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Intercultural competence: Finnish teachers' reflections on addressing diversities

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Abstract

An increasing number of Nordic teachers currently work daily with students from a variety of cultural, linguistic and worldview backgrounds. In Finland, too, the growing diversity of society has increased the importance of intercultural education and developing teachers' intercultural competencies to ensure inclusive, culturally responsive teaching. Furthermore, studies have shown that teachers in Finland and elsewhere often feel inadequately prepared to implement intercultural education effectively. Therefore, further research into teachers' intercultural competencies is essential to promote social justice in education and ensure inclusive classroom practices.

This qualitative, practice-oriented study examined Finnish teachers' reflections on the intercultural competencies they apply in their everyday classroom work. These competencies are defined as the combination of skills, knowledge and attitudes that allow educators to teach effectively and engage meaningfully with students from different cultural backgrounds (Rissanen and Kuusisto, 2023). Nine primary school teachers working in classrooms with students from diverse backgrounds were interviewed. Thematic analysis of the interviews, which were conducted using an open-ended approach, revealed three distinct levels: practical arrangements, pedagogy, and intercultural understanding and awareness. This included a high degree of cultural sensitivity, for example, and the ability to view each student as an individual rather than categorising them according to their culture.

Intercultural competencies among teachers remain a relatively under-researched topic and a challenge for many educators in the Nordic region. This study therefore makes a valuable contribution to the field by highlighting the practical strategies teachers use to navigate cultural diversity in their classrooms. Understanding how teachers develop and apply these competencies can offer valuable insights into effective approaches for fostering inclusive learning environments.

Keywords: intercultural competencies, social justice, practice-oriented study, teacher education, inclusion

Introduction

While education in Finland is widely recognised for its quality and emphasis on equality, the country has not traditionally been at the forefront of intercultural education (Rissanen, 2024). Compared to many other European nations, cultural diversity in Finland is a relatively recent phenomenon (Saukkonen, 2020). Although diversity is not a new phenomenon, given the presence of ethnic and linguistic minorities such as the Sámi, Roma and Swedish-speaking Finns, the historical notion of 'one nation, one language, one mind', which played a significant role in nation-building, still influences societal attitudes (Rissanen, 2024). In this study, the term 'diversity' refers specifically to linguistic, cultural, and worldview backgrounds.

International and national obligations, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), emphasise the importance of recognising and addressing the needs of each individual student. This principle is reflected in the Finnish national core curriculum for basic education (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014), which highlights equality and inclusivity as fundamental values. The curriculum emphasises that education must support each student's personal growth and identity, considering their cultural background, language and individual needs. It also promotes multicultural competence, encouraging students to develop an understanding of diverse perspectives and global citizenship.

Despite its strong reputation for education, Finland continues to face disparities in learning outcomes, particularly between students of immigrant background and the general population. According to the 2018 PISA study, Finland had the largest gap in reading literacy between students from an immigrant background and native students among OECD countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). Research in Finland has highlighted several challenges in effectively implementing intercultural education. Roiha and Sommier (2021) examined teachers' perceptions of and approaches to intercultural education. They found that, although educators recognise its importance, they often feel uncertain about how to integrate it into their teaching. The study emphasised the need for more concrete pedagogical tools and pre-service teacher training to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Additionally, Sommier et al. (2021) discussed the phenomenon of 'intercultural washing', whereby institutions promote intercultural education superficially without meaningful implementation. This highlights the disconnect between policy and practice, suggesting that Finnish educators require more support and resources to apply intercultural principles effectively.

Intercultural learning and competence are vital in shaping future generations, and teachers are at the forefront of this process. However, it is not enough for educators to possess intercultural competence themselves. They must also actively cultivate intercultural awareness and skills in their students. By broadening their students' perspectives, equipping them with the tools to critically analyse global issues and encouraging them to engage in building a more equitable and sustainable world, teachers can make a significant contribution to intercultural education (Jokikokko, 2010). This approach is closely aligned with the objectives of Finland's national core curriculum (2014) for basic education, which emphasises the importance of nurturing cultural awareness, social responsibility and global citizenship among students. The curriculum highlights the need for education to support cultural identity,

encouraging students to engage with diverse perspectives and to appreciate cultural diversity. The research question of this study is:

'What strategies do teachers use to support culturally diverse classrooms?'

