

# ‘Where Should the Orthodox Christian Go?’ Distinctions Based on Religion and Language in a Finnish International School



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## ABSTRACT

While international schools aim to produce global citizens, national schools seek to create national citizens and integrate immigrants into the national whole. When these aims are combined within a municipal international school, the result is at times contradictory. This article considers the everyday experiences of 9-year-old children in a Finnish municipal international school. It investigates how a school that aims to be both international and national creates distinctions between pupils and how such distinctions affect pupils' everyday practices. Two distinctive processes are analysed: how compulsory religion lessons and Christian events create distinctions between pupils, and how children's Finnish skills affect both their interactions and the practices within the school. The article presents the argument that children also use these distinction mechanisms in their everyday lives and that even though the school is an international one, the Finnish-speaking Christian child is still considered the norm, and the international child – the foreigner – the ‘other.’ Finnish international schools can be seen as a magnifying glass with which to illuminate processes taking place in ‘regular’ Finnish schools, since the international school context intensifies these. The article is based on extensive ethnographic research at a municipal international school in a Finnish town.

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Growing numbers of children are moving between countries because of their parent(s)' careers. The temporary labour migration of highly educated professionals – sometimes called career expatriates or transnational corporate elites (Amit 2002; Fechter 2007) – is increasing in various parts of the world. Finland, among many countries, welcomes such professionals both because they offer skills that are needed in global competitive markets and because the country's domestic population is ageing. Typically, they do not intend to stay permanently, generally returning to their native countries or moving on to other locations after a few years (Korpela, Hyytiä & Pitkänen 2017; Koskela 2019).

In the recruitment of highly educated professionals from abroad, the policy emphasis is on labour needs and, consequently, on the adult migrants' expertise (Korpela, Hyytiä & Pitkänen 2019). These experts are, however, often accompanied by their spouses and children. On a global scale, most families of highly skilled professionals move to metropolises, where their children attend international schools, most of which charge relatively high tuition fees. Located on the edge of Europe and with a small population, Finland offers a very different environment: most of its international schools are state-funded and municipal, with no tuition fees and with teaching delivered in English but following the Finnish national curriculum.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, I look at the everyday experiences of 9-year-old children in a Finnish international school. I investigate how a school that seeks to be both international and national creates distinctions between pupils and how such distinctions affect the children's everyday lives and identity formations. In what follows, I first situate the phenomenon by explaining what international schools are and how they function in Finland. Secondly, I outline my conceptual framework of migrant integration, otherness and distinctions. I then describe my research setting and methodology. In the empirical section, I analyse two distinctive processes within a Finnish international school. I elaborate on how compulsory religion lessons and Christian events create distinctions between pupils and how pupils actively utilise such distinctions. I also elaborate on how the children's Finnish skills affect both their interactions and practices within the school. I argue that a Finnish international school can be seen as a magnifying glass with which to illuminate processes that take place in 'regular' Finnish schools but which are intensified in the international school context. The article is based on extensive ethnographic research at a municipal international school in a Finnish town.

## INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS AND NATIONAL SCHOOLS

### INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

Globally, international schools were originally aimed at the children of temporary expatriates.<sup>2</sup> Diplomats, missionaries, development aid workers and military

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1 In the Finnish education system, schooling is compulsory up to the age of eighteen. For the first 9 years, all schools follow the same curriculum, which, in addition to academic skills, emphasises social skills, arts and crafts. Parents cannot choose their children's school; each school has its own catchment area, and, to date, there have been no significant differences in quality.

2 According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, an expatriate is a person who lives in a foreign country. In common usage, however, the term has connotations of elites and whiteness; it is usually used to describe relatively well-off white people who live abroad.

personnel wanted familiar and high-quality education for their children even when they were living far from their native countries. In particular, schools following United States and British curricula were established to cater for the needs of such families, especially in the global south. The first international schools were opened as long ago as the 19th century, but until the 1970s, their numbers were relatively small. Over the years, however, more states, organisations and multinational companies have started to send workers for stints abroad. This means that the numbers of expatriate families have gone up and, consequently, the numbers of international schools. In the late 1960s, there were some 400 such schools (Leach 1969), whereas in 2000 there were about 2,600, and by 2020 the number had risen to 11,600 (Machin 2020). In recent years, international schools have also become popular among the local elites, especially in the global south, where local education systems are not necessarily well-resourced (see, e.g. Hayden & Thompson 2013).

