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Exploring student perceptions of belonging and school climate in two culturally diverse Finnish secondary schools

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Abstract

Perceptions of belonging and school climate among minoritized students in Finland remain underdeveloped areas of enquiry in social and educational science. Using a data-driven approach, this explorative study investigates how minoritized students in lower secondary schools in Finland perceive belonging and school climate. The data used consisted of 11 group interviews with 55 students (14–16 years old) from two culturally diverse secondary schools in Finland. The study found that the overall school climate was perceived to be broadly positive but simultaneously "chaotic", and inclusion, exclusion, and discrimination were found to play significant roles regarding students' sense of belonging. The students interviewed perceived ethnic diversity as generally accepted and a marker of inclusion; however, non-binary gender identity was perceived to be a reason for exclusion. The students expressed various experiences with bullying and discrimination and some students felt that they had to adapt to the school climate to belong. The study's diverse school settings offer valuable insights into inclusionary and exclusionary practices, especially through students' perceptions of belonging and school climate. To foster a positive climate for diversity, greater attention must be given to the experiences of minoritized students.

Keywords: Sense of belonging, school climate, diversity, inclusion, exclusion

Introduction

Many students perceive school as an uncomfortable environment (Harinen & Halme, 2012), and culturally minoritized[1] students often experience discrimination alongside social and academic pressure to acculturate to the majority culture (Airas et al., 2019; Liebkind et al., 2004). Although the Finnish core curriculum for basic education is standardized and emphasizes cultural pluralism, students do not always experience school as such (O'Neill et al., 2023). The curriculum requires that each school is a "learning community [that] develops in dialogue" and "is strengthened by working together and through participation" (EDUFI,

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2014, p. 49). The curriculum also states that "experiences of being heard and treated fairly are building blocks of trust" (EDUFI, 2014, p. 50). Thus, the Finnish curriculum calls for a sense of belonging, which is a basic human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

This exploratory study aims to expand the understanding of students' perceptions of belonging and school climate, thereby offering preliminary insights and contributing to the growing body of knowledge on the lived experiences of culturally minoritized students in the Finnish educational context. Sense of belonging and school climate are connected but reflect distinct aspects of the student experience. A positive school climate can impact students' sense of belonging but does not ensure a strong sense of belonging for all students. Examining the two aspects together provides a more complete view of the school environment: school climate comprises a general picture, whereas sense of belonging sheds light on specific experiences (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016).

Studies focusing on culturally minoritized students' belonging at school are scarce (DeNicolo et al., 2014; Van Caudenberg et al., 2020). Using a data-driven approach, we explored sense of belonging and experiences of school climate in two schools that have high percentages of culturally minoritized students. The primary focus was on diversity related to ethnicity, language background, and LGBTQIA+ identification, as these student groups often experience the harmful impacts of a negative school climate, such as bullying and violence (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). However, cultural diversity also includes race, religion, age, ability, and socio-economic background (see, e.g., Jameson, 2007; Räsänen, 2015), but these aspects are not explicitly addressed in this study. The following research questions guided this study:

1) What are students' perceptions of belonging in a culturally diverse school?

2) What perceptions of school climate in a culturally diverse school shape students' sense of belonging?

With its universalist system and standardized curricula, the Finnish educational context provides a unique platform for investigating how culturally diverse school environments influence students' sense of belonging, which has broader, long-term implications for democratic practices and social well-being. This study is part of a larger research project aiming to develop more inclusive education for all students, especially those with culturally minoritized identities.

School climate and sense of belonging

Worldwide, schools are becoming increasingly diverse. To optimize the educational experiences of all students, particularly those at risk of marginalization (Dee & Penner, 2017), it is crucial to foster inclusive school climates where students feel a sense of belonging (Schachner et al., 2019). School climate is "composed of the affective and cognitive perceptions regarding social interactions, relationships, safety, values, and beliefs held by students, teachers, administrators, and staff within a school" (Rudasill et al., 2018, p. 46) and affects students' opportunities for participation (Homana et al., 2005; Van Houtte, 2005). It reflects the behaviors, perceptions, and expectations of the school community (Homana et al., 2005; Rudasill et al., 2018). This is particularly important in diverse schools, as culturally minoritized students often experience a lower sense of belonging (Borgonovi, 2018; see also Peltola et al., 2021). Supporting cultural pluralism, perceived equality, and inclusion have been found to be advantageous for everyone in diverse schools (Schachner et al., 2019). Perceptions of a positive diversity climate can act as a safeguard against experiences of discrimination and predict better experiences of belonging (Baysu et al., 2016; Heikamp et al., 2020).