Based on this focus, we examined Finnish teachers' reflections on the intercultural competencies they use in classrooms with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. This requires teachers to adapt their teaching accordingly. Open thematic interviews gave participants the opportunity to share their experiences, perspectives and reflections, enabling a variety of themes and sub-themes to emerge. This study contributes to the discourse on preparing educators to meet the needs of learners by exploring intercultural competencies in Finnish classrooms. By examining teachers' ability to adapt their teaching for culturally diverse students, our study sheds light on how intercultural education can be implemented effectively.

Theoretical backgrounds

Contemporary global challenges, including social polarisation, war and climate change, have profound implications for societies worldwide (Jabareen, 2015). In Finland, these global dynamics have manifested as a consistent rise in immigration over the past two decades, partly due to crises such as the war in Ukraine (European Commission, 2022; Saukkonen and Tanska, 2024). In 2023, Finland recorded the highest number of new immigrants to date (OSF, 2024). This demographic shift has significantly impacted the Finnish education system, which has experienced a notable increase in the number of children from diverse backgrounds (Saukkonen, 2020). These developments highlight the growing diversity of the Finnish population and emphasise the need for a rigorous conceptual framework to understand how such demographic changes influence societal attitudes and educational practices in Finland.

Historically, the education system has tended to equate diversity with people from particular ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Paavola and Pesonen, 2021). However, the growing diversity of Finnish society makes it difficult to categorise people based solely on their social backgrounds, such as their native language or country of birth (Pöyhönen and Martikainen, 2023). Finnish educational policy is guided by the principles of equality and inclusion (Tirri and Kuusisto, 2022). However, the current curriculum lacks critical engagement with diversity, treating it as a given and predominantly linking it to ethnicity, language, and nationality (Lavanti, Kuusisto and Harju-Luukkainen, 2025; Kuusisto et al., 2021; Paavola and Pesonen, 2021).

Families with diverse backgrounds are often classified based on assumed cultural backgrounds or worldviews (Dervin, 2016), yet these classifications tend to ignore the rich diversity within cultural groups. Cultures are recognised as diverse and multifaceted, incorporating a broad spectrum of perspectives, traditions and practices (Paavola and Dervin, 2015). Furthermore, the cultures and worldviews of societies, communities, families and individuals are often far more complex and layered than can be understood from an external, neutral viewpoint (Kuusisto and Garvis, 2020; Turunen and Perry, 2013). Gay's (2000) research showed that a student's cultural background influences a teacher's expectations of their abilities and the grades they receive. The study emphasises that teachers should

understand the cultural values, traditions and contributions to society of different racial and ethnic groups and incorporate this knowledge into their teaching. The concept of 'superdiversity' offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the increasing complexity of migration (Pöyhönen and Martikainen, 2023).

The concept of 'superdiversity', introduced by Vertovec (2007), emerged as a critique of traditional multiculturalism, challenging the tendency to categorise populations into overly simplistic and homogeneous groups. Superdiversity provides a sociological framework through which to understand the growing complexity of migration and ethnic diversity (Meissner and Vertovec, 2014). It emphasises a multidimensional view of diversity, considering not only ethnicity and nationality, but also factors such as language, legal status, gender, age, class, worldview and human capital (Meissner and Vertovec, 2014; Siebers, 2018; Vertovec, 2007). The concept acknowledges the growing scale, speed and spread of global migration, highlighting the need for more nuanced approaches to diversity in contemporary societies. The superdiversity framework is therefore crucial for discussions about diverse backgrounds, as it prevents individuals from being oversimplified into homogeneous categories. In Finland, the concept has been adopted in an increasing number of research fields (Pöyhönen and Martikainen, 2023).

