (Sharma & Lazar, 2019, p. 2).

The concept of diversity is widely in use in Finland when discussing e.g. minority groups, cultures, languages, gender or worldviews. When looking at diversity and its increase in Finland, the following four perspectives explain the causes of diversity in society and thus in schools: 1) visible, statistical changes in the demographic structure of our society, 2) taking diversity into account in statistics and 3) the human need to determine for oneself the things that belong to one's identity and 4) change in public social debate (Jantunen et al., 2021). Previously, in the 2010s and before, the concept mainly in use in the Finnish context was multiculturalism, which mainly referred to immigration and people of immigrant background (see e.g. Immonen-Oikkonen & Leino, 2000; Paavola & Talib, 2010). There has been a noticeable change in Finnish educational research concerning the concept of diversity. Today, research has moved away from multiculturalism and toward cultural diversity and identity in order to explore diversity as a broader phenomenon. The concept of intersectionality is closely related to diversity and is developed to describe issues related to race, gender, and social class (Crenshaw, 1991). In practice, the concepts of diversity and intersectionality overlap and can be seen as an attempt to go beyond traditional 'multicultural' discussions, which mainly focus on immigration, and stretch the concept of diversity to cover different group identities more comprehensively. With this in mind, diversity includes an assumption of one's identity, which comes with both a power position and privilege. This identity or 'self' contains the idea of, as well as possibly problematic assumptions of, the diverse 'other' (Sharma & Lazar, 2019, p. 2).

Issues related to immigration and immigrant backgrounds are still key concepts when looking at diversity in education. In Finland, students with an immigrant background clearly have lower school performance than the native population. The difference stays the same even if the main background factors, such as the student's gender, grade level, socio-economic background, language spoken at home, and age of entry, are standardized, and is one of the biggest differences in the OECD countries. Such a difference in competence is mainly interpreted as the result of different treatment of students with an immigrant background (VTV, 2015). In the report of the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, Finland was named one of the most discriminatory countries in the world (FRA, 2017). Apparently, this is also reflected in education. Research has found that although Finnish teachers are professional and have a great deal of good will, meeting diversity in school still produces differentiation and hierarchization of student groups rather than equality and fairness (Riitaoja, 2013). In addition, there is a gap between theory and practice, and despite the official principles, everyday life in schools maintains assimilationist and monocultural features (Rissanen, 2020). In Finnish schools, diversity has been presented as something that has to be lived with and as something that needs to be solved or needs intervention. The need for cooperation arises from the experience of the troublesome nature of the issue (e.g. Helske, 2010). It has also been found that 25% of 9th grade students have experienced discrimination in school, while at the same time 10% of the same age group has experienced discrimination in their free time (Zacheus et al., 2019). Accordingly, it seems that Finnish schools have a significant role to play in countering discrimination and harassment. Most often such harassment, discrimination, and racism are associated with isolation, hidden discrimination, downplaying, and keeping silent (Zacheus et al., 2019).

Supporting diversity in schools is part of the pursuit of equality, equity, and justice in schools and society. According to Sahlberg and Cobbold (2021), taking equity as the ultimate goal in education and education policy is crucial, not only because of its economic impact but also as a moral imperative for countries that call themselves democratic and just. If the only objective in education is to offer an equal *opportunity* to every student, it does not take into consideration the effect of social privilege, high income, and status (Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2021). In addition, the influence of external factors such as skin color or gender should not affect teaching, students' educational pathways, or later life as a whole. In order to promote equality and justice, education should ensure that students and teachers alike have a comprehensive understanding of different people as well as knowledge of power relations in society (Anderson, 2007; Brighouse, 2002). This requires principals and school leaders to have the knowledge, skills, and mind-set to create schools that reduce marginalization in different areas of diversity.

Diversity, Finnish society, and schooling

Statistically, Finland is still a rather homogeneous country. 86.5% of Finns speak Finnish as their native language (OSF, 2021) and approximately 67% are members of the Lutheran Church (Kirkon tutkimuskeskus, 2022). However, diversity is not a new phenomenon in Finland. It has significantly increased during the past 20 years and more rapidly than in other European countries (Furseth, 2018; Sahlberg, 2015). As an example, at the beginning

of the 21st century the number of people with foreign backgrounds (both parents born outside of Finland) was 2%, but in 2021 it had increased to 8% (OSF, 2021). It is safe to say that Finland *used to be* a homogeneous country, although diversity is not equally spread, with half of people of foreign background living in the Helsinki capital area (OSF, 2021). Especially linguistic diversity, ethnicity, and worldview diversity are concentrated in certain areas. In the Helsinki capital area every fourth child under school age has a foreign background (OSF, 2021). In the Helsinki capital area, 74% of basic education students participate in Lutheran religious education, while in the western parts of Finland the percentage is 98%. At the present time, Finnish comprehensive schools are facing challenges related to increasing social selection (free school choice), divergence, and segregation, and it remains unclear how these factors will affect division and inequality among schools in the long run. The downside of the fact that school rankings and school-specific evaluations are not made in Finland means is that it is difficult to assess the social changes that are taking place in schools (Simola et al., 2017, p. 46).