By definition, international schools offer a curriculum that is not of the 'host country' (Hayden & Thompson 2013). In most cases, they follow international curricula with clear connections to those of English-speaking countries (Tanu 2018: 40). Unlike national schools, which are usually at least partly state-funded, international schools generally collect tuition fees that are significantly higher than those for local schools (Tanu 2018).

Danau Tanu, an anthropologist, has written extensively on international schools. She argues that such schools are often exclusive gated communities that aim to produce the future elite of 'global citizens' (Tanu 2018: 4). This international education is believed to provide access to the wealth and opportunities of the international market, wherein these students will form the transnational capitalist class of the future. Tanu argues, however, that in spite of their ethos of cosmopolitanism and internationalism, international schools actually define these concepts in rather narrow terms. The global citizen is predominantly characterised as white, westernised and well-off (Tanu 2018: 65), and as speaking fluent English, preferably like a native speaker (Tanu 2018: 6; see also Igarashi & Saito 2014). In other words, although the ethos is that the global citizen transcends national differences (Tanu 2018: 53), Tanu argues that, ultimately, the ideology of being international is a Eurocentric form of cosmopolitanism (Tanu 2018: 239). In her extensive ethnographic research at an international school in Indonesia, Tanu analyses various hierarchical distinction mechanisms and the strategies that high school students use to navigate them. Being 'international' in the context of Tanu's fieldwork school meant maintaining a distance from the local 'other' (Tanu 2018: 103). In other words, the local Indonesian culture was not included in the cosmopolitan ethos of the international school. Tanu thus argues that those who attend international schools 'are not expected to integrate into the country where they live as temporary migrants. Instead, they are expected to integrate into ... the transnationality of the international school ... where they socialize with friends who are similarly in transit' (Tanu 2018: 3).

## **FINNISH (INTER)NATIONAL SCHOOLS**

In Finland, almost all schools are state-funded and follow the national curriculum. Basic education cannot be provided in pursuit of financial gain, and compulsory tuition fees are illegal. Consequently, there are relatively few private schools in

the country, and almost all schools follow the same curriculum.<sup>3</sup> Tuula Gordon and Elina Lahelma conducted extensive ethnographic studies in Finnish schools in the 1990s. Together with Janet Holland, they argue that schooling in both Finland and the UK is a national project that aims to make children 'familiar with a common culture, common language, common history and a joint sense of future' (Gordon, Holland & Lahelma 2000: 19). This national ethos of schools persists in Finland today. In addition, a peculiarity of Finnish schools is that the national ethos includes a Christian ethos. Sirpa Lappalainen, who has studied immigrants in Finnish preschools, argues that although religion does not play an important role in most Finnish people's everyday lives, Lutheran traditions have become an inseparable part of Finnishness in the education system (Lappalainen 2006: 107) and are actively promoted by schools. Above all, religion lessons are compulsory, and the 'most established celebrations [in schools] are those based on the Lutheran ecclesiastical year' (Lappalainen 2006: 105).

Until the 1990s, there were very few immigrants in Finland, and schools educated the children of the – seemingly – homogeneous population. When immigrants started to increase in numbers in the early years of that decade, schools became frontline agents in their integration into Finnish society and its values, a role they continue today (see Zacheus et al. 2019). Various programmes and support mechanisms exist for integrating immigrant children into the country's national schools, with extensive language training being the most important tool in this process (see, e.g. Forsell et al. 2016; Naukkarinen & Tiermas 2019; Sinkkonen & Kyttälä 2014).

The image of the highly educated, skilled professional whose sojourn in the country is temporary is strikingly missing from these integration policies. Yet, in today's world, there are growing numbers of such people. In Finland, the trend started with the success of Nokia and the IT industry at the beginning of the new millennium. Since then, thousands of skilled migrants have come to work in the country on a temporary basis – typically for 1–3 years – and many of them are accompanied by their families (see Korpela, Hyytiä & Pitkänen 2017).<sup>4</sup>

When families come to Finland with temporary intentions, integrating into Finnish society and learning the language fluently seldom seems feasible to them. Consequently, there has been an increasing demand for schools that offer education in English. In addition, many permanent residents and even native Finns want their children to be educated in English, with the expectation that fluency in the language will be useful to them in the future. The answer to this demand has been the free municipal international schools that provide education in English but follow the Finnish curriculum. Although it is the expatriate children temporarily sojourning in Finland who first and foremost need these schools, between 35% and 60% of their pupils are

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<sup>3</sup> There are some private schools in Finland, mainly Waldorf or Christian ones, but although their curricula differ from the national one, they must ultimately provide children with the same academic skills and knowledge; that is, they are not free to formulate their curricula as they wish. They can accept only voluntary tuition fees, and they receive most of their funding from the state.