Belonging, which is "a state of social inclusion" (Sibley, 2006, p. 401), is "essential for the good health of individuals and communities" (Stratigos et al., 2014, p. 171). This can include feelings of attachment, positive social relations comprising mutual acceptance and respect, a willingness to contribute to a group, and the ability to adapt to situations (St-Amand et al., 2017). The need for belonging is particularly important during adolescence, as major physical, cognitive, and social changes occur during this phase of

puberty; thus, a sense of stability is needed (Allen et al., 2014).

A sense of belonging is positively associated with higher levels of active participation and social wellbeing (Albanesi et al., 2007). Students' sense of belonging has gained more attention in educational research in the last decades (Osterman, 2000). School environments affect students' sense of belonging (Loukas et al., 2010; Osterman, 2000), as schools can be valuable sites for building social networks (Allen & Bowles, 2012). A lack of belonging can lead to negative consequences, such as dropping out or lower school performance (Juvonen, 2006).

A sense of belonging is fostered through positive peer relationships and a school environment in which students feel heard (Allen et al., 2018; Anderson & Graham, 2016; Bruhn & Gonzales, 2023; DeNicolo et al., 2017; Lambert et al., 2013; St-Amand et al., 2017; Van Caudenberg et al., 2020). It is further influenced by internal factors, such as individual agency and self-perception (Bruhn & Gonzales, 2023; Cuervo & Wyn, 2014; St-Amand et al., 2017; Viesca et al., 2024).

Belonging can also be viewed as the discourses and practices of exclusion or inclusion that are influenced by groups' values (Juutinen, 2018; Yuval-Davis, 2011). At school, for example, exclusion may occur due to values that do not support certain students' identities. Furthermore, educational practices may include or exclude students based on, for example, their disadvantaged positions (Antonisch, 2010; Cuervo & Wyn, 2014; DeNicolo et al., 2017). When relationships are grounded in reciprocity and accountability, they foster a sense of belonging (Viesca et al., 2024). Importantly, students seem to suffer less from bullying when they feel valued at school (Govorova et al., 2020) and when school personnel perceive students' diverse backgrounds as a resource and promote inclusion (Heikamp et al., 2020). Every school staff member and student is responsible for building a community that is grounded in reciprocal acknowledgement, resulting in diversity being perceived as positive and productive (Viesca et al., 2024).

School adaptation

School adaptation, or adjustment, can be defined as the process through which students acquire the behaviours necessary to function effectively in their educational setting, with the goal of achieving an optimal fit between their personal characteristics and the expectations inherent in the learning context (Spencer, 1999). Therefore, it is crucial for students to find ways to adapt to the expectations of the school community—whether those expectations are positive or negative. School adaptation, involving academic, social-emotional, and behavioural competencies such as socially acceptable peer interactions (Perry & Weinstein, 1998), has been predominantly studied in young children. However, research on adolescents indicates that it is influenced by factors like school climate, academic grades, gender, family support, and peer relationships (Kurt, 2022), and that positive adaptation correlates with enhanced learning outcomes (Zhang et al., 2018).

While successful adaptation can lead to positive educational outcomes, allowing students to reveal their potential and positively transform their environment, poor adaptation can have significant negative consequences (Kumar et al., 2014). When people are placed in groups that do not contribute to a positive sense of self or value their social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 2001), discrimination is more likely to occur. Conversely, when pluralism is fostered, students can be empowered to implement their cultural practices and develop social competences (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Paris & Alim, 2014). It is essential that such pedagogy (i.e., critical multiculturalism; Giroux, 1992a, 1992b) focus on students feeling valued and important to the school community and having opportunities to achieve their full potential through mutual respect and shared responsibility.