Considering superdiverse educational settings (Lavanti et al., in press), a key responsibility of contemporary teacher education is to ensure that future educators can recognise, value and respond effectively to the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity present in today's societies (see Rissanen et al., 2016). In Finland, attitudes towards families with an immigrant background vary among educators depending on their experience of and knowledge about working with diverse families (Kuusisto, 2017; Vigren et al., 2022). The present study will therefore utilise the concept of 'intercultural competence', commonly defined as the knowledge and skills necessary for effective and appropriate interaction in intercultural contexts (Perry and Southwell, 2011). Despite its growing prominence in educational research and teacher education, the term has been conceptualised in various ways (e.g. Byram, 2020).

Intercultural competencies are generally understood as the combination of skills, knowledge and attitudes that allow educators to teach effectively and engage meaningfully with students from different cultural backgrounds (Rissanen and Kuusisto, 2023). These competencies are typically divided into three dimensions: affective, behavioural, and cognitive (Rissanen, Kuusisto, and Kuusisto, 2020). The affective dimension involves the attitudes, beliefs and emotions that shape teachers' interactions with students (Rissanen and Kuusisto, 2023). Intercultural sensitivity is also considered part of the affective dimension and is seen as the foundation of intercultural competencies (Rissanen et al., 2020). Intercultural sensitivity is defined as the capacity to recognise and experience cultural differences more deeply, developing more nuanced perspectives on otherness (Bennett and Hammer, 2017).

Intercultural competencies enable teachers to consider students' diverse backgrounds when designing teaching methods and materials and when interacting with students (e.g. Gay, 2000; Lavanti et al., 2023). These backgrounds are not limited to geographical or linguistic differences but are considered in the context of superdiversity (Kuusisto and Gavis, 2020), encompassing various socioeconomic,

religious, sexual and racial differences, as well as different cultures within the same country. Furthermore, intercultural competence is a fundamental aspect of teachers' ethical professionalism. They are responsible for supporting the personal and academic development of all students, regardless of their background, culture, language, religion, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation. Jokikokko (2010) has shown that, in teaching, intercultural competence is not merely about acquiring specific skills, but rather about adopting a holistic approach to diversity that shapes educators' thinking and behaviour in the classroom. Teachers' beliefs and knowledge of cultures and cultural diversity are important aspects of their intercultural competence (Gay, 2010; Kuusisto, 2017). Studies emphasise that teachers must continuously reflect on their own biases and cultural assumptions to ensure inclusive and equitable learning environments. Self-awareness and self-reflection have been identified as key components of teachers' intercultural competence (Rissanen et al., 2016).

Data and methods

This study aimed to explore how Finnish primary school teachers take their students' diverse cultural backgrounds into account in their teaching practices. Our research question was: 'What strategies do teachers use to support culturally inclusive classrooms?'

Nine teachers from five different cities in Finland participated in the study. Eight of the participants worked in primary schools, while one taught at the lower secondary level (Year 7). The participants had a variety of educational backgrounds, professional experience and levels of familiarity with students from diverse backgrounds. At the time of the interviews, all interviewees were working in classrooms with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. One interview was conducted with two teachers from the same school, while the remaining interviews were held individually.

Data were collected through open interviews. In this method, the research question provides a starting point for encouraging participants to reflect on and elaborate on their own experiences. Teachers were asked to explain the practical strategies they use to support culturally inclusive classrooms. Although some guiding questions had been prepared in advance, the aim was not to influence or restrict the interviewees' responses (Palonen and Kylmä, 2022). Participants were encouraged to share their personal experiences, emotions, memories and opinions. This approach meant that each interview contributed unique themes and subthemes to the dataset. We did not define cultural, linguistic, or worldview diversity for the interviewees. Instead, they were allowed to explore the topic from their own perspective. Each session lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Data collection took place between October 2024 and April 2025. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. We employed data-driven thematic analysis to identify findings relevant to our research questions. This method involves identifying, analysing and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Our aim was to systematically examine the interview material in order to uncover how teachers address cultural, linguistic and worldview diversity in their classrooms. This approach enables the study to highlight both practical strategies and the underlying pedagogical thinking behind them.

