This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *British Journal of Sociology of Education* on 23 May 2024, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2024.2357127

Pupils' right to inclusion in an urban Finnish lower secondary school: a Bernsteinian analysis of pupils' social relations

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Abstract

Finnish schools are famous for their egalitarian principles, but they face challenges related to pupils' equal opportunities and, more broadly, democratic schooling. In this article, we examine the lived consequences of a growing challenge, school segregation, using Basil Bernstein's concepts of inclusion and classification. Our analysis is based on ethnographic data produced in a lower secondary school located in a relatively disadvantaged residential area in the metropolitan area of Helsinki, Finland. First, we explore how classification of pupils from different social class and ethnic backgrounds is present in the school. Second, we analyse how the strength of this classification affects pupils' right to inclusion. We conclude that weak boundaries between pupils, and thus weak classification, construct an inclusive school community. However, the different categories—social class, ethnicity or other—intersect, and the strength of their classification varies, which in turn affects pupils' peer relations and feelings of belonging.

Keywords

Basil Bernstein, pedagogic rights, inclusion, classification, democratic schooling, Finland

Introduction

Basil Bernstein (2000) theorised what constitutes a democratic school where all pupils' educational rights are met. Finland's comprehensive schooling system and its foundation in Nordic welfare egalitarianism, aiming to provide all children with equal educational opportunities, has attracted global interest over the past two decades (Morgan 2014; Reay 2012). In the UK, Diane Reay (2011) has called for more socially just education and according to her, Finland represents an example of an educational system where schooling for democracy—a system that emphasises equality and commonalities between pupils—is achievable. In the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, equality and democracy are indeed among the stated values: 'Basic education promotes well-being, democracy and active agency in civil society. The development of basic education is guided by the goals and extensive principles of equality and equity' (Finnish National Board of Education 2016, 16). These values are embraced in Finnish schools, and the national self-identity is strongly attached to them; however, research has shown that persistent and emerging social class-based, ethnic and racialised inequalities affect pupils' learning, well-being and sense of belonging in Finnish schools. This deepening inequality also poses a challenge to democratic education.

Recent studies have demonstrated that pupils with ethnic minority backgrounds face discrimination and racism in Finnish schools (Juva 2019; Zacheus et al. 2019). Moreover, the educational attainment of young people with migrant background, particularly those who are first-generation migrants or who come from socioeconomically disadvantaged families, is often lower than their Finnish peers (Ansala, Hämäläinen, and Sarvimäki 2020). While Finland is sometimes even assumed as a 'classless' society in popular discourses (Erola 2010), studies demonstrate that inequalities based on social class are reflected in both education and broader well-being. For example, there is a widening gap in academic

ambitions between socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged pupils (OECD 2019), and the level of parental education is related to a family's level of income, experiences of economic hardship, and various indicators of well-being or ill-being in young people (Kestilä et al. 2019).

Residential segregation and school segregation at the primary and lower secondary levels are some of the phenomena through which social class-based and racialised inequalities manifest, and they both have been identified as deepening in Finnish urban areas (Bernelius and Vaattovaara 2016). In Finland, school segregation has been shown to lead to the differentiation of learning outcomes between schools (Bernelius 2013), and it can also reinforce the boundaries between pupils from different social class and ethnic backgrounds (Oittinen, Peltola, and Bernelius 2022; Peltola 2021). As stated by Reay (2011), divisions between people are an obstacle for democratic schooling, and to strive for democracy, there is a need to recognise the social and cultural inequalities among pupils but also to focus on what they share (Reay 2011).

This article contributes to the discussion on democracy and equality in education by offering a Bernsteinian analysis of whether and how pupils' right to inclusion—that is, the right to belong to the school community (Bernstein 2000)—is realised in today's urban Finland. Utilising ethnographic data produced in a lower secondary school located in a relatively 'disadvantaged' but still heterogeneous residential area in the metropolitan area of Helsinki, we focus on how pupils' social relations, together with school practices, construct an inclusive school community. We also examine how feelings of being included or excluded are related to democratic schooling.

