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(Im)possibilities of parity of participation in school settings in the lives of unaccompanied youth

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ABSTRACT

Despite the rhetoric of inclusion and equal participation, educational practices end up producing social exclusion. In this research, we are interested in practices where outcomes fail to match efforts with respect to students' opportunities to participate equally. The research was carried out as a focused ethnography with young people who arrived in Finland as unaccompanied asylum-seeking youths. The results show that separated learning environments in school settings commonly exclude these young people socially from the rest of their peers. The research sheds light on how seemingly 'innocent', well-meaning practices form a mesh of exclusion, making inclusion and parity of participation practically impossible for students seeking asylum.

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Introduction

Unaccompanied youths¹ are young persons under the age of 18 who are seeking asylum and have been separated from their primary caregivers (UNHCR 1997). They often live in institutions with people with whom they have no prior connections. Institutional living poses barriers to the creation of close and stable ties in unaccompanied youths' everyday lives (Kauhanen, Kaukko, and Lanas 2022). Schools have great potential to remedy some of these lack of ties (Kaukko, Wilkinson, and Kohli 2022; Veck and Wharton 2021). However, instead of meeting their aims of being places of inclusion and equal participation, schools may also produce systematic social exclusion (e.g. Baak 2019; Bunar and Juvonen 2022; Lems 2020; Mustonen 2021).

The context of this research is Finland, where formal education is internationally renowned for its equality and the national and local policies explicitly aim to foster social justice and equal participation (FNAE 2016). However, recent research (e.g. Juva and Holm 2017; Kurki, Brunila, and Lahelma 2019; Mustonen 2021; Pihl et al. 2018) shows that despite the efforts of policymakers and practitioners, in everyday school settings this aim is not met for marginalised students. It has been argued that

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incorporating the ideas of inclusion into educational policy and practice has been slow (e.g. Vetoniemi and Kärnä 2021) and that general attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education are negative (Saloviita 2020). The current policies leave room for segregated education (Nikula, Pihlaja, and Tapio 2021) and when this is raised as an issue, the attention is almost solely on students with special education needs. Thus, in Finland, racialised and newly arrived students² are seldom part of the inclusion discussion, and their exclusion from mainstream schooling is rarely problematised. Although the Finnish educational policy emphasises inclusion, its realisation in practice is not monitored (see the National Core Curriculum, FNAE 2016).

These kinds of issues result in situations where unaccompanied youths are often excluded from their peers via separated learning environments (Bunar and Juvonen 2022; Fandrem et al. 2021; Lems 2020). The exclusion is commonly justified by arguing that students with inadequate knowledge or language skills benefit from working in separate groups (Lems 2020; Mustonen 2021; Pastoor 2020). This justification is based on focusing on deficits instead of assets of newly arrived students (Bunar and Juvonen 2022; Veck and Wharton 2021). Often, in these separated groups, the student's multilingualism is not supported but instead, monolingual and monocultural practices are enforced (McIntyre and Neuhaus 2021; Panagiotopoulou and Rosen 2018; Welply 2019) and students are expected to perform 'normality' (Juva and Holm 2017; Veck and Wharton 2021).

The separated learning environments aim to provide newly arrived students with the necessary language and academic skills to increase their possibilities for participation (Bunar and Juvonen 2022). Previous research presents some contradictory evidence in relation to this: Some indicate that studying with others who are at a similar level of attainment is beneficial for learning (e.g. Steenbergen-Hu, Makel, and Olszewski-Kubilius 2016), whereas others suggest that studying in mainstream groups, where newly arrived students can interact with their peers, has positive effects on learning a new language (e.g. Fandrem et al. 2021; Valero, Redondo-Sama, and Elboj 2018). In addition, separation isolates students, creating barriers for possibilities for participation in the wider school community (Bitzi and Landolt 2017; Hilt 2017; Lems 2020; Pastoor 2020). This separation reinforces seemingly innocent practices that constrain students' participation, despite schools' efforts to promote it (Bitzi and Landolt 2017; Edgeworth 2015; Mustonen 2021).