Table 1: Summary of the interviewees

	Degree	Work experience in years	Current position and teaching group
Interviewee 1	Master of Education, class teacher	22	Class teacher, 6 th grade
Interviewee 2	Master of Special Education	14	Special education teacher, 4 th and 5 th grade, small group
Interviewee 3	Master of Education, class teacher	1	Class teacher, 4 th grade
Interviewee 4	Master of Education, class teacher	20	Class teacher, 2 nd grade
Interviewee 5	Master of Education, class teacher	23	Class teacher, 1 st grade
Interviewee 6	Master of Education, class teacher	24	Class teacher, 5 th grade
Interviewee 7	Master of Philosophy, Master of Special Education Master of Education, class teacher	22	Special education teacher, 7 th grade, small group
Interviewee 8	Master of Education, class teacher	7	Class teacher, 2 nd grade
Interviewee 9	Master of Education, class teacher	37	Teacher of preparatory class, 1 st to 3 rd grade

We followed the six-phase process of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). All interview transcripts were read thoroughly by two researchers, who noted initial impressions and identified meaningful segments related to the research focus. Preliminary codes were then generated independently, with each mention relevant to the research questions marked and colour-coded. In line with qualitative research principles, even single references were considered significant for theme development. The coded data were subsequently organised into potential themes by grouping similar codes together, after which the researchers compared and discussed their findings to reach consensus. This iterative dialogue led to the refinement and reorganisation of preliminary themes to ensure coherence and clarity in relation to the research question: *What are the strategies teachers use to support culturally inclusive classrooms?* Finally, illustrative examples were selected to demonstrate each main theme and to link the analysis back to the theoretical framework.

Thematic analysis was chosen as the methodological foundation because of its flexibility in identifying patterns across qualitative data while allowing for inductive theme development. To ensure the reliability of the coding process, transcripts were read multiple times, and discrepancies in coding were resolved through collaborative discussion. Reflective memos were kept throughout the process to document analytical decisions and enhance transparency. The researchers also acknowledged their active role as interpreters of the data: rather than aiming for neutrality, they engaged in reflexivity, critically

examining how their own cultural backgrounds, professional experiences, and assumptions may have influenced both the coding and the interpretation of themes.

Findings

For this study, we interviewed nine primary school teachers who work in classrooms with students from a range of different backgrounds. During open-ended thematic interviews, the participants were asked to describe the practical strategies they use to support such classrooms. Thematic analysis revealed three levels at which teachers consider diverse backgrounds in their teaching. These are the practical arrangements level, the pedagogical level and the intercultural understanding and awareness level.

Practical arrangements level

In this category, we included actions through which teachers consider different cultures in arrangements that are not directly related to teaching. In practice, teachers explained how they made adjustments to ensure participation was possible for everyone and that information was communicated effectively to parents. These included flexible solutions to enable all students to take part in physical education classes, ensuring that the clothing made in crafts was suitable for all pupils and assisting parents in creating Wilma accounts. During Ramadan, prayer spaces and times were made available for older students.

The interviewees stated that they nevertheless reflected on how far it is reasonable to be flexible, considering factors such as the curriculum. They also reflected on how to strike a balance between acknowledging culture and stigmatising it.

Where do we draw the line in primary school—how far can we keep adjusting and adjusting? At some point, we must set a limit; we can't endlessly compromise on everything. (Interviewee 8)

That one still tries to help and acknowledge all students from different backgrounds, but at the same time thinks a lot about ensuring that their actions are in no way stigmatizing—instead, that they are always genuinely fair and considerate of everyone. (Interviewee 3)

Sometimes, differences in cultural attitudes require teachers to verbalize and explain aspects related to students' specific challenges, as parents' perceptions of learning difficulties or special support were found to vary across cultures.