The Finnish educational system relies heavily on public education, and only a small share of students (under 2%) go to private or state schools (Ministry of Education and Culture, n.d.). The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Board of Education [FNBE], 2014) forms a central frame for the work in all school communities (i.e. in public, state, private school; Simola et al., 2017, p. 42). The decentralized nature of the education system gives a strong autonomy of municipalities allowing the local education administration and schools to modify the curriculum to meet local needs.

The National Core Curriculum is built on a diverse Finnish cultural heritage (FNBE, 2014, p. 16). This suggests that Finnishness is diverse and constructed in different ways and with influences from many different sources. Along with subject-related content, the curriculum forms a whole, representing desirable values, pedagogy, and school culture. Moreover, the curriculum introduces transversal competencies in which ‘cultural competence, interaction and expression’ ensure that students grow up in a culturally diverse world (FNBE, 2014, p. 21). Therefore, issues related to diversity cannot be ignored in school even though Finland is often considered to have a homogeneous population.

Research by Sharma and Lazar (2019, p. 2) in North America argues that diversity is a social and institutional challenge which is coded in educational policy and implemented in school practice. In Finland, bearing the ‘Topelian illusion’ in mind, an important question is whether we have moved from a ‘conservative’ educational orientation to a ‘critical’ or even ‘post-modern’ orientation. Has Finland moved away from authority and maintaining the status quo and toward a more democratic education policy that facilitates critical thinking and questions the status quo (Jones, 2013, p. 27–28)? The starting point in schools could be that diversity as a phenomenon would be understood as broadly as possible. From this perspective, all members of the school community are diverse and each person’s identity is constructed from diverse group memberships. This demands a positive attitude toward diversity as well as support for the construction of students’ identities in schools.

Principals as leaders of comprehensive schools

Finnish principals can qualify for their profession in several ways, and consequently their training lacks national uniformity (Lahtero et al., 2019). The common basis for all

principals is a 5-year Master's degree, a teacher qualification, work experience as a teacher, and excellent knowledge of the school's official language (i.e. Finnish or Swedish). In addition, principals must have a certificate in educational administration or other knowledge on educational administration or have completed university-level studies in educational leadership and administration (Asetus opetustoimen henkilöstön kelpoisuusvaatimuksista, 1998; Lahtero et al., 2019). Principals in Finland do not have a unified job description or framework for leadership competence (Eisenschmidt et al., 2021). Due to the decentralized nature of the Finnish system and the autonomy of the local education administration, the range of responsibilities and duties assigned to schools and principals varies (FNBE, 2013). In general, however, Finnish principals are responsible for the use of human and financial resources at their schools, and for organizing teachers' professional development. They also have among the highest degree of autonomy in Europe (OECD, 2019). Teachers in Finland also have a high degree of pedagogical autonomy, principals trusting their professionalism as developers of classroom-level practices and methods (Eisenschmidt et al., 2021).

Principals build the school-level strategy with teachers, and stress the importance of coherence between schools locally. In these strategies, the focus is on the interrelation between the vision for schools, the local curriculum, and municipal strategies (Eisenschmidt et al., 2021). The curriculum takes a stance on the leadership of schools and links it to the goals set for learning and teaching. Therefore, in the Finnish discourse on schools the concept of pedagogy forms the core of school leadership (Fonsén et al., 2022) and pedagogical leadership is often perceived from a broad perspective (Lahtero et al., 2021). Principals lead the culture of teaching and learning, human resources, school culture, and are responsible for the development and learning of all members in their school community (Eisenschmidt et al., 2021; Fonsén et al., 2022; Lahtero & Kuusilehto-Awale, 2015; Lahtero & Laasonen, 2021). The principal's leadership whether direct or indirect affects student learning (Bendikson et al., 2012; Gurr et al., 2010; Larsen & Rieckhoff, 2014). Direct pedagogical leadership covers immediate actions that support everyday schoolwork, whereas indirect leadership happens when the principal leads development processes for teachers' professional growth and capacity building (Dinham, 2016; Lahtero et al., 2021). In practice, pedagogical leadership often takes place through principals' indirect actions because direct leadership requires the presence of the principal, which is rarely possible (Lahtero & Laasonen, 2021; Raasumaa, 2010). This conceptualization of pedagogical leadership as a broad phenomenon emphasizes the participation of teachers in strategy work and shared decision-making. Consequently, the aim is to broaden teachers' thinking about their roles and responsibilities, to reach a teaching role that goes beyond the instructional practices in classrooms with students (Eisenschmidt et al., 2021; Lahtero et al., 2021).