<sup>4</sup> There are no statistics on temporary migration in Finland. In the last few years, about 7,000–9,000 first residence permits have been issued annually for work purposes (European Migration Network 2020: 8).

actually Finnish-speaking and live in the country on a permanent basis (Terävä et al. 2023). Some of them have international backgrounds, but others do not.<sup>5</sup>

The Finnish international schools are therefore interesting ‘hybrids.’ They operate in English and host children from various countries, but at the same time, they are regular Finnish schools following the national curriculum and hosting many Finnish-speaking pupils. This produces a constant interplay between international emphasis and national practices. In fact, a national (or municipal) international school sounds almost like a contradiction in terms. Nevertheless, in order to understand how Finnish international schools operate, it is useful to look at how regular Finnish-speaking schools operate for pupils with international backgrounds.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: MIGRANT INTEGRATION, OTHERNESS AND DISTINCTIONS

Integration is a key theme in Finnish immigration policy. According to the ethos of the Finnish integration strategy, learning the language and the country’s cultural norms and practices enables migrant children to later become integrated into the Finnish labour markets and, consequently, to be contributing members of society (see, e.g. Zacheus et al. 2019). A similar ethos exists in the other Nordic countries; immigrants are ‘the other’ that needs to be integrated, and various programmes and practices are employed to achieve this aim, with daycare centres and schools being central agents in these processes (on Norway, see Kalkman, Haugen & Valenta 2017; on Sweden, see Åkerblom & Harju 2019; Svensson & Eastmond 2013; on Denmark, see Beazamy & Feron 2012). The integration of migrant children into ‘national’ schools is, however, often a somewhat controversial process. Moreover, in an institutional setting such as a school, certain differences and boundaries can become emphasised via institutional practices (see Gilliam & Gullov 2017: 1).

In his infamous theorisation on ethnicity, Fredrik Barth (1969) argues that no ethnic group can exist in isolation and that a group necessarily defines itself via contact with other groups. In this process, certain differences are considered socially significant while others are not. In fact, not only ethnic groups but also other groups and individuals define themselves in relation to others; that is, differences are used as distinctive identity tools, but the significance of particular differences is always context-dependent and therefore varies. In similar terms, Steven Talmay (2004), who has studied migrant children in schools in the United States, writes about ‘recognizable’ and ‘marked’ identities, referring to the fact that some identities in schools are understood as being distinct from the mainstream one while other potential identities and differences remain unrecognised and invisible.

Schools may thus strengthen particular identities and distinctions when they emphasise certain identities and produce certain identity positions for pupils (Åhlund & Johnson 2016: 167). For example, Sidsel Vive Jensen (2018: 513), who has studied 4–7-year-olds in Danish schools, found that young children paid more attention to differences marked by their experiences and possessions than they did to gender

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<sup>5</sup> The percentage of Finnish-as-a-second-language students in Finnish international schools varies from 39% to 65% (<https://yle.fi/a/74-20018233>). This shows that a significant number of pupils in these schools are actually native Finnish-speakers. Moreover, some of the Finnish-as-a-second-language students were born in Finland and speak the language fluently.

and ethnicity, but when the latter two aspects became emphasised in the practices of schools and daycare centres, children eventually learned to use them too. In other words, daycare centres and schools as institutions can play a significant role in emphasising certain distinctions that children then end up using as identity tools. Here, it is important to note that identities are matters of 'doing' rather than merely of 'being' (Wiltgren 2014: 313), that is, identities and distinctions based on them do not simply 'exist' but are produced in everyday actions. Within an institution like a school, such 'doing' is affected by institutional practices that can amplify certain identities and even reify cultural differences (Lappalainen 2006: 108).