When it comes to children with special needs, one challenge is how to talk about disability. In Finland, the discussion might be a bit more open and accepting—for example, it may be more common to acknowledge that a child has a diagnosis. However, someone from another culture may experience this differently. It may be considered shameful, or parents might deny it. (Interviewee 2)

These examples illustrate how teachers balance cultural sensitivity with curricular boundaries. Practical arrangements are not only logistical solutions but also reflect teachers' ethical considerations in ensuring fairness and inclusivity.

Pedagogical level

The pedagogical level is closely linked to differentiation. Examples include simplified language instructions, adapted audio materials, second-language instruction and visual guidelines. Teachers described how they continuously adapt their teaching methods to meet their students' individual needs. The interviewees stated that they use a variety of pedagogical methods to clarify their teaching and ensure that all students understand the subject.

I always strive to give instructions very clearly. I make sure that everyone stays on track and knows what needs to be done. Often, I demonstrate the next steps of the task, and I always have the working stages visibly displayed on the board. (Interviewee 3)

A very clear structure. Everything needs to be familiar and safe, and I try to speak clearly. In the classroom, I try to repeat the same routines as much as possible—greetings and daily schedules. We always check the same clocks on the same weekdays, so the same routines are repeated daily. (Interviewee 4)

The interviewees also described how they constantly verbalize everything to expand students' vocabulary.

All structures that support security and attachment help organize the day and shape our understanding of time and concepts—covering everything from seasons, dates, months, and the flow of the week. A child's experience is built through verbalization, and the day is structured by creating a spoken Finnish-language context. (Interviewee 5)

The interviewees also described how they use open exploration of topics, including sensitive subjects, as a pedagogical method.

We always have great discussions about what celebrations everyone has had and what they mean. The group explains together, "We have Ramadan, and during that time, we follow these customs." Someone might respond, "Oh, I don't think I could go a whole day without sausage." It's a very natural and open dialogue with the children. They learn that families have different traditions, and that in different religions and cultures, but all of them are equally valuable. (Interviewee 8)

The interviewees stated that they regularly use the native languages of their students as part of their teaching. Linguistic diversity is seen as a richness, not a problem.

Often, when a single word comes up—like "friendship" or "friend" on Valentine's Day—we add that word to the class language wall in all twelve languages spoken in our classroom. It's a great richness to see languages represented in the classroom, and it's also fun. There are hilarious moments when the teacher tries to say something in Somali or Arabic—languages bring so much joy to the classroom. (Interviewee 8)

The interviewees described that they also consciously engage with cultural ideas suggested by the students. The interviewees described that it requires teachers to be flexible and able to adjust lesson plans instantly.

The boys wanted to teach us the traditional dances from their home countries—ones where you move in a circle and jump forward. We all danced together in the classroom. The students laughed, telling the teacher, "You're doing it wrong, you need to move this way!" These moments can't really

be planned—they happen when they happen, and you have to know how to embrace them. (Interviewee 7)

Overall, the pedagogical strategies highlight teachers' efforts to create clarity, safety, and engagement in diverse classrooms. By integrating students' languages and cultural practices, teachers move beyond adaptation towards genuinely inclusive pedagogy.

Intercultural understanding and awareness level

This level relates to a deep consideration of cultures in interactions, a willingness to engage and communicate openly. Often, this skill develops through personal international experiences and encounters with different cultures. At this level, teachers view each student as an individual, eliminating any division between "us" and "them". Diversity is seen as a source of joy and strength rather than a problem or challenge. Practically, this is reflected in the open representation of cultures in the classroom, curiosity about different perspectives and ways of life, and the teacher's ability to take different viewpoints and show empathy.

The interviewees emphasised the importance of genuine interactions and getting to know students and parents, as this makes handling even difficult matters easier.

I've learned that you must first connect with the person—not just the topic at hand. You ask how they're doing, check in on their family, and create that connection in the moment. Because if you dive straight into the issue, especially with people from various cultural backgrounds, there might not be a real connection at all. You absolutely need to prioritise the person first, and only then move on to the topic. (Interviewee 1)

The interviewees emphasised that their understanding of cultural encounters has been shaped by personal experiences rather than, for example, formal education.