Materials and methods

Aims and research questions

The aim of this study was to gather information on how Finnish comprehensive school principals describe the diversity of their school communities and which phenomena they associate diversity with. Because there is no prior research about Finnish principals'

perceptions of diversity, this is a much-needed starting point for further research about how diversity is understood and experienced in the Finnish comprehensive school context.

The research questions for this study are as follows:

- (1) How do Finnish principals describe the diversity of their school communities? Which phenomena do they associate with diversity?
- (2) What aspects of diversity do the descriptions reveal?

The data

The data in this study consist of 689 open-ended responses to the question and request: 'What forms does diversity take in your school? Describe the diversity of your school community'. The data were collected as part of an electronic questionnaire that was sent in January 2020 to all comprehensive schools in a total of 219 municipalities across Finland. We received a total of 819 responses. Responses that were left empty or were unclear, were removed from the final research data. 60% of the respondents reported that they were women, 39.5% men, and 0.5% chose the option 'other'. 80% of the respondents were between 40 and 59 years old. Most of them (80%) worked as principals and 20% had the position of vice or assistant principal. The length of the responses varied from one word to approximately 150 words. Many responses gave lists of diversity-related phenomena, but there were also a large number of responses with a more in-depth analysis of the school community as a whole as well as detailed descriptions of daily life in schools. A third common form of answering the question was with only a few Finnish words, the most frequent being 'Not at all'.

Research methods

The questionnaire used in this study consisted of four open-ended questions, 50 Likert scale questions and questions concerning the respondents' background. The questionnaire was based on previous research and literature about leadership and diversity in school contexts. The Likert scale questions have been reported in another article (Jantunen et al., *forthcoming*). For this study we wanted the respondents to describe diversity in their own words to be able to form an understanding of how they understand and to which phenomena they associate it with. To reach this aim, the open-ended questions used in this study preceded the phase in which the respondents were given more information regarding the concept. That is the concept of diversity in educational context was identified after the open-ended questions and before the Likert scale questions.

The main research frame for this study was based on previous theories. The analysis was primarily data driven, yet it also drew from earlier research, the literature, and the conceptual world of that literature. The research lenses were constructed from literature and research concerning diversity and diversity leadership in education, at the same time taking account of the model and characteristics of Finnish educational leadership. The data-driven approach was selected due to the fact that the literature and theoretical frameworks of diversity leadership are North America- centered, and through this study we are in the phase of forming an understanding of how Finnish schooling is adjusting to

increasing diversity. Conventional content analysis has its limitations and it should not be used to form a new theory (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Instead, it is useful for model building, as is the case in our study, and for further concept development (Lindkvist, 1981).

More precisely, the responses were examined by using conventional content analysis in which the formulation of thematic categories relies on observations drawn from the data with the aim of describing the phenomenon given the limited previous literature and theory (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). As the data consisted of open-ended questions, the analysis began with reading the responses through to be able to form a comprehensive picture of the whole (Tesch, 1990). After that, Atlas.ti program was used to read the responses in more depth and to code the data by identifying key words and concepts (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Each response could contain more than one code, but the same code was used only once per one response. This enabled the calculation of how many of the respondents had noticed the same feature or phenomenon. Codes were then arranged into larger thematic groups based on their relations. In the analysis, we identified the larger phenomena to which principals linked diversity in their responses and also recorded their frequencies. The thematic groups were then defined in more detail and four main categories were identified.

Ethical considerations

Research participants were provided with information about the key elements of the study, their rights as respondents, and the storage, analysis, and the use of the data. The researchers of the University of Helsinki are committed to following the Ethical Principles of Research in the Humanities and Social and Behavioral Sciences (TENK, 2021). A statement of the ethics of a research design must be requested from the University of Helsinki Ethical Review Board if a study meets any of the following: participants under the age of 15, exposure to exceptionally strong stimuli, a risk to cause mental harm or involving a threat to the safety of participants. This study did not include any of these items.

Results

The principals' descriptions and reflections on diversity in their school communities formed four thematic categories: *Categorizations of diversity*, *Principal's work*, *Visibility of diversity* and *Attitudes and concerns*. Each of these thematic categories contains several sub themes, which are presented in Table 1.

As lists of different phenomena that the principals associated diversity with was a popular response type, the categorizations of diversity formed several subcategories, as well as a large number of total responses. The three other categories are mainly based on longer, more descriptive and in-depth responses, which result in smaller frequency, but richer data and analysis. We will next review each thematic category more closely.

Categorizations of diversity

The largest of the identified thematic groups was named 'Categorizations of diversity'. The total number of responses in this group was high because there were numerous responses with lists of various features of diversity or minority groups in school, e.g. 'Our

Table 1. The frequencies per thematic category identified in the responses (N = 689).