In a school with a positive climate toward diversity, diverse backgrounds are seen as assets, intersecting factors influencing students' lives are recognized, and power structures and societal hierarchies are critically observed and deconstructed (Anya, 2021; Giroux, 1992a, 1992b; Jennings & Lynn, 2005; Viesca et al., 2024). Each member of such a school community actively works to enable everyone to feel like part

of a group (Viesca et al., 2024), creating a community in which all students can belong (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Shaw et al., 2021), feel good (Anderson & Graham, 2016; Juvonen, 2006; Nuttman-Schwartz, 2019; Osterman, 2020), and succeed academically (Fredricks et al., 2004; Osterman, 2020; Schachner et al., 2019).

Negotiating a sense of belonging at school

The acceptance or rejection of different aspects of one's identity can enable or constrain belonging (Bruhn & Gonzales, 2023). Several studies have shown that minoritized students have a weaker sense of belonging than the majority population (Borgonovi, 2018; Chiu et al., 2012), especially those who have a migrant background, speak a language at home other than the language of instruction (Alisaari et al., 2023; Kilpi-Jakonen & Alisaari, 2022), or identify as LGBTQIA+ (McGowan, 2020). Religious discrimination has been found to impede a sense of belonging for young people with minority religious identities in Australia (Hunter et al., 2015), Sweden (Osman et al., 2020), and Finland (Schihalejev et al., 2020). In one study (Schihalejev et al., 2020), Muslims were the largest target group for linguistic and religious bullying, and those born abroad were more likely to be targeted. Socioeconomic background (e.g., Ahmadi et al., 2020) and developmental disorders such as ADHD and autism (Jangmo et al., 2019; Myles et al., 2019) also affect a sense of belonging at school. Such discrimination can strongly impact students' experiences and lessen their engagement in learning (Heikamp et al., 2020), leading to school failure, dropout, and risky behavior (Kumar et al., 2014).

In the current exploratory study, two main factors related to inclusion and exclusion emerged from the data: 1) ethnic or language background and 2) gender diversity and sexual orientation, factors which are often related to discrimination and negative experiences of school climate (DeNicolo et al., 2017; Hatchel et al., 2019; Kutsyuruba, et al., 2015; McGowan, 2020; Moyano & del Mar Sánchez-Fuentes, 2020).

The concept of ethnicity is not fixed; rather, it comprises relations between and perceived inequalities among different groups of people. It is often connected (sometimes indirectly) to language (Hollingworth & Mansaray, 2012). When schools embody practices that accept multilingualism and students' linguistically diverse backgrounds are valued, they experience a higher sense of belonging (Van Caudenberg et al., 2020; Van Der Wildt et al., 2017). In Finland, schools are generally not (yet) very ethnically or linguistically diverse, and students with a migrant background often feel excluded (Saarinen & Zacheus, 2019). These students also face barriers related to identifying as Finns and may see themselves as, for example, a foreigner or a resident of the local neighborhood (Haikkola, 2011; Kimanen et al., 2025; Saarinen & Zacheus, 2019; Toivanen, 2014). However, recent studies have indicated that students from ethnically and linguistically diverse schools in Finland generally report a high sense of belonging, due to positive experiences with cultural diversity (Alisaari et al., 2023).

LGBTQIA+ students also often have a weaker sense of belonging than their peers (e.g., McGowan, 2020) and are at a higher risk of being bullied (Hatchel et al., 2019; Moyano & del Mar Sánchez-Fuentes, 2020). They may encounter religiously based bullying in both secular and religious schools, as well as in other contexts (Newman et al., 2018). Victimization is a strong predictor of a low sense of belonging among LGBTQIA+ students, whereas support from others and a positive school climate have been found to be related to a higher sense of belonging (McGowan, 2020), which can help mediate the mental health issues related to victimization among LGBTQIA+ students (Hatchel et al., 2019).

The Finnish school system has been praised for its inclusivity; however, recent studies have suggested that LGBTQIA+ students, particularly transgender and non-binary individuals, continue to encounter bullying and discrimination (Heino et al., 2021; Lehtonen, 2023; Lehtonen et al., 2024; Majlander et al., 2022). Many LGBTQIA+ students are not treated equally or do not feel safe at Finnish schools (Lehtonen, 2023), and they experience more bullying and harassment and dislike school more than students who identify with gender and sexuality majorities (e.g., Lehtonen, 2023; Lehtonen et al., 2024; Majlander et al. 2022).