Childhood researchers Anna Åhlund and Rickard Johnson have even argued that, although schools aim for equality and inclusion, some of their practices may have exclusionary effects (Åhlund & Johnson 2016: 171). A key integration tool employed in many Finnish and other Nordic schools is introductory second-language programmes, wherein newly arrived pupils study the local language intensively in a separate group and then join a regular class once they have reached a sufficient level of proficiency. According to Åhlund and Johnson, the 'second language identity, however, often leads to the reproduction' of social hierarchies, whereby mainstream students are the models against which second-language students are evaluated (Åhlund & Johnson 2016: 167). Second-language students can, however, never attain the status of mainstream students because ethnic 'others' are needed so that the school can 'display its celebration of diversity' (Åhlund & Johnson 2016: 173). In other words, although integration is emphasised, fully successful integration appears to be mission impossible, and in the process, various distinctions (Bourdieu 1979) are created.

In Finnish schools today, being international or multicultural applies not only to international schools but to many 'regular' ones as well. Yet the context is somewhat different in the two kinds of schools. Firstly, the language of tuition is different (Finnish in 'regular' schools and English in the international ones) and, secondly, many children in international schools intend to stay in the country only temporarily, whereas in 'regular' ones, most immigrants stay on a permanent basis – or are at least believed to do so.

## THE CASE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

This article is based on ethnographic research focusing on children with international backgrounds who currently live in Finland and attend a municipal international school. I conducted this research among third graders (9-year-olds) in such a school for 9 months in 2019–2020.

My research methods included participant observation, interviews and participatory photography projects. I took part in the school activities of a class of 9-year-olds for 2–3 days a week over a 9-month period. I participated in everyday classroom activities, school events, excursions and after-school activities, played with the children during breaks and accompanied some of them to the nearby library in the afternoons. During the fieldwork, in the classroom, I was often in the role of teaching assistant, but outside of it, I was more closely involved with the children, playing and chatting with them. When schools were closed during the COVID-19 lockdown, I took part in online lessons. I also interviewed about 20 children and gave some pupils digital cameras, with the task of taking photos of important things in their everyday lives. Afterwards, I talked about the photos with the child who had taken them. I also

visited the homes of some of the pupils, joining them on their way to or from school. The interviews and photo projects were conducted in English or Finnish after several months of participant observation, which meant that the children and I knew each other well. (See [Korpela 2022](#) for a detailed account of this fieldwork.)

The interviews were transcribed and then organised and coded with the ATLAS.ti software. Also the field diaries were thematically coded. The coding was data-driven: codes were not pre-decided but formulated during a careful reading of the data. During further analysis, the data included under particular codes was analysed and subdivided so that its diversity could be carefully studied. Once certain themes were identified as empirically particularly interesting, they were further analysed using relevant theoretical concepts. The study was evaluated by the ethics board of my home university, and research permits were obtained from both the school principal and the municipal school administration. Information sheets were sent out to all the children, and consent forms were collected from parents whose children participated. In addition, I explained the research to the pupils several times, and they asked me questions about it on a number of occasions. The children also gave me their oral consent for their participation, typically several times during the project. Moreover, I was constantly on the alert for non-verbal signs, and I included in the research activities only those children who were enthusiastic about taking part.

The children in this study held various nationalities. Some had roots in European countries or in other affluent industrialised states such as the United States, Canada or Australia. Many of them came from India, and some were from China or other Asian countries, or from Africa. Some of them had recently arrived in Finland – during my fieldwork in a couple of cases – while others had been in the country for years. There were also many Finnish children in the school; some of them had previously lived abroad, others had not. The international backgrounds of the pupils were nevertheless a key characteristic of the school.

## CELEBRATING INTERNATIONALITY

The principal recommended our class for this research because we are so international. This class has 21 pupils, and 16 nationalities.  
(classroom teacher)

The school where I conducted my fieldwork was the only school in town that provided teaching in English. The municipality belongs to the category of relatively large Finnish towns (100,000–300,000 inhabitants), and several international companies are based there. The international character of the school was emphasised and celebrated on various occasions during the school year. The above comment was made by the classroom teacher at the end of the year, when I was saying goodbye to the children on completion of my fieldwork. This was, however, definitely not the first time I had heard her and other teachers emphasising the fact that the children represented many nationalities.