Participation in schools is extensively researched field (e.g. Black 2011; Horgan et al. 2017; Raby 2014; Thornberg and Elvstrand 2012). Much of this research focuses on different participatory models (such as student councils) or individual students' capabilities to participate in these adult-regulated models. Far less attention is paid to how schools act as places for equal possibilities for social participation (Black 2011). Students' participation in everyday school settings is regulated, as adults determine for example when, how, and where students are allowed to speak (Horgan et al. 2017; Thornberg and Elvstrand 2012). Critical scholars note that for students, this kind of adult-regulated participation may be seen as the performance of a 'dutiful student' (Lanas 2019; Raby 2014). Rebecca Raby (2014) argues that students' participation can develop a pattern where young people 'freely internalise disciplinary aims and shape themselves in accordance with expected social norms' (81). Participation of this kind becomes subordination.

Nancy Fraser (2007, 2008, 2010) provides an alternative approach. She directs attention to the conditions necessary for everyone to participate on equal terms. According to

Fraser, ‘justice requires social arrangements that permit all members of society to interact with one another as peers’ (Fraser 2010, 365). Although she focuses on adults, her approach can be used when thinking about youth participation, as it involves looking at the patterns of society that produce inequities and prevent people from establishing themselves as equals (2007, 2008, 2010). Fraser argues that to overcome injustice, the patterns that limit possibilities for parity of participation must be continuously analysed and deconstructed to allow participation on a par ‘as full partners in social interaction’ (Fraser 2007, 27). This is central to the research at hand.

According to Fraser (2008, 2010), parity of participation requires that three conditions are met: the redistribution of wealth, the recognition of cultural value (status), and the representation of different voices (Fraser 2008; 2010; McIntyre 2021). Firstly, *redistribution* of wealth refers to economic structures that provide everyone with the resources needed to participate in social life on a par (Fraser 2007, 2008, 2010; see also McIntyre 2021). In educational settings, this requires that all students have equal opportunities to access equal education. Secondly, Fraser calls for *recognition* of cultural value, or status. Institutionalised patterns of cultural value, such as racialised and gendered practices, can prevent certain groups of individuals from participating in social life as peers and should therefore be deconstructed (Fraser 2007; 2008; 2010; see also Keddie 2012). Thirdly, *representation* of different voices focuses on who is eligible to make decisions and whose voices are represented (Fraser 2008, 2010; Keddie 2012). This means that society should focus on ensuring that all groups and individuals have the opportunity to participate in decision-making.

In this research, we were interested in practices that result in experiences not matching policy-level efforts with respect to asylum-seeking students’ possibilities for participation. We focussed on Finnish schools, where this contradiction is particularly notable. Our analysis was guided by Nancy Fraser’s (2007, 2008, 2010) theory of social justice. We used this theoretical lens to analyse unaccompanied asylum-seeking youths’ possibilities for equal participation in the everyday practices of educational settings. In our analysis, we treated the three dimensions of parity of participation as interlinked, while focusing on the small but significant nuances that create conditions of parity of participation (see also Fraser 2010; Keddie 2012).

The main researcher engaged in a 10-month focused ethnography with 13 youths aged 15–20. In this article, we draw on interviews and other discussions between the main researcher and the youths, as well as the former’s field journal. We asked: what kinds of patterns of (dis)parity of participation become visible in school settings through the accounts of the unaccompanied youths?

Educational pathways of unaccompanied youth in Finland

The Finnish educational system has been designed to level out disadvantages due to students’ unequal backgrounds. Its aim is to promote a positive image of each learner as part of the community and prevent inequity and exclusion (FNAE 2016). According to the Basic Education Act (Act 628/1998), schools are required to provide possibilities for participation for all students, including those seeking asylum.

Newly arrived students’ educational pathways differ from those of students who have lived in the country for longer. Long-term resident students are placed in inclusive

mainstream education and provided ‘three-tiered support’ (see e.g. Vetoniemi and Kärnä 2021), which ensures that they get the support they need. Newly arrived students are offered similar support, but not in mainstream education. They attend preparatory education, which aims to support language learning and study skills before they enrol in basic education. Preparatory education is offered in comprehensive schools and adult education units. Depending on the majority language of the municipality where an unaccompanied youth arrives, they start learning either Finnish or Swedish.