Transgender students, in particular non-binary students, are involved in bullying the most frequently, usually as the victims (Heino et al., 2021).

Methods

The data for this study were collected through semi-structured group interviews (n = 11) that lasted approximately 60 minutes each. The participants (n = 55) were 14–16-year-old students from two schools in diverse urban neighborhoods in Southern Finland. No student was asked to identify any personal characteristics such as nationality, 'race', ethnicity, sexuality or gender. All students were welcomed to participate in an open, equal setting.

To protect the participants' anonymity, the school context is not described in detail. The students had diverse linguistic backgrounds; their first languages included Albanian, Arabic, Bengali, Bosnian, English, Finnish, Hungarian, Japanese, Kurdish, Latvian, Malayalam, Nepalese, Pashto, Persian, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog, and Urdu. Students that had Finnish as their first language were a minority in both of the schools and in the interviews.

The participants were recruited via an open call to students and teaching staff. The researchers presented the study and its purpose to the schools' 8th grade classes; however, only two students registered. The schools were contacted again, and one teacher (working in both schools) offered their English classes as an interview site in both lower-secondary schools. The students and their guardians were sent a letter including information about the study's purpose, the interviews, the ethical procedures, and the option to participate or not, and permission to participate in the study was requested. Ethical permission was not required from the university, but the study followed the ethical guidelines set by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK).

The interviews were conducted in autumn 2022 (see Table 1 for example questions). The interview groups comprised four to six students and two interviewers, and students were free to choose in which groups they wanted to be interviewed. The students seemed eager to discuss the topics, and they participated equally. The discussions were recorded and transcribed by one of the researchers. English was the primary language of the interviews, as they were conducted during English language classes. All students spoke good, excellent, or fluent English; when necessary, some students used Finnish to answer or clarify a question. The interview excerpts were polished for clarity, and non-relevant or repeated words and fillers were removed. The content was not changed.

Table 1. Examples of interview questions

How would you describe the atmosphere[2] at school?
How would you describe what it feels like to be at school?
Do you feel that teachers and other people here consider your thoughts and opinions? Are you heard if you have something to say?
Do you think everyone is included at school, for example, during lessons and breaks? Are some students excluded?
What would be needed for everyone to feel included and accepted?

Content-driven thematic analysis was used to analyze the transcribed data (Krippendorff, 2012). Author 2 read the responses to gain an initial understanding of the data and identify categories for coding. These were discussed among Authors 1 and 2, and the following categories were created: *belonging*, *school climate*, *bullying and discrimination*, and *adaptation*. Mentions categorized as *belonging* referred explicitly to students' experiences of inclusion or exclusion or to possibilities to be themselves and be heard at school. Mentions categorized referring to *school climate* included perceptions regarding social interactions (other than inclusion and exclusion), values, and safety. *Bullying and discrimination* included mentions of experienced or perceived conflict at school. *Adaptation* included students' perceptions of not having possibilities to influence belonging or climate but rather a necessity to adapt to the existing context.

Results

In this section, we explore students' perceptions of belonging at school and the school climate. We then explore students' perceptions of bullying and discrimination and whether they recognized the need to adapt to the existing realities. Quotations from the interviews are provided; the students and researchers are referred to as S and R, respectively, followed by a running number. To maintain authenticity, non-idiomatic expressions in the students' utterances were not corrected.

Notions of inclusion and exclusion

Regarding the category of *belonging*, various notions of inclusion and exclusion at school were reported. There was a perception among students that belonging to a 'norm' was generally associated with inclusion, and ethnic diversity was often considered a norm.

> "*You can be how you want to be, and you don't have to really be scared here at school, and, well, I feel like I'm quite ordinary. I don't really stand out."* (S24)

The students expressed feelings of empowerment, especially in relation to ethnic and linguistic diversity; being able to speak their own languages contributed to a sense of belonging (see also Van Caudenberg et al., 2020; Van Der Wildt et al., 2017). This contrasts with the results of studies from other contexts in Finland (Saarinen & Zacheus, 2019) which argued that students with a migrant background often feel excluded at school.