For example, one morning, the teacher asked the pupils to list all the countries they had lived in and from which their parents came. These countries were then marked with pins on a map on the wall. Such a visual presentation, illustrating the international backgrounds of the pupils, was a clear celebration of the international character of the school. At the same time, it promoted an ethos of equality; each pin

on the map was the same as the others. The pupils' international backgrounds were also made visible in the classroom when we were learning about world geography by listening to a YouTube song about the continents: the children had to stand up each time the continent where they were born or one they had visited was mentioned. Most of them got up several times.

The above-mentioned examples are in line with Tanu's remarks about international schools aiming to produce cosmopolitan global citizens who have experiences of living in various countries, and this ethos was definitely evident in the school through the pupils' international backgrounds being repeatedly made visible and celebrated. The Finnish families who chose to send their children to this particular school also seemed to emphasise its international character in contrast to the regular Finnish-speaking schools their children could have attended. Nevertheless, although the school as an institution celebrated this diversity of its pupils, nationalities or ethnicities were seldom mentioned among the children themselves. There were, however, other differences that became relevant to their everyday school lives.

## RELIGION AS A DISTINCTION CATEGORY AND AN IDENTITY TOOL

Tomorrow, a new pupil will join our class. He is Canadian. (classroom teacher)

What is his religion? (Anton<sup>6</sup>)

The dialogue above illustrates how important religious background was to the children, with a new pupil's religion being one of the first things they wanted to know about him.

In a Finnish school, children generally all attend the same lessons, and third graders have no optional subjects – everyone studies the same subjects with the same group. However, the compulsory religion lessons are an exception to this. The majority of students attend religion lessons that follow the teachings of the Evangelical Lutheran Christian Church, which is the dominant religion in the country. Children whose families do not belong to the Lutheran Church can attend the classes, but they also have the right to attend non-religious ethics lessons or lessons in their family's religion when there are at least three students whose families request this.

Every Monday afternoon, the religious differences became strikingly visible when children went to their separate lessons. Many children who had arrived from abroad had not had any such lessons in their previous schools, and the Finnish practice was new to them. This caused confusion at times when new pupils, for whom religion was not actively practised at home, did not necessarily know which group they should be in.<sup>7</sup> The school administration obviously discussed this with the new pupils' parents, but the information was not necessarily understood by the children themselves, or they forgot it because the whole concept of religion lessons was a novel one.

It was, however, not only the religion lessons that caused religious distinctions. Because my fieldwork site was a regular municipal school, various Christian festivals were celebrated. During these religious events, there was always an alternative

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<sup>6</sup> The participants' names are pseudonyms.

<sup>7</sup> In the school where I conducted fieldwork, most children attended either the Lutheran or the ethics lessons. The third-biggest group was that of Islam. In addition, there was a separate group for Catholics.



programme for non-Christians. Such a system, however, makes each student's religious background glaringly obvious, or at the very least divides them into Lutheran Christians and 'the others':

Each year, at the end of November, the local Evangelical Lutheran parish organises an Advent service for the school in a nearby church. The service takes place during the school day. I stand in the corridor where children are hassling around trying to find their coats and boots in order to get ready to go to the church. Teachers are rushing them to get ready. Suddenly, one teacher shouts to another: 'Where should the Orthodox go?' An Orthodox Christian boy had come to ask her where he should go and it turns out that nobody has thought whether the Orthodox children should go to the Lutheran church or remain in the school where there will be a secular event – 'the festival of light' – for the non-Christians. (Field diary December 2019)

Before this episode, I had not known that this pupil was an Orthodox Christian, but the church service made his religion visible to me and to the many children and teachers who were in the corridor at the time. It is also worth noting that although the church has resources for organising such events, which are already part of its annual calendar, it is the responsibility of the school to provide alternatives for those children who do not attend Lutheran Christian activities. As the alternative events tend to be shorter than the religious ones and it takes time to get to church and back, those left at school end up having a great deal of time to simply hang around waiting for the others to return. The non-Lutheran 'others' had to adjust to the fact that the Christians<sup>8</sup> were attending a religious service during the school day. The same separation in terms of Christian and secular activities happens in 'regular' Finnish schools. In fact, the system was developed in a context in which it was assumed that the great majority of children were Finnish Lutherans and only a few 'others' would need an alternative. However, with the increasing secularisation of Finnish society and the growing numbers of immigrants, the situation has changed significantly in many Finnish schools, yet the centrality of Lutheran practices has persisted.