Categorizations of diversity (total f=1193)	Principal's work (total f=598)	Visibility of diversity (total f=217)	Attitudes and concerns (total f=215)
Linguistic, cultural, and worldview diversity (f=540)	School culture (f=301)	Diversity in school is low or not noticed (f=121)	Tolerance (f=100)
Otherness (f=205)	School leadership (f=151)	Diversity is part of everyday school life (f=55)	Diversity as a mindset (f=52)
Family and home as categorizing agent (f= 199)	Teaching arrangements (f=146)	no diversity or diversity is invisible in school (f=41)	Problems and challenges (f=41)
Disability and special educational needs (SEN) (f=170)			Students' attitudes (f=22)
Gender, sexual orientation and age (f=79)			

school has students from different backgrounds, religious backgrounds, language backgrounds, ages and learning skills' (P411). In this group, the majority of the responses contained named features of diversity, although with different emphases. The subcategory 'linguistic, cultural and worldview diversity' contained 540 responses with principals describing the diversity of their school as something related to different languages, cultures, and worldviews. Most of the descriptions were related to different languages: 'You can hear several languages here and different cultural backgrounds stand out in everyday life' (P57). According to these results, it seems that when principals describe the diversity of their school community in their own words, linguistic diversity is the most evident feature.

A significant number, close to one third of the responses, included descriptions of 'those different from us'. This meant viewing diversity as something that is different, other, or something that differs from what 'we' are. This indicates that the respondents have an idea of what is normal, and diversity occurs when a student or a staff member somehow differs from that norm. Principal 27, for example, reported 'We have very few students with a different ethnic background or are (openly) deviant in another way', while P77 stated: 'We are a small village school in the countryside. Over the years, our school has had only a few students with a foreign background'. Under this subcategory we also found responses which covered immigration, 'foreigners', 'others', different nationalities, as well as named minority groups. Principal 481 affirmed that: 'The diversity of our school is pretty much focused on working with people with a Russian background. Other cultures are in very small numbers'. These responses could be related to the fact that up to ten years ago, additional training or other information about (cultural) diversity or multiculturalism concentrated on integration of immigrants (e.g. Helske, 2010; Paavola & Talib, 2010).

This subcategory also contains principals' descriptions of what they see as Finnish, namely students who were born in Finland, speak Finnish, and belong to a Christian church, primarily the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Principal 154 represents a typical response in this category: 'There are only a few students from different cultural backgrounds, so so far it has been easy for us. All families have a background related to Finland and speak Finnish. The school also has no students from non-Christian denominations'. It is worth noting that although the majority of the responses had quite a limited view of Finnishness, other views were also expressed: 'We have a very heterogeneous

Finnish group of students from different backgrounds, including strong religious backgrounds, diverse family forms, immigrant backgrounds, and different gender identities. Most recently, students have also arrived with refugee status and observe great eastern religions' (P266).

Third, and almost as large a subcategory as 'those different from us' included responses that referred specifically to students' personal backgrounds. Principal 176 reported that there were: 'Students from very different families (values, customs, SEN)' and principal 228 stated that concerning socioeconomic status 'Diversity is reflected in . . . the manifestation of social inequality, socio-economic differences (wealth, family background, family education background)'. They also emphasized that backgrounds can be different in many ways and some of the respondents expressed the view that in their opinion all students are individuals. Principal 316, for example, observed that: "We do not have very wide diversity in cultural and linguistic terms. However, each student is always an individual and we have 155 'diversities' even though everyone speaks Finnish and comes from a fairly cohesive environment. One thing that introduces diversity are the different worldviews of homes".

Competence and ability are major factors of consideration concerning inclusion, equality, and equity. In the fourth category, Categorizations of diversity, one subcategory was labeled 'disability and SEN'. This subcategory was formed from responses in which the principals named different needs that required support in learning, such as lack of competence, neurological diagnosis, or disabilities. Principal 184, for example, wrote: 'In our school, diversity is mainly SEN as well as diversity in student health'. It is understandable that principals highlight SEN as it is a significant part of everyday school life that also requires work from the principals themselves (curriculum work, teaching arrangements, official documents, parental meetings, etc.). Some schools in Finland provide special education for children who have significant support needs: 'We have ordinary native Finnish children as well as special support, preparatory education, students with intellectual disabilities, and multilingual students working in the same facilities and in the same classes' (P256). Several of these responses included pedagogical principles or descriptions of school culture:

Diversity is evident both in the teachers' room and in the school hallways. We have people from different cultures and people with some kind of limiting factor in movement or other activity (CP disability, voice sensitivity, vision challenges, learning disabilities . . .). Because diversity is part of our everyday lives and we encounter people as human beings, little attention is paid to diversity and instead people are encountered as human beings. Everyone has his or her own strengths and weaknesses. By focusing on strengths instead of weaknesses, everyone is allowed to be who they are. (P226)