Examining inclusion through classification

The theoretical starting point of this article is Bernstein's (2000) concept of inclusion. It

presupposes that all pupils have the right to be socially, intellectually, culturally and personally included in the school community. The right to be included does not mean to be absorbed; it is also about an individual's right to be separate and autonomous. This right is the condition for communitas (Bernstein 2000, xx), the idea of a community whose members recognise and foster the presupposition of equality (Heimans, Singh, and Kwok 2022). Moreover, inclusion is one of the three pedagogic rights that serve as a basis for democratic education (Bernstein 2000). The other two rights are enhancement and participation. Enhancement entails that everyone should have access to critical understanding and new possibilities. Participation encompasses pupils' right to participate in procedures that involve construction, maintenance and transformation of order, in the school context and beyond. In a democratic school, all pupils should have access to these pedagogic rights, regardless of their backgrounds (Bernstein 2000, xx–xxi).

The right to inclusion can be highly context-dependent, as the sense of belonging is often attached to a specific place or context (Nylund et al. 2020). Thus, we presume that the right to inclusion is affected by local and school-specific practices, and both pupils and school staff contribute to constructing an inclusive atmosphere in a school. However, Bernstein's own description of pedagogic rights, including that of inclusion, is scant, and the concept requires further elaboration (Frandji and Vitale 2016). We contribute to this theoretical discussion by examining the right to inclusion using Bernstein's (1975, 1981, 2000) notions of classification (see also Walton 2023). We argue that classification provides a useful tool to analyse pupils' diversified social relations and the ways in which they are related to the right to inclusion. This approach advances a theoretical understanding of the Bernsteinian right to inclusion, and empirically helps to identify the barriers to inclusion in a school context.

According to Bernstein (1975, 1981, 2000), classification refers to relations and boundaries between categories, be they agencies, agents, discourses or practices. If

classification is strong, there is strong insulation or a boundary between the categories, which means that each category has its own unique identity and voice; it creates a strong sense of membership within a category. If classification is weak, the categories, and thus the identities and voices, are less specialised and closer to each other (Bernstein 1975, 90; 2000, 7). Bernstein (2000, 206) noted that while there is always a boundary between categories, there may be variation in whose interest is promoted or privileged or who is included or excluded.

In a school, transmitters (teachers) and acquirers (pupils) are social categories whose relationships can be analysed using the concept of classification (Bernstein 1981). However, classification may also apply to relations within a category, for example to relations between pupils (Bernstein 2000, 99), which in turn constitutes subcategories such as age, social class and ethnicity (Bernstein 1981; Morais and Neves 2010). In this article, the (sub)categorisations we are interested in are pupils' different social class and ethnic backgrounds and we examine the types of boundaries these categorisations produce in pupils' social relationships (see Moore 2013, 128–129; Morais and Neves 2018). In terms of the right to inclusion, it is important to consider how these boundaries are related to pupils' opportunities of being included.

Classification has a twin concept known as framing, which refers to the principles regulating communicative practices between transmitters and acquirers, that is, teachers and pupils (Bernstein 1981). Both concepts are applied most often in the context of educational settings and especially when examining pedagogic interaction in classrooms. Classification is based on the power relations between categories, while framing is about who controls and what in the pedagogic relationships (Bernstein 2000, 7, 12). In principle, these two concepts are dialectically linked and cannot be separated since the boundaries between different categories (classification) are defined, maintained and changed through interaction (framing) (Bernstein 2000, 206; Hoadley 2006). Pupils' social relations are not detached from the

school and its pedagogic practices, and framing as a controlling practice between pupils and school staff is present in the school, therefore affecting pupils' opportunities to socialise across different school class groups and with pupils from diverse backgrounds. In this article, however, we focus on classificatory principles in pupils' social relations, and we only refer to framing when necessary (see also Walton 2023). Our research task is to examine classifications of pupils based on the selectiveness of their school class groups as well as their ethnic and social class backgrounds. Furthermore, we ask how the strength of classification in the given categories affects pupils' right to inclusion in an urban lower secondary school.