After the preparatory education stage, newly arrived students are either placed in regular classrooms in mainstream basic education schools, or they finish their basic education in adult education units. The newly arrived students and their caregivers are consulted when deciding whether the students enrol in mainstream or adult education, but the final decisions are based on the students’ age and prior schooling history. Usually students over 16 years old are directed to adult education units whilst younger ones are placed in mainstream education units. Finnish adult basic education units have students from all backgrounds, but they also have groups for immigrant students only. The aim of these latter groups is to offer flexible educational pathways so that students can proceed at their own pace. As basic education for adults has its own core curriculum, a diploma from adult education is not fully comparable to the diploma from mainstream basic education, which may affect further education choices for students.

Focused ethnography with unaccompanied youth

This article draws on a focused ethnography (Wall 2015) conducted by Kauhanen. She was in charge of participant recruitment, designing and conducting the fieldwork, and conducting the initial analysis. Lanås and Kaukko contributed to the analysis and theoretical exploration of the research materials.

Producing the research material with participants

The participants of this study were recruited through gatekeepers and personal contacts of Kauhanen. She first sought research permits from municipalities in Northern Finland. After getting the permits, she contacted schools and group homes that host unaccompanied youth. She then visited these places to get to know potential participants, discuss this research with them and if they seemed willing, invite them to participate. Eight participants were recruited through visiting schools and group homes. Two group homes wished to do the informing and inviting themselves and recruited three participants. Finally, two participants were recruited through Kauhanen’s personal contacts. Altogether, 13 unaccompanied youths participated in this research.

The participating young people (four identified as female, nine as male) arrived in Finland without their primary caregivers during 2014–2016 and applied for asylum. At the start of the study in 2018, participants were 15–19 years old and all had received at least their first permit to stay. All had participated in preparatory education. However, by the start of the study, 12 participants were studying in the basic education, with one still attending preparatory education. During the 10-month fieldwork, eight participants finished their basic education and began studies in vocational schools. The participants were representative of the demography of the time of their arrival. In

2015, asylum seeking youths in Finland came mostly from Afghanistan (1915), Iraq (635) and Somalia (253).

In 2018 the 13 youths lived in various places across Northern Finland, which meant that traditional ethnographic fieldwork in one place was not possible. Therefore, the fieldwork was carried out as focused ethnography in different locations for shorter periods of time (Wall 2015). Also, as is typical in focused ethnography (Wall 2015), the participants did not all know each other or their living conditions.

Altogether, Kauhanen made 49 visits to participants' hometowns in Northern Finland. Although the focus was on school experiences, the study was not limited to the physical boundaries of school. Kauhanen encouraged the youths to take her to places where they wanted to go, so that they could show and tell what they wished us to understand about their lives in relation to their school experience in different ways. Some participants wanted to go for a nature walk, whereas others chose to do homework at their living unit. Importantly, the places outside of school were the participants' choices. This is in line with how we, among many others (e.g. Coffey 2018; Wall 2015) see ethnography: as a relational and reflexive research approach that is shaped by the researcher and participants, as well as by the time and place.

The research material used for this article consists of participants' accounts of basic education in Finland. The material includes 15 recorded individual interviews, one pair interview, and a research journal of Kauhanen. The purpose of the interviews was to focus on the issues that had emerged during the fieldwork. These interviews were ethnographic in style (e.g. Heyl 2001), meaning that they were informal discussions within established relationships and had no fixed structure. Each interview lasted between 30 and 120 min. We considered all participants as fluent enough to express their thoughts in Finnish, as they had lived in the country for at least two years. Interviews were conducted without an interpreter. This choice was done because the interpreter, as a third person in the interview, could have interrupted the trust created between Kauhanen and the participants. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by Kauhanen and translated from Finnish to English by Kauhanen, Lanas and Kaukko.