When identifying and mentioning different features of diversity, the principals rarely spoke of gender, sexuality, or age, although they were not totally absent from the responses. Principal 468, for example, stated that: "The diversity of gender identity can be seen in the students, and we strive to respond to it with the organization of practical activities (e.g. restrooms, PE classes) and with the contents and means of education and teaching'. It may be that because the discussion over diversity has been immigration centered (and therefore culture, worldview and language centered), it is probable that less attention is paid to more common factors. For some reason, the responses related to age

mainly concerned teachers and other personnel, e.g. ‘There are teachers of different ages’ (P1); and ‘[there are] ways of doing things for employees of different ages (age issues and educational differences, humor, experience, mind-set)’ (P221.) Principals do not necessarily recognize gender-related diversity in school (preschool to 9th grade). Schools in Finland are still rather gendered and, for example, in the majority of schools PE classes are taught separately for boys and girls. It can be said that schools still promote traditional dichotomous thinking about boys and girls, and heteronormativity is in many ways maintained, at least implicitly.

Apart from age and different personalities, the respondents only very rarely mentioned diversity when describing the teachers at their school. The following quote may provide one reason for this: ‘We have no ethnic or linguistic minorities among students or staff. [It] has not applied either. There is [however] a lot of diversity in Finnishness’ (P49). The majority of Finnish teachers are still white, middle-class women (FNAE, 2020, pp. 10–11), and in that sense they represent a somewhat homogeneous group.

Principal's work

In Finland, the principal's work is connected to everyday school life. It involves leading the school culture, making teaching arrangements and other, often practical, school leadership practices. Pedagogical leadership, in fact, is repeatedly seen as the most important part of the principal's profession (Lahtero & Kuusilehto-Awale, 2015; OECD, 2019). In this category, close to half of the responses were related to school culture. Many principals pointed out that diversity in their school affects annual celebrations in school or school lunches. One stated that ‘Celebrations for students with different worldviews are equal’ (P80), while another wrote:

Our school also has students who are severely disabled. ... As members of our school community, they are equal and participate in all school activities according to their abilities, e.g. performances at school parties either with their own age group or as their own group. For our students, diversity and its acceptance is natural. (P53)

Principals mentioned how diversity plays a role when formulating a school's vision and strategy. Regarding teaching and learning, the starting point was not to divide students into groups according to their individual characteristics: ‘Student groups are never divided according to gender, ethnic origin, etc. All members of the school community are equal, supported, and encouraged to be so’ (P147). Community building and parent-teacher collaboration were also reflected in principals' considerations about the appearance of diversity in their schools. As one principal wrote: ‘The adults at our school are willing to better understand the variation in family backgrounds and different educational perspectives. The community is a positive resource through which to deal with diversity and multiculturalism’ (P455).

Approximately 25% of the responses were directly related to school leadership and leadership practices, e.g. ‘Diversity must be taken into account especially in planning. This is reflected, for example, in the planning of the organization of worldview education, the planning of support services for students, etc’. (P184). Most often the principals referred to different forms of cooperation and teamwork structures:

We have set up a development team to develop pedagogy and special education in classrooms, and we are sharing more expertise in encountering and teaching different kinds of learners. We cooperate with several professionals to help reduce inequality, and they were also invited to participate in communal student care. In-service training has been active. We also have the opportunity to work more closely with an institution that provides multicultural education for adults in the building next to us. (P190)

In addition, cooperation with teachers and other school personnel was found important when discussing diversity in school. Pedagogical leadership, including curriculum work, was also present in the responses. However, when a respondent emphasized the curriculum, following it was often the only diversity-related action taken in school: ‘Not at present [is diversity visible in school], except through curriculum content’ (P610). Resources were mentioned only a few times: ‘We have students from nine countries. It is a richness but there are also challenges. In addition, when there is a lack of space, we have large groups; it is difficult to find enough time for everyone to direct the development of their own skills’ (P274). Overall, resources were only mentioned when the respondents experienced a lack of them.

Responses in general reflected a pragmatic approach to diversity leadership in schools, which was reflected in the teaching arrangements subcategory. One of five respondents wrote that the diversity of their school is visible to them when they make arrangements for Finnish language learner classes, for worldview education, SEN or PE classes:

At the moment, [diversity is] not really [visible]. We do have three different confessional religions and three different language groups, but the minorities are really small. Of course, because of this, teachers have a wide variety of work that is divided between them. [There are] Finnish language learners and different religious education [classes] to teach. (P69)

To sum up, in this thematic category the respondents’ descriptions were mostly related to leadership practices with close connection to daily school life and to the pragmatic aspects of the principal’s work. On the other hand, promoting school values and other more abstract features of school leadership were mentioned only a few times.