The local Lutheran congregation also offered my fieldwork school various other activities. They provided after-school clubs (floorball, cooking, etc.), both on the school premises and in a nearby church, and they organised an overnight camp for third graders and their classroom teachers. The non-Christian children also attended the camp, but for a few activities they were placed in a separate group, and the teacher, along with the anthropologist, ran an alternative – relatively ad hoc – programme for them while the majority of the children participated in the well-prepared religious programme. However, everyone participated in a quiz in which the questions were related to Christianity and the Lutheran Church. For many non-Christian pupils, the questions were too difficult, since they had no idea about Christian celebrations, practices or teachings. In fact, even the word priest was new to some of them.

School lunches were also occasions when pupils' religions frequently became visible. Children are offered free warm lunches in Finnish schools. If there are options, it is a choice of just two meals – vegetarian or non-vegetarian – but vegetarian food was not at all popular among the children in my fieldwork school. Pupils are, however,

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<sup>8</sup> In most cases, those pupils who were not Lutherans but were nevertheless Christians also attended the events organised by the Lutheran Church.

entitled to special meals if they have an allergy or follow a religious diet. Consequently, lunches were occasions when religion repeatedly became visible because, as the Muslim children did not eat pork,<sup>9</sup> some of them were constantly worried about what the food contained. There was always an alternative meal available, but it was the children's own responsibility to seek it out and, although this was an international school, the ingredients were written in Finnish because the catering company used the same labels for all its schools.

All the children were very aware of the fact that, for religious reasons, some of them did not eat pork, and they often made remarks about the dishes that some of them could not have. Similarly, when birthday candies were given out or the children brought in snacks to share in the classroom on the few class party days, the teacher always had to make sure that there was an alternative available for those who could not eat gelatine because of the possibility that it had come from a pig. Religious diets obviously also cause distinctions in many 'regular' Finnish schools, but the issue becomes particularly visible in international schools where the numbers of non-Christian pupils are high.

Because religion was so often visible in the school, it repeatedly created distinctions between the pupils, and the children also learned to use it as an identity marker:

Since I have practised astanga yoga for years, I offered to run yoga classes during PE lessons. In one of these lessons, a few boys were missing and it turned out that they had gone to run outside because they had decided that yoga was not for them. When one of them finally arrived in the PE hall, he immediately announced to me that he would not be doing any yoga poses because 'I am not some Buddhist'. (Field diary February 2020)

It thus seemed that, since religion was such a visible distinction mechanism in the school, some children tried to use it as a way of avoiding doing things they were not interested in. Thus, since religion is taught in the school and, consequently, religious differences become emphasised, the pupils appear to learn to use religion as a distinction tool. In other words, in Finnish schools, religion becomes a marked and recognised identity (Talmy 2004: 152), and school practices not only encourage pupils to define their and their peers' religious identities but demand that they do so.

For some children (including a large number of Lutheran Christians), the religion lessons represented a practice that felt alien to them because, as their parents were secular, they did not learn about their religion at home:

M: Do you like the Islam lessons?

T: Yeah, we learn about God, our prophet and those things.

M: Do you learn about that also at home?

T: No. (Taara)

It is not, however, only the school institution that emphasises religious differences; the distinctions also become lived realities when pupils use them among their peers. Religious identities are actively formed in the everyday life of the school; one's

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9 At the time of my fieldwork, none of the children followed a kosher diet.

religious identity is a question not of passive being but of active doing in everyday practices (Wiltgren 2014: 313). Consequently, religion can become an identity marker also for children from secular families.

Moreover, some children emphasised their religion as a distinction tool to an extent unexpected by their parents. For example, a Muslim boy convinced a girl to fast with him at school one day because it was a fasting day for Muslims. It later came to light that children of their age are not expected to fast and that the children's parents had no idea what they were doing.

At times, my *international* fieldwork school actually felt like an 'inter-religious' school, since religious differences were much more visible than national differences in the everyday life of the institution. In Finnish schools, whether international or Finnish-speaking, different religious backgrounds are made much more visible than they might otherwise be, and, consequently, children learn to use religion as a distinctive identity tool in other contexts too. Moreover, the Finnish curriculum defines Lutheran Christians as the norm and, in this process, all other religions are defined as 'the other'. This is not surprising, considering that Finland has traditionally been understood as a rather monolithic society, but in an international school, it seems somewhat contradictory. Unlike in international schools in many other countries, where the local is 'the other,' in the Finnish context, the international – the non-Lutheran foreigner – becomes 'the other,' and institutional practices contribute to the emphasis on this distinction. Although this tends to be presented as a reaction to an existing identity situation, it is actually a dynamic process that also produces and reinforces religious identities.