The research ethics were continuously discussed with each participant, and required being sensitive to the moment, the place, the time and the emotions (Lanas and Rautio 2014). This meant that we had to improvise and change plans to fit participants' needs and emotions (Kaukko, Dunwoodie, and Riggs 2017), prioritising their wishes over our research needs. Consent to research is a continuous negotiation; participants took part in the research as actively as they wished, and knew they could retreat whenever they wanted. We also asked for informed consent from participants and their legal representatives. Interpreters were used whilst discussing research arrangements to clarify the research process and to make sure that all questions about conducting this research were answered. Participants also decided on the locations and how they wished to participate. All the names used in this article are pseudonyms. Two participants chose their own pseudonyms (Happy and Sundus). The rest asked Kauhanen to choose a pseudonym for them.

For ethical reasons, we do not reveal any detailed demographic information about participants. There are three reasons for this. First, as the number of unaccompanied youths living in Northern Finland is rather small, it would render them recognisable. Second, our interest is in how practices in the lives of unaccompanied youth create possibilities

for parity of participation, and individual demographics might direct the interpretation towards participants' personal experiences and away from the conditions and practices creating such experiences. Third, and most importantly, the lives of unaccompanied youths (like all refugees) are continuously under violent inspection by officials and by the general public. Revealing details would only contribute to the discourse in which their private affairs are open to public scrutiny.

Analysis

The limited possibilities for participation in these youths' lives became evident in the early stages of fieldwork, which directed the analysis. The analysis was an iterative and reflexive process of thinking with different theories of participation (Fraser 2007; 2008; 2010; Raby 2014) that inspired, and were inspired by, the fieldwork (Coffey 2018).

After the field work, the analysis consisted of three stages: Firstly, Kauhanen read the interview transcripts and the research diary multiple times and extracted all parts that directly or indirectly discussed parity of participation in school settings. Secondly, the material was organised thematically, following Nancy Fraser's three-dimensional model of parity of participation. Kauhanen analysed how different practices seemed to impact participants' (1) possibilities for equal access to education (2) recognition as individuals with skills and capabilities (3) possibilities to have a say in decisions related to their educational pathways.

After this, Kauhanen invited the participants to contribute to the analysis. The participants were asked to reflect on their individual accounts to find out if the interpretations fairly represented their experience. Eight participants contributed. One of them clarified some details, some emphasised incidents that they felt were important, but overall all eight agreed with the interpretations.

These contributions were integrated into the third stage of the analysis. Lanas and Kaukko joined Kauhanen at this stage to interpret the findings. During these readings, we found that it was difficult to organise the data according to Fraser's three conditions of parity of participation, as the conditions are so interconnected. Hence, the three dimensions eventually faded in significance, and analysis became focused on the contradiction we identified between supporting learning and supporting parity of participation. We then organised the data according to what was created due to this contradiction. To best illustrate our findings, and answer the research question, we chose quotes describing (dis)parities of participation in everyday school settings of seven different participants. However, the ethnographic material used in the background analysis includes all participants' accounts.

Results: inclusive learning, exclusive participation

The findings show that well-meaning educational practices may form a mesh of exclusion, thus making parity of participation practically impossible for asylum-seeking youth. The participants were well supported in their learning, but they still experienced disparities of participation. These experiences related to seemingly small and benign educational practices which could go unnoticed at first, but when looked at together, seemed to work in ways that limited participation and led to subtle forms of exclusion. When this

happened, parity of participation was impossible. Separated learning environments, especially, created disparities of participation. These separations not only prevented participants from connecting with peers during teaching, but also from developing tools to connect with peers in their own time.

Preventing connections with peers

The small, separated groups for newly arrived students were meant to support participants' learning. However, they simultaneously excluded participants from natural opportunities to connect with peers, and prevented them from learning unofficial, everyday language and communication styles from their Finnish peers.