Visibility of diversity

The third category of the principals’ responses, ‘Visibility of diversity’, is a collection of descriptions responding to the question whether the respondents’ school community is visibly diverse, and if so, to what extent. The majority of responses in this category reflected the perception that the diversity in school is low or if there is some diversity, it is not noticed at the school. Mostly, the respondents felt that was because there were no or very few students with immigrant backgrounds. Principal 203, for example, wrote: ‘In my current school, diversity is quite low. We have a very small number of immigrants and language minorities’. As mentioned previously, not so long ago, diversity was seen in Finnish educational discussions to be mainly a matter of immigration. Additionally, diversity is not equally spread in Finland but is more centered in certain areas, such as the Helsinki capital area:

Our school is not very diverse; for example, we do not have any immigrant students at the moment. Our students are very homogeneous. Everyone’s mother tongue is Finnish. Very few of our students think about issues related to their gender, all of them have grown up in

Finnish culture and have similar ethnic backgrounds. We have students in special education, but they are not much different from the rest of us. There are also no major differences in the wealth or social status of people in our region. (P485)

The response above is a very typical example of a conception where diversity is something that is unusual. Some scholars (e.g. Moore, 2017) have argued that to avoid this type of thinking we should start teaching about identity rather than diversity. It would be beneficial to be aware of the fact that not everyone with the same language, biological gender, or who seems to belong to the same culture, shares the same kind of identity. It is also worth noting that identities are complex and fluid and change over time (Dervin, 2016, p. 15).

When learning about other cultures, everyday encounters and discussions with different people are found to be of most significance to teachers (Jokikokko, 2009). This can be applied to principals as well, as in Finland all principals are qualified teachers. However, less than 10% of the respondents felt that diversity is a part of everyday school life, and thus the two following examples represent the views of a minority of principals:

Diversity is reflected in our school so that we are all different. There are people from different backgrounds and diversity is a natural part of everyday school activities. We respect different starting points and strive to create an atmosphere of acceptance. Diversity is an asset to us. (P229)

Students from different cultural backgrounds bring the necessary variety to the school curriculum and increase global understanding. Attentiveness increases in everyday situations. (P588)

Another matter to consider concerning this category are the responses claiming that there is no diversity in school, as in this comment: 'Diversity is not visible to us because there are no students from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds in our school. At least for now, [name of the] school is quite homogeneous' (P103). These responses are in a minority ($f = 41$, approximately 7%), but at the same time they may reflect a very narrow conception of diversity. Diversity leadership demands responsiveness to recognize that, broadly considered, all individuals present different aspects of diversity. This means that every school community is a diverse school community.

Attitudes and concerns

The fourth and final category, 'Attitudes and concerns', consists of responses describing attitudes or concerns toward diversity in the school communities. When taking into account all the coded attitudes, the majority of these notions ('equality', 'positivity', 'respect', 'tolerance', 'richness') can be understood as positive. The largest subcategory was 'tolerance', which is a complex conception. One principal wrote: 'We try to be tolerant and consider the rights and needs of everyone' (P3), but what 'tolerance' means here is not self-evident. It has been argued that rather than tolerance, one should speak about equity. Tolerance suggests that there are certain features or even groups of people who need to be tolerated, i.e. someone is in a power relation to tolerate someone else. Rather a small number of principals expressed an attitude in their responses that can be considered as having 'diversity as a mind-set'. These principals wrote about inclusion,

equity, and values which support diversity in the school community, as in the following response:

We have people from different language and cultural groups. It is not forbidden to speak in another language, or to highlight that one has another home country; we can be proud of all this. We have a wide variety of students at different levels of support. (P298)

In these responses, it was emphasized that students from all types of background are welcome at school, although it often meant that the teachers' workload increased: 'A lot of personal learning plans are made, which means that teachers have enough paper work and meetings, the booking of translators, and differentiation of instruction. . . . Everyday life deals with various multicultural situations on a daily basis' (P290). Principals described the structures in place in schools to support the diverse community through shared leadership, for example having a named teacher as a 'multicultural manager'. These principals saw supporting diversity as an important principle that benefits the whole school community: 'When you have to teach, for example, linguistic awareness, you must teach very clearly and in a way that benefits everyone. The overall approach to teaching also helps the whole class, not just those for whom it is designed' (P290).

An even smaller subcategory was formed from the answers which expressed problems and challenges related to diversity in school:

Challenges are currently raised by groups of students from different cultures. For example, 1st grade students already have more than 60 percent non-native speakers of Finnish and this poses challenges. The formation of groups within classes is a concern. (P233)

As in the above response, diversity is not a problem or challenge per se, rather it is the teaching arrangements or other concerns that are considered problematic. The principals particularly mentioned school celebrations (e.g. Christian traditions or more secular events) and arrangements for Finnish language learners and religious education classes.