I worked for over five years in Africa and in the school system there, and that experience has given me a tremendous amount. It has helped me understand the backgrounds and why, for example, time is perceived differently—why the concept of time isn't the same. It has also shed light on what it means when the man is the one who makes decisions. (Interviewee 1)

The interviewees described their effort to see each child as an individual, rather than through the lens of their cultural background.

I tend to think of my students more as multilingual rather than multicultural. The similarities are far more significant than the differences. We often tend to categorize students, but I prefer not to associate specific aspects with a particular cultural background. Regardless of a child's language or cultural background, my most important role is to see each child as an individual, recognize their strengths and starting points, and support their growth. (Interviewee 6)

The interviewees described engaging in constant balancing to determine the most ethically appropriate way to act. They also reflected on their own actions and compared themselves to tightrope walkers, navigating delicate ethical decisions.

Can I provide sufficient recognition without my actions carrying any stigmatizing elements? The goal is to support and acknowledge students from diverse backgrounds while constantly reflecting

on how to ensure that one's actions do not become labelling in any way. Instead, they should remain genuinely fair and inclusive, always considering the unique needs of each individual. (Interviewee 3)

All interviewees described how cultural diversity brings joy to the classroom and helps nurture students to become open-minded individuals.

We all live in a wonderful symbiosis, where no one disrespects anyone. We have an amazing community, especially in the way we show deep respect for each other's religions. One of the most beautiful things about our kind of school is the daily opportunity to teach students respect for others. We also actively seek out similarities between our cultures, fostering unity and understanding. (Interviewee 7)

The interviewees described that their intercultural understanding and competencies had developed most through their own experiences of interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. Several noted that their understanding had increased, for example, through a year as an exchange student or through international work experience.

The fact that I have worked for over five years in Africa and in the school system there has given me an enormous amount. It helps me to better understand those backgrounds and to see why time is perceived differently—why the clock is not the same, or the concept of time is not the same, and what it means when the man is the one who makes the decisions. Having seen and lived in the middle of it, such work experience has truly given me a lot. (Interviewee 1)

My orientation towards internationality has been strong already from a young age. I have had exchanges, work experience in Norway, training in Namibia, and camp counselling in the United States. I have gained personal experience of what it is like to be a foreign-language speaker, and that has been very significant. (Interviewee 6)

At this level, teachers' reflections reveal intercultural competence as a mindset rather than a set of techniques. Their emphasis on empathy, individuality, and joy underscores how personal experiences shape professional practice and foster inclusive classroom cultures.

All together, these findings illustrate how teachers' strategies operate across practical, pedagogical, and intercultural awareness levels. These levels resonate with the affective, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions of intercultural competence described in the theoretical framework (Rissanen and Kuusisto, 2023). By presenting teachers' voices through direct quotations, the study highlights not only the practices but also the lived experiences that shape intercultural teaching.

Discussion

In this study, we examined the strategies that teachers use to support culturally diverse classrooms in their day-to-day work. We interviewed nine Finnish primary school teachers who worked in comprehensive schools with mixed-ability classes from a variety of language and cultural backgrounds. Specifically, we aimed to explore how teachers consider students' diverse backgrounds in their teaching and what practical strategies they use from a highly practical perspective. The findings show that

teachers acknowledge cultural differences at three levels: practical arrangements, pedagogy and deep awareness.

Teachers described how they always strive to find practical solutions and arrangements that enable all students, regardless of their cultural background, to participate in school activities. The pedagogical level primarily referred to differentiation practices, such as providing support based on individual needs, visualising instructions, maintaining structure and repetition reinforcement. Intercultural understanding and awareness refers to the stage at which teachers demonstrate sensitivity when interacting with students and families from diverse cultural backgrounds. This is reflected in an inclusive mindset where teachers recognise each student as an individual, regardless of their cultural identity, and avoid categorising or structuring students based on their cultural backgrounds.