The extract from Kauhanen's research journal below follows the school day of one of the participants, Happy. The school professionals had expressed concern about Happy's future and invested notable efforts to help her learn Finnish and to gain the knowledge required to finish basic education:

First, she attended a chemistry class with a teaching assistant. The class has a test coming next week, so Happy prepared for the test with the assistant teacher, not with the 'regular' chemistry teacher or with her classmates. Then she had history with the mainstream class. After history was P.E. [Physical Education]. The teaching assistant joined in the P.E. lessons to be with Happy, as 'she doesn't have as good coordination skills' as the others. So now when they had basketball, Happy was practising with the assistant teacher instead of playing basketball with her classmates. After P.E. was English. She attended a smaller group that comprised mostly of students who seemed to have behavioural problems. Most of the lesson, the teacher focused on different loud interruptions (of various students) that had nothing to do with studying English. Happy sat alone quietly. (Research journal, Kauhanen)

While this extract is revealing about the teacher's efforts to support Happy's learning and secure a calm learning environment for her, it also tells another story. It shows how the various supportive measures limited Happy's possibilities for participation and excluded her from her peers and the mainstream class. She was not allowed to participate with her peers even in learning to play basketball, as it was assumed that she lacked some specific skills (coordination), and mastering those skills was emphasised over social participation in sports.

These kinds of exclusionary practices were common in participants' accounts regardless of the types of schooling they attended. In preparatory education, some participants had been almost completely separated from other mainstream students. After beginning studies in mainstream basic education, participants' teaching often took place in hallways or other separate areas outside the classroom and was delivered by the teaching assistant. Thus, connecting with peers was almost impossible. Afzar, who was studying in mainstream basic education, explained that he had no friends at school. This made school boring for him:

It is so boring. I don't want to go there any longer. I'm glad the school is finished soon. [...] I don't have a lot of friends, so it's boring. (Afzar)

The exclusionary practices were consistent, regardless of whether participants studied in regular basic education, adult education or special education groups. Participants

themselves wished to be socially included with their peers and felt they could learn more that way:

They asked me why I wanted [to study in a mainstream school]. I said, I like to be with Finnish people, so that I would have friends and I would learn more. Because when we [people with immigrant background] are always together, we talk with our mother tongue, and we don't learn. But they didn't accept me. (Arman)

Most of the young participants spoke several languages fluently in addition to their heritage language. In their excluded study groups, they often communicated in different languages. Many participants articulated that to be able to participate in social interactions with peers in Finnish, they needed an environment where they could acquire everyday language. Most had no Finnish friends and many already lived independently, so school was the only place where they practised their Finnish skills. The language of schooling was formal and simplified to accommodate the needs of newly arrived students. This may have been helpful in learning the content, but participants noted that being constantly exposed to simplified language was not helpful in strengthening their courage to communicate in Finnish. Cilmi expressed that he felt he spoke such a different language compared to other youths that his peers did not even talk to him (see also Edgeworth 2015; Mustonen 2021).

Iida: Have you chatted with your classmates in the new school?
 Cilmi: No
 Iida: Why not?
 Cilmi: Because I don't know Finnish well enough. They don't talk to me.
 Iida: I think you speak Finnish very well.
 Cilmi: It's not enough, they speak with a dialect, not formal Finnish.

The communication cultures in many of the participants' schools were so normalised that the ability to speak non-European languages was not valued in learning or in social interaction. It was participants' assumed lack of Finnish skills that resulted in their being excluded from mainstream students. Viewing language as a means for learning, not as a means for building connections, enhances segregation and the differentiated communication cultures that already exist within schools.

Concrete physical exclusion

In some cases, the exclusion was concrete. Arman talked about his experiences in an adult education unit that was located partly inside and partly outside of the main school, hosting students from first grade to senior secondary school. The doors of the main school were locked during the school day. In senior secondary school the schedule was flexible, which meant that students with a key could come and go as they wished. However, Arman and his fellow students had no key:

When we go to have lunch, all the doors are closed. We must wait and knock for someone to come and open the door. It felt really bad to sit and stand and wait every day, if someone could open the door. Sometimes I saw someone going by and they saw me at the door and then they just walked past me. [...] Then I said to the principal, that it would be good, if we also had keys, so we could get in. They didn't give us the keys. Last year,

before school finished, we were given one key for all of us. I said, we are many, like twenty students, and you give us only one key. How is that? All the secondary school students have their individual keys. I asked, are they different to us? (Arman)

In a very concrete way, Arman and other immigrant students had to plead for permission to enter, and this permission could be given by other students who were already inside or who had the key. Later, Arman's group received a key, but they only got one key for the whole group of 20 students. For Arman, the one, shared key indicated that immigrant students were not as important as other students of their age studying in the mainstream senior secondary school. They were treated as a group, not as individuals. Being part of the immigrant group took away their autonomy and individual rights and positioned them as persons who were categorically excluded.