The Finnish context: school segregation in the country of 'equal opportunities'

Finland's education system includes several elements designed to guarantee equal access to high-quality basic education and prevent mechanisms that (re)produce inequality. The nine-year comprehensive education (primary school, grades 1–6, and lower secondary school, grades 7–9) is compulsory and free of charge for all children, typically aged 7–16 years, and all comprehensive schools follow the Finnish National Core Curriculum, with a few rare exceptions. The comprehensive education is officially non-selective, and pupils are enrolled in a local school based on their residential address. Permanent grouping by attainment is not permitted.

Despite such mechanisms, a degree of selectiveness exists in Finland's basic education system. Pupils can apply to receive 'teaching with a special emphasis', which typically involves separate selective school class groups within a school that provide additional instruction in areas such as sports, science or music (Seppänen, Pasu, and Kosunen 2023). Studies show that upper and middle-class white Finnish families use this option more often than working-class families or minority ethnic families (Berisha and Seppänen 2017; Koivuhovi, Vainikainen, and Kalalahti 2022; Kosunen et al. 2020). It therefore functions as a

middle-class parental strategy to avoid schools or school class groups that have a ‘poor reputation’ (Kosunen 2016) and contributes to segregation between schools and between school class groups within schools (Berisha and Seppänen 2017; Peltola 2021). Moreover, since pupils applying to selective groups are often high achieving, this form of school selection can also contribute to hidden ability grouping within the Finnish comprehensive school system (Berisha & Seppänen 2017; Koivuhovi, Vainikainen, and Kalalahti 2022).

The Finnish study context is characterised by residential segregation, referring to socioeconomic and ethnic segregation of neighbourhoods (Rosengren, Rasinkangas, and Ruonavaara 2023). In Finland, the level of residential segregation is relatively low in international comparison, and to date, research has mainly focused on the largest cities in Finland and rather little is known about residential segregation in small towns and rural areas (Rosengren, Rasinkangas, and Ruonavaara 2023). From a national perspective on school segregation, research indicates that many of the most disadvantaged as well as the highest performing schools in Finland are concentrated in urban areas (Bernelius and Kosunen 2023). It is also noteworthy that one-half of all people with migrant background in Finland live in Helsinki and surrounding municipalities (Official Statistics of Finland 2021)[1]. As in other national contexts, socioeconomic and ethnic segregation (partly) overlap in Finland, as ethnic and racial minorities are more often in socioeconomically vulnerable positions than white Finns (Bernelius and Vilkama 2019).

Ethnographic data production in a lower secondary school

The study is based on one year of ethnographic fieldwork conducted during the academic year

[1] In 2020, the total population of Finland was approximately 5,500,000, of which around 444,000 (8 %) were of foreign background (Official Statistics of Finland 2021).

2019–2020 in one lower secondary school in the metropolitan area of Helsinki. The lower secondary school studied in this article, pseudonymised as 'Goldfinch', is one of the three schools that participated in the research project *Local Educational Ethos: a study on well-performing comprehensive schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods* that aimed to observe and document the daily life of schools that seemed to be addressing the challenges of segregation effectively, at least to some extent. The schools were in socioeconomically disadvantaged residential areas compared to the citywide average; however, they achieved learning results that were better than the statistical predictions based on the socioeconomic factors of the schools' catchment areas (Bernelius 2013).[2] Goldfinch has a long history of emphasised teaching in selective school class groups, and on average, one selective group is formed each year at the beginning of the seventh grade, while there are several parallel non-selective groups within the school.

Ethnography with participant observation and interviewing provided us understanding on the everyday activities and 'what happens' in Goldfinch as well as the social encounters and relations between the different actors (Gordon et al. 2005). The data includes extensive fieldnotes from participant observation (47 days; the time spent on observation varied from 1 to 6 hours; with typical days ranging from 4 to 6 hours) of two school class groups, a selective and a non-selective group, and interviews with 24 pupils and 14 members of the school staff. Under the Finnish legislation and according to the guidelines of Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK (2019), ethical review was not required. The requisite research permits were received from the Education Division of the city and from the school principal.