A few of the respondents emphasized the 'students' attitudes" in their responses: 'Young people are more aware and accept in theory more when knowledge and role models are available' (P205). The majority of the responses described the students as very aware and as individuals who take diversity to be a natural part of the school community. Other kinds of observations were also made. A few principals wrote that there are conflicts between students, or that they feel that some students who are in a minority in school have a hard time because of some other students' behavior:

The student material in our school is very homogeneous (only five students are from non-Finnish cultures). In the discussions with students and guardians, the stigmatization of families who have 'moved from elsewhere', meaning those who have moved from another country, is often repeated in a negative sense. However, children who are still unsure about their gender and sexual identity are just taken into the school community exactly as they are, as boys, 'girl boys' or something else :). (P461)

Responses in this thematic category suggest a slightly dated and shallow understanding of diversity, which is present in the responses about e.g. tolerance, respect, and equality. All of these words are easy to use and they sound appropriate, but to truly make them visible for everyone in school requires deep awareness and self-reflection throughout the school staff (Khalifa, 2019, p. 175). However, it is worth mentioning that principals very rarely

had negative thoughts about diversity, but seemed instead to concentrate on the positive features and saw diversity as an asset in school.

Discussion

In this study, we have analyzed Finnish principals' perceptions of diversity in order to gather new information on how to enhance diversity leadership in comprehensive schools. This study also offers valuable starting points for other countries that are similar to Finland, especially countries where diversity and/or its recognition is rapidly increasing and that are willing to improve inclusiveness on many levels in their school communities. Although Finland has always been somewhat diverse, the pursuit of diversity or valuing diversity is still a new ideology in Finnish society. Principals' attitudes and observations can be a consequence of this. In general, Finnish principals do not have an adequate education or the knowledge and skills to analytically evaluate diversity and apply their knowledge in practice. As 60% of the principals responding to the questionnaire were older than 50 years old, they received their qualifications and were socialized to their profession in a different societal context than what we are dealing with today. The principals in our study do not necessarily have the required tools to analyze diversity comprehensively. In addition, the fundamental idea related to equality in Finnish comprehensive schools is to offer everyone the same quality of education, whatever their background may be. Where diversity and inclusion are concerned, this is a complex matter.

Three aspects of principals' perceptions of diversity

According to our analysis it would seem that Finnish principals' perceptions of diversity reflect three aspects. First, Finnish principals clearly relate diversity to linguistic, cultural, and worldview diversity, as well as to students with an immigrant background. In our previous research, 63% of the principals ($N = 819$) informed us that religions and worldviews were the aspects that they most often needed to consider in their work (Jantunen et al., 2021). In general, in Finnish society it is somewhat unusual to discuss religion, even at home (Spännäri et al., 2022). Given that probability, it is little wonder that religions and worldviews are a difficult topic in schools and for principals. More subtle features of diversity, such as gender or age, were not mentioned as often. More research is needed, but it can be assumed that principals see Finnish-speaking students who participate in Lutheran religious education and have parents of Finnish origin as a more homogeneous group than they actually are. In education and in the school context it is somewhat typical that identities are believed to be permanent and steady. Moreover, students may not feel comfortable about bringing up certain aspects of their identities, such as sexual orientation, in a school setting (Dervin, 2016, p. 14–15). This supports the perception that the principals most often felt that there was very little diversity in their school. Although the background (e.g. gender, age) of the respondents did not cause any significant differences in their perceptions of diversity, it seemed that principals representing bigger cities mentioned the features of the visible diversity slightly more often than principals working in smaller towns or rural areas.

Second, diversity issues are most often approached as challenging or problematic, or as something that needs to be accepted or tolerated. As Finnish principals are white and mainly middle-aged, in that sense they form a group that can turn into a 'normative

frame' of white, European identity (Sharma & Lazar, 2019, p. 1). This is supported by the Finnish tradition of 'Topelian patriotism'. If the school leaders are not critically self-aware and do not have the competence to recognize racism or other forms of discrimination, there is a real risk that they will reproduce these negative influences in their schools (Khalifa, 2019, p. 24).

Third, Finnish principals' strong emphasis on pedagogical leadership is central in diversity leadership in Finnish comprehensive schools. In their descriptions of teaching arrangements, leading the school culture as well as collaboration with families were primarily in focus. Although the national curriculum emphasizes community building, the idea of a community or a school community is not widely found. As mentioned earlier, there is a gap between what principals theoretically know and believe and how they act in practice, for example, whether they maintain assimilation or not (Rissanen, 2020). Finnish principals are Finnish, white, and usually middle-aged, making it more difficult for them to realize that empathy, advocacy, and solidarity should not just be shared within identities but across them. The first vital step is to have more diverse school staff, teachers, instructors, and principals (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2022, p. 121). Shared leadership and distribution of power are of importance to include these voices in schools (Khalifa, 2019, p. 49). A diverse school staff would offer broader perspectives in the school community, and would also add a broader variety of representations to students in the school context.