All participants' accounts displayed similar kinds of exclusion, and for many these experiences produced a feeling of being an outsider and less worthy. Fahim described his feelings: *I don't know, only I feel that here I am like a person, who Finnish people don't want to live here.* Similarly, Bina talked about how he felt he was positioned due to his immigrant status: *I am not a human as I am an immigrant.* These exclusions came together in a way such that even though participants wished to be better included in the school community, many kept to themselves. For example, during recess or lunch, most of the participants spent time alone or with other newly arrived immigrant students. This was vividly seen in Sundus's daily life at school: *In class or during the breaks Sundus had almost no interaction with other students (Research, journal, Kauhanen).* Further, Happy preferred staying out of sight of her classmates until the lesson started:

Before the class started, she did not engage with the other students at all. First, she opened the door to the corridor in front of the class, where all the rest of the students were waiting for the class to start. When she noticed the teacher had not yet opened the door to the classroom, she immediately returned back to the staircase. (Research journal, Kauhanen)

This example highlights the fact that although these practices seem harmless and isolated, they never happen in a vacuum. Happy was included in learning but excluded from social participation. The exclusion was so consistent that she had internalised it to the extent, that for her, the appropriate way to act in this situation was to retreat from her peer group. No one directly asked her to retreat, but Happy chose to stay outside the glass door. However, this choice was based on her understanding of the requirements to participate in the school community. Many other participants, like Sundus, also preferred keeping to themselves during and between lessons in mainstream schools. The cumulative effect of what happens around the students, including, but not limited to, the practices of other students and teachers, and the material, cultural and political arrangements of the school, prefigure what the students consider to be within their realm of possibilities. The normalised, hidden conditions make the exclusion of students seem to be their own choice.

Discussion

In this study, we looked at patterns that create (dis)parity of participation, as conceptualised by Nancy Fraser (2008; 2010). Fraser argues that the realisation of parity of

participation should be evaluated based on disparities at three levels: (re)distribution, recognition and representation (2008; 2010). The findings presented in this article are in line with Fraser's claim (2007; 2008; 2010) that while these dimensions can be analytically distinct, in real life they are interconnected and overlapping.

This research showed that mechanisms of exclusion produced disparities of participation in various ways: Firstly, the participants did not have the equal access to basic education compared to youth born in Finland. Immigrant children and youth have access to education immediately after their arrival in Finland, but participation is conditional on language (e.g. Bunar and Juvonen 2022; McIntyre and Neuhaus 2021; Vogel and Stock 2018). This compromises the *redistributive* part of parity of participation (Fraser 2007; 2008; 2010).

Secondly, the participants had competencies that were not *recognised* in the Finnish system. On the contrary, it was their *lack* of Finnish or subject-specific knowledge that was emphasised and which placed them in separated learning groups. This overlooked, for example, the multiple languages the participants spoke and positioned their competencies as less valuable (Fraser 2008; 2010). Similar findings have been made elsewhere: newly arrived immigrants' future trajectories are commonly expected to be lower compared to other youth (Baak 2019) and their linguistic competencies are not always valued (McIntyre and Neuhaus 2021).

Thirdly, the voices of the participants were not adequately heard, nor were their views properly *represented* (Fraser 2010). The fact that the participants were commonly studying separately from the mainstream students, meant that they did not have possibilities for a fair representation in mainstream education. McIntyre and Neuhaus (2021) note that newly arrived students should be adequately represented in activities that prioritise student voice. To avoid misrepresentation, schools should create a culture of listening, where marginalised students also become contributors in the school (Veck and Wharton 2021).