We deliberately chose not to define the concept of cultural diversity for the interviewees. Instead, we encouraged participants to approach the topic from their own perspectives and experiences. This approach enables a broader and more authentic understanding of how teachers perceive and engage with cultural diversity in their work. Consequently, the data reflect varying levels of understanding and interpretation of intercultural competencies. Some participants, particularly those with extensive experience in culturally diverse classrooms, had internalised many intercultural practices to such an extent that they had become normalised and therefore less consciously recognised. For these teachers, cultural diversity was often seen as an everyday reality rather than a distinct pedagogical challenge. This may have led to the underreporting of certain intercultural strategies. Conversely, participants with less experience or limited exposure to diversity may not yet have developed comprehensive awareness of intercultural competencies or the range of practices that support cultural inclusivity. This may have influenced their ability to identify or articulate such practices during the interviews. This variation in interpretation and awareness is an important finding in itself as it highlights the need for ongoing professional development and reflection in intercultural education. It also emphasises the importance of qualitative methods in capturing the nuanced and evolving nature of teachers' professional identities and practices in diverse educational settings.

The findings of the study indicate that, according to the research participants, teachers' intercultural competence is not primarily defined by specific skills or knowledge, but by an integrative approach to questions about a superdiverse society that addresses their intercultural competencies. Intercultural competence is understood more as a mindset or fundamental ethical framework that shapes one's perceptions, attitudes and interactions with individuals, society and diversity in order to meet the challenges of superdiverse educational settings. Rather than being characterised as the technical ability to function effectively in intercultural settings, it is viewed as a guiding principle that influences thought processes and behaviours. Similar results were reached by Jokikokko (2010), who states that intercultural learning and its outcome, intercultural competence, are both a condition and an aim for fostering cultural awareness, understanding, dialogue, fruitful cooperation, and mutual learning in superdiverse societies.

This study found that teachers with personal experience of living or working extensively in a superdiverse context demonstrated intercultural competence and sensitivity. They considered the encounter of different cultures to be relevant to all students and did not distinguish between them. According to Rissanen (2024), it is also important for teachers and student teachers to interact with people whose actions and thinking are based on cultural norms that are unfamiliar or not self-evident to them. Without experience of a superdiverse educational setting, it is difficult to develop intercultural competencies.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. Firstly, it is important to consider whether the study inadvertently perpetuates the distinction between so-called 'normal' and 'diverse' families, a distinction that has previously been criticised (see Eerola et al., 2023). Secondly, the sample size was small, consisting of teachers recruited through the researchers' professional contacts in culturally diverse schools. This may have biased the sample towards teachers who are already experienced with, or interested in, intercultural interactions. Thirdly, participants were asked to describe their approaches to supporting diverse families without being given a clear definition of 'diverse context', which may have led to variations in interpretation and limited comparability across responses. Finally, as is typical in qualitative research, the researchers' interpretations are shaped by their own assumptions and perspectives. Although rigorous methodological procedures were followed to minimise this risk, other researchers might still draw different conclusions from the same data.

Taken together, these limitations suggest that the findings should not be generalised to all Finnish teachers or educational contexts. The value of this research lies instead in the depth of insight it provides into teachers' lived experiences and reflections. Qualitative research emphasises transferability rather than statistical generalisability, so readers and practitioners are encouraged to consider how the identified themes may resonate with or inform their own contexts. While the strategies described by the participants offer valuable insights, they should be considered illustrative rather than representative of the entire teaching profession.

This study highlights the need for further research into how teacher education programmes can better support the development of intercultural competencies in superdiverse settings. The participating teachers did not emphasise receiving such support during their studies, suggesting that existing teacher training programmes may have a gap in this area. Instead, many interviewees said that they had developed their intercultural competence primarily through personal international experiences, such as studying or working abroad. This suggests that, although experiential learning plays a crucial role in shaping teachers' intercultural awareness, formal teacher education has not yet addressed this dimension sufficiently. Therefore, future research should explore ways in which teacher education programmes could integrate opportunities for experiential and practice-oriented learning, as well as identifying the forms of support that teachers themselves would find most valuable in developing their intercultural competencies.

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