Diversity as a concept, construct, and practice

Diversity as a phenomenon is quite complex to define or understand. Finnish principals' perceptions of diversity are very practical and are mainly related to everyday school life or visible diversity. It seems clear that at a descriptive conceptual level, diversity is understood well, but at a deeper conceptual level it is not. We argue that principals' descriptions in this study mostly reflect *diversity as a concept*. This means that Finnish principals' understanding of diversity is mainly ideological or that ideologically diversity is recognized and acknowledged. Diversity is accepted as a principle, but school practices have not moved forward at the same pace and concentrate more at the surface level, such as arranging Finnish language learners or classes that introduce different worldviews. What is missing is both professional and personal commitment to equity, awareness, and culturally relevant teaching (Scanlan & Lopéz, 2015, p. 31).

Some of the principals' responses reflected the attitude *diversity as a construct*. In these responses, diversity is present as a concept and as an ideology, at which level the principals accept and recognize it, although the practical level is still missing. Diversity and its features are constructed but still have not formed leadership or school practices. To take this a step further, principals as well as teachers should commit themselves to critical self-reflection to be able to position themselves within their organization and avoid both explicit and implicit discrimination (Khalifa, 2019, p. 59). An example of these types of constructions are responses where principals describe diversity as important or even highlight its meaning, but have not yet taken the step to evaluate these constructions or apply their thinking in practice. Diversity is a construct of ideas that has a legislative and ideological basis.

The final stage we are suggesting is *diversity as a practice*. On this level, the principals' constructed understanding of diversity is deeply rooted in everyday practices, decision-making, and leadership. Diversity as a practice should be a lens that a principal uses in all his work. There were only a few descriptions that reflected *diversity as a practice* and all of them were written by principals from schools with students from very diverse backgrounds. An important factor is that the principals have felt that it is close to impossible to develop schools, school culture, and school practices without the help of teachers' professionalism (Eisenschmidt et al., 2021). In addition, it is part of the principal's duties to enable teachers' professional development and ensure that their knowledge and skills are up to date.

Conclusion

In the global world phenomena spread fast. People throughout the world are aware of movements like Black Lives Matter and Pride. Concepts and theories like 'intersectionality' and 'Critical Race Theory' have been in the news almost on a daily basis. Young people are often called digital natives, who are connected to all parts of the world through social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, and absorb societal themes through them. They may be more 'woke' than their parents or principals, teachers, and other personnel in their school. Diversity is not on its way to Finland, it is already there, at least through digital and virtual channels. Nevertheless, many phenomena related to diversity discussion in Finland are still new or are felt to be too sensitive or personal to discuss. Nationality, ethnicity, skin color, and sexuality, for example, are the kinds of topics that are typically avoided in Finnish conversations. This is especially true in education, as schools are authorities and users of public power. Issues related to diversity are often experienced as a part of an individual's privacy policy. Nevertheless, when promoting equitable and culturally responsive schooling, it is crucial to understand and recognize its Eurocentric features (Khalifa, 2019, p. 26). Placing the results of this study against the frame of global world and current discussion topics, it is safe to say that Finnish (and other rapidly diversifying countries) educational leadership needs to pay more attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion to develop schools that are safe and meaningful learning spaces for all students.

Note

1. Zachris Topelius (1818–1898) was a Finnish writer, poet, journalist, historian, and rector at the University of Helsinki whose pedagogical and moral influence reached its peak in his old age. After his death the influence of Topelius continued to be strong, especially when the old grammar school system was in operation. Topelius thought it especially important to emphasize the historical unity of the Finnish people, despite linguistic and social differences. He urged mothers to teach their children Finnish as he believed that culture in Finland would become primarily Finnish in character. Topelius thought that history was the history of nations in which each nation sought to become aware of its calling and to create a state for itself. Topelius's historical novels emphasize patriotism, religion, and the estate society. Topelius wrote *Maamme* (Our land), which was published in 1875 for use in primary education. In *Maamme*, Topelius describes the people, history, and natural environment of Finland, and it was used in schools for almost a hundred years. He strongly shaped the image of Finns and the Finnish natural

environment and history and in his works Finland is presented as a rugged country where life is hard. The importance of work and diligence in difficult circumstances is emphasized. *Maamme* became Finland's second most read book after the Bible, and the moral and pedagogical message of Topelius's writings and fairy tales became part of the nation's fabric (Klinge, 1997).

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