This research complements earlier studies pointing to a contradiction in existing educational practices: despite the rhetoric of inclusive and participatory educational policies, unaccompanied youth, as well as other racialised immigrant students, are systematically excluded from their peers in schools (see also Bitzi and Landolt 2017; Bunar and Juvonen 2022; Hilt 2017; Lems 2020; Pastoor 2020). The participants' accounts show how exclusion in schools was produced with practices that seemed well-meaning (e.g. locking doors to keep students safe), or at least were not intended to cause harm to anybody. The young people in this research studied in separated learning environments and this made the creation of peer relations with the mainstream students almost impossible (see also Bunar and Juvonen 2022; Fandrem et al. 2021; Hilt 2017; Valero, Redondo-Sama, and Elboj 2018) and created physical and social exclusion.

This research indicates that at the beginning of their school journeys, newly arrived students in Finland are segregated through various educational practices. This is also typical in other European countries (Bunar and Juvonen 2022; Fandrem et al. 2021; Panagiotopoulou and Rosen 2018). The experiences of participants show that a fixation on efficient learning results and measurable achievements may constrain possibilities for parity of participation in schools and thus in society (see also Biesta 2016; Heikkinen et al. 2021; McIntyre and Neuhaus 2021). Focusing strongly on the learning 'needs' of an individual student overlooks the social needs the individual might have (McIntyre

and Neuhaus 2021) and decontextualises education from the societal contexts and challenges in which it takes part (Biesta 2016; Heikkinen et al. 2021; Welply 2019).

Allowing assumed learning needs to overrule possibilities for social participation can become a vicious circle: The young people are excluded from mainstream study groups because their language skills are not considered adequate, but when excluded from the natural communication cultures, their language skills cannot develop, as communication with other youth is absent. Further, the multilingualism of students with immigrant backgrounds, especially those who are racialised, is rarely seen as an asset or used in learning, while the rest of the students are encouraged to learn more languages (Mustonen 2021; Panagiotopoulou and Rosen 2018). Schools should recognise and value each student's distinctiveness and contributions instead of focusing on what they lack (McIntyre and Neuhaus 2021; Veck and Wharton 2021).

Based on this research, exclusion in separated learning environments may be stigmatising and create a feeling of not being an equal participant in society (see also Veck and Wharton 2021). This was brutally demonstrated to Arman and his friends, as they were not given a key to get into the main school, thus revealing that they were not regarded as equals with other secondary school students. As in earlier research, separated learning environments had negative consequences on students' self-worth (Fandrem et al. 2021; Hargreaves, Buchanan, and Quick 2021; Valero, Redondo-Sama, and Elboj 2018).

To conclude, we would like to acknowledge the efforts of school personnel to support these young people. We recognise that they often care for their students (see also Kauhaneen, Kaukko, and Lanas 2022). However, we argue that good will and caring is not enough (see also Bunar and Juvonen 2022). The staff should aim to create a school culture that enables an 'atmosphere of trust' (Veck and Wharton 2021, 215), belonging and social participation through a dialogical process between the individual and the school (McIntyre and Neuhaus 2021).

We have only shown some small examples of disparity of participation in Finnish schools. We need more knowledge about how some of ordinary, well-meaning educational practices can become segregating and how these practices are experienced by marginalised students (see also Welply 2019). Addressing disparities of participation requires that patterns creating injustice are made visible and changes are made at an organisational level (Fraser 2010; McIntyre and Neuhaus 2021; Mustonen 2021). This can only be done by investing time to listen to those who are excluded and by scrutinising exclusionary practices from the perspective of these young people (Welply 2019). Unaccompanied youth need to be included in mainstream structures physically, pedagogically and socially (Bunar and Juvonen 2022).

Notes

1. Creating categories such as *unaccompanied youth* is always problematic (see also Herz and Lalander 2017). This kind of labelling can stigmatise as well as simplify the differences among a group of people whose one shared feature is that they arrived in Finland under the age of 18 without their primary caregivers and sought asylum. However, numerous institutional and social practices affect the everyday lives of those arriving in Finland as unaccompanied youths. Therefore, it is important to study such practices to find out if they provide opportunities for equal participation.

2. By newly arrived students, we refer to those young people who have recently immigrated to Finland and are studying in basic education. This includes unaccompanied youth.

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