Similarly, for students that identified as LGBTQIA+, inclusion seemed to also be associated with belonging to a 'norm', as previous research has demonstrated (Moyano & del Mar Sánchez-Fuentes, 2020). Some students mentioned that masking identities at school took place in order to avoid being seen as different:

> *"There's a lot of homophobia in this school, so you can't really be open about your sexuality or your gender identity to everyone. Sometimes, you have to pretend to be something you are not."* (S1)

Thus, opportunities for and obstacles to inclusion were related to experiencing oneself as part of the norm, which seemed to be ethnically and religiously neutral. However, some students mentioned that religious beliefs played a role in shaping attitudes toward minoritized sexual and gender identities, leading to feelings of exclusion.

There were also perceptions mentioned in the opposite direction where all identities were being included and exclusion did not occur:

> "*I can be myself fully. We [...] discussed last lesson about sexuality, so there's no need to hide anything if you're ready, [...] if you're a part of the LGBT community or you come from a different background, for example, you have a different religion, yeah, there's no need to hide that [...] I think that's not that big of a deal."* (S38)

> "*I don't know about other classes, but in my experience, since our class has known each other for over eight years now, most of the people know each other so well that no matter who we sit with, we can talk comfortably [...]."* (S10)

The students perceived that their class or school was special, as people made efforts to include everyone. Equal treatment was often mentioned as a reason for inclusion. However, the students also reflected that everyone was included during lessons but not necessarily outside of them; some wondered if it only *seemed* that everyone was included. Others reflected on how difficult it is to include everyone:

> *"Some people are not most comfortable around others. Especially in the young age, it might sometimes be hard to fit in with everyone."* (S6)

This statement highlights how some students perceived social integration as challenging, particularly in early adolescence: The expression "it might be hard to fit in with everyone" might refer to the diverse needs adolescents have. However, some students did not recognize that power relations and different positionalities enable or prevent inclusion (see also Juutinen, 2018; Yuval-Davis, 2011). They transferred the responsibility to be included to those who were excluded, claiming that they should be more social and take active responsibility for themselves as reciprocal community members:

> *"It's just, if you take the first step and decide to talk to a new person, then that's how you slowly become more sociable."* (S6)

A welcoming or chaotic school climate

Most of the students described the school climate as ethnically and linguistically diverse, saying that it differed from other schools in Finland in this aspect. Furthermore, they claimed that this diversity was highly acknowledged. They reported enjoying hearing the languages they spoke at home being spoken at school (see also Van Caudenberg et al., 2020) and the different ethnic backgrounds being seen as the norm. The school climate was often referred to as "good" or "welcoming." Thus, the school seemed to foster ethnic pluralism and empower students to implement at least some cultural practices and develop social competences (see also Ladson-Billings, 1994; Paris & Alim, 2014). Often, positive mentions concerning school climate included mentions of inclusion, especially with regard to ethnic or linguistic diversity and experiences of safety. Interestingly, some students experienced the school climate both negatively and positively.

> *"I think it depends on the day. And also the people. And the lessons. Maybe, like, overwhelming, nervous, and also, like, happy and excited."* (S45)

Students who perceived the climate as negative often referred to it as "overwhelming" or "chaotic" and mentioned aggression between "boys." Some stated that there were often people fighting in the corridors or at lunch and that physical violence was sometimes scary. Others reported struggling to find a "safe" place to relax and said they felt a sense of over-crowdedness. A few students referred to the school climate as "toxic," explaining that arguments were "constantly happening" (S18). To these students, the school climate was neither welcoming nor comfortable.

Some students who reported a lack of belonging described the school climate as negative, while others did not. A few reported problems with the school climate, but their own sense of belonging was positive. Thus, there was not always a clear relationship between belonging and school climate.

Varied perceptions of discrimination and bullying

The students also expressed perceptions of bullying at their school and teachers' reactions thereof. Religion was not perceived as a reason for bullying:

> *"Nobody gets bullied for their religion, and everyone just treats each other as we are the same — humans."* (S40)

The students interviewed perceived that those belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community were particularly prone to bullying and discrimination, contrasting the pluralism that a positive diversity climate should support (see, e.g., Viesca et al., 2024). Homophobia and misogyny were explicitly mentioned, and issues surrounding gender and sexuality were said to elicit arguments. Such discrimination was sometimes justified by religion.