[2] The data regarding learning outcomes from comprehensive schools is not publicly available in Finland, but it can be accessed for research purposes on a municipal basis. Discussions with local educational authorities were also utilised in selecting the schools for the research project.

All participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntariness of the participation and the processing of their personal data. Parental consent was obtained from all the guardians of the pupils who participated in the study.

The pupils were in the seventh grade and aged 13–14 at the time of the fieldwork. There were 20 pupils in both school class groups. Approximately one-quarter of the pupils in the selective group and just over half in the non-selective group had an ethnic minority background—which corresponds with the earlier finding that selective 'emphasised teaching' is a more common choice for white Finnish families than for ethnic minorities. Fourteen of the 24 pupils who were interviewed were from the selective group and nine were from the non-selective group; in addition, one ninth-grade pupil from a non-selective group was interviewed because of their active participation in the school's activities. Seventeen girls and seven boys were interviewed. Six of the interviewed pupils had an ethnic minority background (their families originating from Southern Europe and the Middle East); three pupils had a mixed parentage (one parent was Finnish and the other was from a European country) and 15 pupils were white Finns. The pupils provided information on their parents' occupations, and based on this data, their social class backgrounds were heterogeneous: some pupils had parents in clearly middle-class or working-class roles, while other parents were in more precarious positions. The pupils' social class positions could not be clearly defined in all cases but based on the interviews, observations and discussions with pupils and school staff during the fieldwork, more pupils in the selective group came from middle-class families than in the non-selective group.

Table 1. The pupils and members of the school staff who participated in the interviews.

The pupils were interviewed individually, in pairs or in groups of three based on their preference. In general, pupils in the selective group were more willing to participate in the

study than pupils in the non-selective group, and it was also easier to obtain the required informed consents from their guardians. Although this difference could be related to various issues, one factor is the potentially lower levels of trust in the school institution among families with lower social class positions (see also Peltola 2021). Half of the pupils in the non-selective group did not participate in the interviews because of a lack of parental consent; therefore, the information on their family backgrounds is based on the researchers' observations and assumptions.

A feature of ethnography is that the preliminary analysis often begins during the data collection phase: the data production, analysis and interpretation overlap and thus the research process may be shaped by the analytical interpretations developed during the fieldwork (Lahelma et al. 2014). In this study, the theoretical framework with Bernstein's notions of pedagogic rights directed the first author's gaze as the fieldwork proceeded. A significant amount of time was also allocated to open observation, when everything that happened in the school was of potential interest. Once the fieldwork ended, we coded the data with Atlas.ti software and analysed it using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019). We examined the data in dialogue with the research literature, asking what themes concerned pedagogic rights, especially inclusion and classification, and how they were related to each other.

In ethnographic research, a researcher's first-hand experiences from the field serve as a basis of ethnographic knowledge. The data excerpts in the following empirical sections are selected to illustrate recurring themes in the data and communicate the central findings (Kwame Harrison 2018). The themes we analyse address the classification of different types of school class groups (selective and non-selective) as well as the classification based on pupils' ethnic and social class backgrounds. The divide between the selective and non-selective groups as a social difference relates to both social class and ethnicity. Although we focus on the pupils' experiences, the school's practices alongside the framing of pedagogic

relations define the space in which pupils act and socialise; therefore, we examine the pupils' views against the perspectives of the teachers and other members of the school staff. These themes direct the analysis of how classification can promote or impede the right to inclusion in the context of an urban lower secondary school.

Boundaries between the school class groups

The teachers described the selective group as more school-oriented and motivated than the non-selective group, and this was reflected in how the teachers spoke to and about the groups. While the pupils in both groups considered themselves 'noisy' and 'wild', the teachers regularly praised the selective group for their academic skills and perceived their noisy behaviour as 'extroverted'. In contrast, similar behaviour of the pupils in the non-selective group often received more negative attention in the classroom, which implies that there were differences in the strength of framing, including, for example, how strongly pupils' behaviour was controlled (Luoma 2021). Given the differences in compositions of the school class groups—there were more pupils with white Finnish and middle-class backgrounds in the selective group while the non-selective group was highly heterogeneous in terms of pupils' ethnic and social class backgrounds—these differences may also be read as a way of working of the implicit middle-class and white norms of the education system (Juva 2019). Consequently, from this perspective, the classification of the school class groups can be interpreted as strong.