## ENGLISH BUT FINNISH: LANGUAGE SKILLS AS DISTINCTION TOOLS

In order for children to gain a place at the school where I conducted my fieldwork, they had to pass an English language test, and those without sufficient English skills were directed to the preparatory classes in Finnish-speaking schools, where the emphasis is on learning Finnish. However, although the language of tuition in my fieldwork school was English, all pupils had to study Finnish too. For the Finnish lessons, children were divided into groups according to their skill level. Some attended mother-tongue Finnish lessons and others Finnish-as-a-second-language lessons, which in turn were divided into a number of skill levels, starting with beginners. The Finnish lessons took up a large amount of time each week; for the 9-year-olds, this was 5 hours out of a total of 22.

Many children in the school were native Finnish speakers, and many others knew the language relatively well. There were, however, also many pupils whose Finnish skills were very basic – some of them had recently arrived, whereas others had lived in the country for years but had not learned the language. Pupils who spoke both Finnish and English used both languages on a daily basis in the school, and many seemed to prefer Finnish during breaks. Consequently, those who did not speak Finnish were excluded from some conversations, although the other children were skilled enough to notice when they needed to switch to English. Nevertheless, the bilingual children had an advantage, as they were able to change language according to the situation, whereas those whose Finnish skills were weak or non-existent relied on others to translate for them or to speak in English.

In spite of the school being international and the language of tuition being English, Finnish was widely spoken and used, and Finnish skills (or the lack of them) created various distinctions in the everyday life of the institution:

It is a maths lesson. The maths books are in English, but this time we are doing mental arithmetic. We listen to the questions from the book's online platform. The online material, however, is available only in Finnish. Therefore, we listen to the questions in Finnish. Those who understand Finnish, quickly calculate the answers while those who do not understand Finnish need to wait until the teacher translates the questions. By the time they are calculating the answers, those who understood the questions in Finnish are already impatient to move on. (Field diary November 2019)

In addition to the mental arithmetic questions being available only in Finnish, the online material that came with the science book was also in Finnish. The national market for teaching materials in English is so small that publishers provide online materials only in Finnish. Since this international school follows the national curriculum, it has to use these Finnish teaching materials because materials from abroad would not cover the relevant topics. On numerous occasions, the class listened to Finnish even though some pupils understood hardly anything. Afterwards, the teacher always translated the main points into English; for those who understood Finnish, this was revision, whereas others relied solely on these ad hoc summaries.

It was common for the third graders to go on excursions outside of school; the classroom teacher took them to concerts, art and science workshops and so on. Some of these activities off the school premises were provided in Finnish, including the camp organised by the church that was mentioned earlier. It was the task of the classroom teacher and the accompanying anthropologist to translate for those children who did not understand enough Finnish. The Finnish-speaking children also often acted as translators for their friends, which placed the pupils in a hierarchical order, with some of them dependent on the language skills of their peers. Although being educated in English differentiated all the pupils from those in other schools in the town, within the school itself, Finnish skills became a distinguishing marker whereby those not able to speak the language were given the identity position of a non-Finnish speaker, that is, of a foreign 'other.'

Some teaching was explicitly bilingual; the teacher explained certain terms (e.g. the parts of a fish or the compass points) in both English and Finnish, with the aim that the pupils would learn the words in both languages (which seldom happened, except perhaps among the native Finnish speakers). In music lessons, we sang songs in both English and Finnish, sometimes even singing verses in alternate languages.