> *"There's a lot of homophobia [...], so you can't really be open about your sexuality or [...] gender identity [...]. Sometimes you have to pretend to be something you are not. [...] The homophobes are going to be like, "Why there is a pride flag over there? [...] That is against my religion", even though that doesn't make any sense. Like, even if it is against your own religion, it doesn't mean that other people can't do it."* (S1)

Bullying was mentioned as not being straightforward but rather occurring as a subtle form of exclusion. Some students claimed that there was no bullying, discrimination, or conflicts at school: "You can be with everyone" (S25). This could be due to different understandings of bullying; for example, some students might have thought that bullying needed to be consistent and physical.

Some students spoke openly about their LGBTQIA+ identities and reported not being able to be themselves at school. It seemed, however, that they felt safe in their interview groups to discuss their experiences openly. These individuals may have been more aware of discrimination, as positions of power and privilege create unequal opportunities regarding belonging (see also Bruhn & Gonzales, 2023; McGowan, 2020).

Instead of (or alongside) direct bullying, many students mentioned conflicts among their peers, especially between friend groups and between "boys and girls". These perceptions were intertwined with unequal opportunities for "having a say" or being in a safe learning environment, indicating that these students experienced a lower sense of belonging at school (see Anderson & Graham, 2016).

Conflicts with teachers were also mentioned. In particular, situations in which teachers were perceived to be unfair, or showing special treatment to specific students, were highlighted as causes of conflict. This relates to the finding that the students experienced inclusion due to equal treatment, where a lack thereof created strife.

Adapting to realities

This category included mentions of altering behaviours, attitudes, and even identities to navigate the school's prevailing norms, expectations, and social dynamics. Some students perceived that adaptation, not environmental change, was necessary for social inclusion. They expressed that no one could be equal and that there would always be unsatisfied people. Although the teachers tried to build positive relationships among their classes, the students claimed, "the school can't just force someone to be friends" (S7).

R7: *Is there something done about this? By the teachers or other students?*
S36: *If the teachers notice, then yeah.*
S33: *I mean yeah, but you still...*
S35: *Teachers don't do much, in my opinion.*
S33: *Yeah.*
S35: *'Cause even though they might say or, like, give the other person detention, it's not gonna do anything.*
S34: *Yeah, it's not.*
S33: *It doesn't really change.*

Some students mentioned that social pressure made it difficult to act when they saw someone alone, thus preventing them from behaving inclusively.

> *"I see a lot of people sitting alone at lunchtime [...], and I feel pretty bad for them [...]. I want to help them, just go hang out around them, but it be kind of weird if I would just randomly sit close to someone and start talking. So, like, the other hand says that I wanna do something about it, but the other says that I don't wanna be weird."* (S33)

> *"The students discussed not enjoying having to adapt; rather, they considered it a necessity: But it doesn't mean that it's not annoying. We've just gotten used to it and learned what we do in a noisy environment."* (S4)

Thus, some of the students seemed to feel they had little agency regarding increasing their sense of belonging or promoting a better school environment. Previous studies (e.g., Anderson & Graham, 2016) have found that students may perceive themselves as not having a say in school issues and feeling that teachers do not listen to them. In the current study, the students did not expect support from teachers, and both peer pressure and social norms prevented them from taking action; thus, their only option was to adapt.

Limitations

The study also has some limitations. The interviews were conducted in small groups, which might have influenced what the participants were willing to share. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted mainly in English, and some students may have struggled to express themselves in a language other than their first language. The use of the English language in the interviews might have excluded some students who were not comfortable communicating in English, meaning some students may have been discouraged to participate. However, as all the interview groups also included Finnish speaking researchers, it was therefore possible for the students to express themselves in Finnish, and some of the students used this opportunity when they did not understand a question or if they were more comfortable responding in Finnish.

It is also important to note that the group interview setting may have influenced participation. All group settings reflect social dynamics which display hierarchies (Koski et al., 2017). More socially integrated students might have been more likely to volunteer owing to elevated group status. Socially excluded students may have felt discouraged to participate owing to insider/outside group dynamics. All these aforementioned issues may have affected the range of voices captured in the study.