However, unlike the teachers, the pupils we interviewed did not make distinctions regarding the academic performance of the different school class groups. Hence, the classification of the groups appeared weak in the pupils' discussions concerning school

achievement. Amin[3], a pupil from the non-selective group, stated that pupils in selective groups might even have less work in academic subjects because of the time spent in emphasised teaching. He described how he socialises with pupils from different groups:

> Interviewer: There are selective groups in this school, so have you experienced any differences between selective and non-selective groups?
> Amin: I may have sometimes thought that maybe they have it easier here because they have more teaching in the emphasised subject. So perhaps it means they have less teaching in other subjects. (…)
> Interviewer: Do you know pupils from these selective groups?
> Amin: Yes.
> Interviewer: Is it easy to get to know people, either between groups or within them?
> Amin: It's fairly easy if you have the courage to go and talk to people. I could get acquainted with nearly anybody here. (…) Maybe during breaks, when you're playing ping-pong and someone lines up near you. Then I might talk to that person. And if a new pupil comes here, I would try to speak to them too so that they don't feel lonely. (Amin, non-selective group, ethnic minority background)

Amin did not perceive strong boundaries between school class groups. Amin mentioned playing table tennis, and according to the other interviewees and observations, too, this was a popular form of entertainment during school breaks. Pupils from all the school class groups and grades gathered around the table, and it served as a meeting point and an inclusive element for pupils with various backgrounds. This specific activity can be regarded as a site for socialising across boundaries and which therefore has the potential to reduce the strength of classification (McFadden 1996).

In general, the classification of different types of school class groups was weak from the pupils' perspective; the field notes support this finding by indicating that pupils frequently socialised across school class groups, particularly during breaks and lunch hours. Erin and

[3] All names are pseudonymised to protect the anonymity of the study participants.

Anni, pupils from the selective group, described their relationships with other pupils and the ways in which they make new friends at school:

> Interviewer: Do you know pupils from other school class groups?
> Anni: Yes.
> Interviewer: Do you spend time together?
> Erin: Yes.
> Anni: Yes. We spend every break with pupils from other groups.
> Interviewer: Is it like, do you know them already from primary school or how have you met them?
> Erin: No.
> Anni: No, we just met here.
> Erin: We just went to talk to them, and we became friends. (…) There was one boy in our Swedish class (…) and he became our friend and he had a friend who also became our friend. And we met other people through them. (…) You just go and talk to people and they'll talk to you back. (Anni, selective group, Finnish background and Erin, selective group, mixed parentage)

Marja Peltola's (2021) study on pupils' social relations in selective and non-selective groups in a Finnish urban lower secondary school showed that hierarchies between school class groups can be powerful and they are strongly connected to pupils' social class and ethnic backgrounds. In Goldfinch, however, the classification between the selective and non-selective groups was much weaker. Erin and Anni, like Amin, argued that socialising with pupils across school class groups was straightforward in Goldfinch: one could easily approach people and become friends with them. Although this strategy may be more easily available for sociable rather than timid personalities, Erin, Anni and Amin were not the only pupils who expressed this opinion, and most of the interviewed pupils had friends or acquaintances in other groups. Meeting new people through old friends was a common way to expand social networks outside of one's own school class group, and some inter-group friendships in Goldfinch had carried over from primary school. However, these issues are inevitably specific to the school context and make us rethink Bernstein's (2000, 7) words: 'What preserves the

insulation? What preserves the space between?' Bernstein's (2000, 7) answer is *power* but rather than answering these questions directly, we consider what breaks the insulation and what diminishes the space between.