In fact, the international school was officially not simply an English-speaking school but a bilingual one, which is why it was able to use Finnish teaching materials and even the Finnish language at times. Finnish skills were not, however, a question of 'capital' that could be acquired; the children either spoke Finnish or they did not. Although everyone was studying the language, it took such a long time for beginners to become fluent that their everyday lives in the school were defined for an extended period by their limited Finnish skills:

Those who come from abroad cannot learn Finnish well in this school. In a Finnish-speaking school, they would be exposed to thousands of hours of Finnish, whereas here they mostly function in an English-speaking

environment. It would be good for them to get involved in Finnish-speaking environments during their free time but many of the pupils do not do so. (a Finnish-as-a-second-language teacher)

Finnish-as-a-second-language teachers mentioned to me on several occasions that pupils who do not speak Finnish at home, or with friends, do not learn the language because they mostly hear and speak English, and they considered this a downside of the international school. These teachers thus seemed to be implicitly regretting the fact that the pupils were not becoming integrated into Finnish society because of their lack of language skills. Those pupils who knew they would be leaving Finland in the future were understandably not necessarily very motivated to learn the language, but the teachers were particularly worried about those who stayed in the country on a long-term basis. Moreover, it was common for a family to initially believe that they would be staying for only a short while and then to change their plans and stay much longer, sometimes even permanently. It is possible to get by with just English in Finnish towns, but a lack of Finnish (or Swedish) skills narrows down people's social interactions and, above all, their options in terms of further education and jobs. For example, there is very little secondary education available in English, and most companies require their employees to have local language skills.

At the same time, being international language-wise means, above all, speaking English. In the Finnish school system, municipalities offer pupils teaching in their mother tongue if there are a certain number of children who want this. Consequently, many of the pupils in my fieldwork school had language lessons in their mother tongue once a week, after the end of the regular school day. Some parents also taught their native languages to their children in the evenings or at weekends, and some children had private (online) language lessons. Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that many children speak different languages at home, I seldom heard anything other than Finnish and English (or a mix of these) on the school premises. The international character of the school thus denoted the use, predominantly, of the English language, and knowledge of Finnish (but not of other languages) became a distinction tool among the pupils. Those who spoke Finnish were not the local 'other' but the norm.

## CONCLUSION

While international schools aim to produce global citizens, national schools seek to create national citizens and integrate immigrants into the national whole. This article has shown that when these aims are combined within a municipal international school, the result is at times contradictory and can create particular distinctions in pupils' everyday realities. In addition, I have argued that certain processes present in Finnish schools in general become intensified and particularly visible in international schools, which makes such schools appear as a magnifying glass regarding the realities of Finnish schools, where increasing numbers of pupils have roots abroad.

The Finnish national curriculum produces certain distinctions among pupils that seem somewhat contradictory. In particular, the curriculum has two consequences that amplify distinctions, not only in international schools but also in 'regular' ones. Firstly, the compulsory religion lessons and the Evangelical Lutheran activities that take place during the school year result in religions becoming recognised and marked differences and, consequently, in the children learning to use religions as distinction tools in their everyday lives in school. Secondly, the centrality of the Finnish language

creates distinctions among students since knowing the language provides an advantage in the everyday life of the school. These two processes show that unlike in many international schools on a global scale, where the 'local other' is kept at a distance (Tanu 2018), in Finland the 'local self' is integrated into the system, meaning that the norm is the Finnish-speaking Lutheran child.

When specific distinctions and identity positions are emphasised and used in institutional practices in schools, these distinctions can also become particularly significant in pupils' everyday lives with their peers. Yet, such distinctions are not necessarily intended by the school curricula, and they can even end up emphasising differences that the schools as institutions may actually want to downplay. Although differences may be recognised and marked in the ethos of equality, this may result in hierarchical distinctions.

With regard to municipal international schools, the ultimate contradiction is between integration aims and being 'international.' Danau Tanu has argued that international schools aim to produce global citizens, but that internationality and cosmopolitanism are defined in western terms; in Finland, they appear to be defined in Finnish terms. When the Finnish curriculum affects everyday practices and interactions in Finnish international schools, the result is a constant negotiation between the international and the national, which raises interesting questions: What should a truly international school be like? Is a school international if the language of tuition is English and many pupils have roots abroad? What is the purpose of 'international' schools when many 'regular' schools also host a large number of pupils who have roots abroad? Moreover, is there an alternative to differences and distinctions being defined in a hierarchical manner?

Demand for international schools is increasing in Finland. In fact, in the Helsinki area, those who pass the language test do not all secure a place because the schools are full. Before new international schools are established, it would be useful to have a thorough discussion on the aims of such schools: who is the 'imagined' pupil, and which curricula and practices suit them best? Moreover, who is the imagined student in 'regular' Finnish schools, and to what extent should the Finnish-speaking Lutheran Christian child be the norm in today's world? And finally, can an international ethos and integration aims be combined in schools, or will this always be a contradiction in terms?

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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