Additionally, students participating in the group interviews may have felt pressure to conform to the perceptions of other group actors to ensure pro-social acceptance, which otherwise might have been negated in individual interviews. This is a persistent challenge with group-based data collection methods (see Sim, 1998). For ethical reasons, the students' backgrounds were not systematically examined. Self-ex-

pressed positionalities were analyzed, but interpretations were not made based on background information. The analysis could have revealed more complexity had we included data on various background factors (see, e.g., Hollingworth & Mansaray, 2012). It is also important to acknowledge the power positionalities between the interviewers and the students which might affect the results. Moreover, data-driven analysis led us to focus on ethnic, gender, and sexual diversity. However, marginalization is connected to multiple other issues and can occur at intersections of these (and other) aspects. A deeper focus on intersectionality would help create balance between valorizing students' voices and critically analyzing the content based on theoretical perspectives. Finally, this study was conducted in schools that are more ethnically diverse than most schools in Finland; thus, the results are not explicitly generalizable.

Discussion and conclusions

In this study, students' perceptions of belonging included notions of both inclusion and exclusion, while the school climate was experienced as highly positive by some students but chaotic and unsafe by others. Many of the students interviewed emphasized that everyone was accepted regardless of their ethnicity (e.g., Anderson & Graham, 2016). However, LGBTQIA+ students were mainly perceived as excluded and othered, which aligns with studies showing that LGBTQIA+ youths often experience discrimination at school (Moyano & del Mar Sánchez-Fuentes, 2020).

The school climate in both of the schools was perceived as broadly positive by the majority of the interviewees, and the presence of multiple languages and diverse ethnic backgrounds was perceived as a normative feature in both schools. Majoritized white Finns held minority positions in both schools; thus, the discourse of the school being inclusive for all ethnicities was widely used by participants who may be ethnically minoritized in the wider society. However, ethnically diverse schools remain scarce in Finland, so generalizations cannot be extended to all students' school experiences in Finland. Nevertheless, some students seemed to consider their environment safe for identity construction and performance (see Baysu et al., 2016; Heikamp et al., 2020), which may explain these students' perceptions of acceptance (see also Heikamp et al., 2020) and an absence of bullying (see also Govorova et al., 2020).

However, the school experience was not positive for all the students. Many students reported having to adapt to the "chaotic" school climate and to ensure a sense of belonging. This may be problematic regarding creating a safe learning environment for all. To co-construct a positive school climate for diversity and promote a more just society, inequalities among students must be actively challenged (see also Freire, 1973; Giroux, 1992a; Viesca et al., 2024; Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). Students must be educated about social justice (Kimanen, 2023) to be able to recognize and challenge inequalities and build a more inclusive society. Future studies should explore the tensions between normative expectations (e.g., inclusivity) and lived experiences (e.g., experience of racism or homophobia) and how they are negotiated (e.g., reappropriation, resistance, conformity).

According to Bruhn and Gonzales (2023), "Being included does not have to mean erasing ethnic, linguistic, and national identities, nor is it contingent on acceptance by others with more racial, economic, and political power" (p. 3). Highly diverse educational settings may foster a greater sense of belonging for ethnically minoritized students, but inclusion may be less likely when gender or sexual identity is other than the "norm". Indeed, while some aspects of identity may be accepted, others are not similarly valued. However, when students experience a school climate that values diversity, they experience a higher sense of belonging and better learning outcomes (Schachner et al., 2019). It is therefore vital to aim to co-construct a positive climate for diversity in every school (Viesca et al., 2024). A better understanding of students' experiences of inclusion and exclusion could help build more inclusive school environments in many contexts.

This article explored students' perceptions of belonging and school climate. The results provoke thoughts about students' roles in creating and amending belonging and the school climate: How much is

the students' responsibility, and when should schools adopt a greater role in creating spaces where students can co-construct the learning environment as more active members of the community. This should be addressed in future research.

Endnotes

1 Here, culturally minoritized refers to groups that have been socially constructed as minorities within specific societal contexts, such as schools, often due to systemic and structural inequities (see also Fallon et al., 2021). This concept emphasizes how certain groups are marginalized based on cultural, racial, ethnic, sexual, or gender identities (Stewart, 2013). Culture is a complex concept; we understand it as the shared knowledge, values, behaviors, and attitudes that characterize a particular group (see also Cerulo et al., 2021). Here, identity refers to the social categories to which an individual claims membership and ascribes personal meaning (Deaux, 1993).

2 Although we use the term "climate" in the article, we considered the term "atmosphere" to be more relatable for the students.

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