Our data does not provide a straightforward answer as to why the boundaries between pupils from different school class groups in Goldfinch were lower than the findings of previous studies such as Peltola's (2021) show. Although social class and ethnicity shaped the composition of non-selective and selective groups in similar ways in both schools, differences in school culture and leadership may account for some of the variations observed. The existence of spaces and activities open to all pupils regardless of school class groups—such as the table tennis area—was one prerequisite, but the existence of such areas alone does not explain why inclusive atmosphere in these areas develops. Although the boundary between selective and non-selective groups appeared to be upheld by teachers' interview discourses in Goldfinch, the school staff may also have a role in lowering the boundary, as all the interviewed pupils described the teachers and other adults as easy to approach. Based on our observations, the teachers and other adults often socialised with pupils during breaks and even joined in on games such as table tennis. This may help keeping the common areas inclusive to pupils from all school class groups.

In turn, the school staff also emphasised the importance of openness and building trust with pupils, as Aaron, a member of the school welfare group, described in the interview: 'In Goldfinch, any pupil can walk into the principal's office. Actually, no matter whose office it is, pupils can walk in and be sure that we have time for them.' Aaron's quote highlights the role of the principal and school welfare group in fostering an inclusive atmosphere in school. Pupils often have more encounters with teachers than the other school staff, and positive teacher-pupil relationships may strengthen pupils' sense of belonging in peer relationships (Ulmanen et al. 2016); however, the leadership practices of a school cannot be overlooked

when discussing inclusive policies and the recognition of all pupils within a school that has a diverse pupil body (Devine 2013; Huilla 2022).

From weak to moderately strong classification of ethnic groups

In urban areas of Finland, relatively disadvantaged residential areas are often ethnically heterogeneous, which is reflected in the diversity of pupils' ethnic backgrounds in the schools located in these areas. However, ethnic diversity was not equally divided within Goldfinch. Most pupils in the selective group spoke Finnish as their first language, whereas the range of home languages and ethnicities in the non-selective group was wider. Both the pupils and school staff emphasised the positive effects of Goldfinch's ethnic diversity, as teacher Elsa described in the interview:

> I really like that we have different types of pupils (...) the pupil body has been like this for a long time. We have immigrants, we've had pupils with special needs, somehow it feels like the fabric is so diverse, it's like our thing in Goldfinch, that it's the richness. It feels like people are extremely tolerant. What I've noticed during these years I've been working here, that there has never been anything like visible inequality; the school has always been, in my opinion, a lovely melting pot. (Elsa, teacher)

In Elsa's talk, the classification of pupils based on their ethnicity was weak, and she praised Goldfinch's atmosphere that promoted equality between pupils with diverse backgrounds. Most members of the school staff shared Elsa's perspective, but conflicting views were also provided in the interviews. Some pupil and adult interviewees mentioned that they had observed racism in the school, which was related to differences in the assessment of pupils' achievements. According to them, at times it was easier for Finnish pupils to receive higher grades on exams than for those from ethnic minority backgrounds (Luoma 2021). Based on the interviews, the school also lacked a means of discussing these observations openly. This racism was manifested in the relations between pupils and adults, and although we focus on

the relations between pupils, it is important to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of Goldfinch's seemingly positive multi-ethnicity; differences in how pupils were assessed indicate that the social dynamics were not as trouble-free as was widely represented in the interviews (see also Hollingworth and Mansaray 2012; Juva and Holm 2016; Wiltgren 2023).

Further, the two school class groups that participated in the study had somewhat distinct features in terms of the classification of ethnic groups and, consequently, there were differences in how the pupils with different ethnic backgrounds socialised with each other. In the non-selective group, the classification based on ethnicity can be interpreted as weak, as the observations and the interviews with the pupils indicated that friendships were formed across ethnic (and social class) borders, as demonstrated in the following field note extract:

> On the way to the excursion, pupils mainly walk in specific friend groups. Iina, Wila, Ronja and a girl [Iina mixed parentage, Wila ethnic minority background, Ronja and the fourth girl Finnish background] form a group. Mitra, Amina and Hilla [Mitra and Amina ethnic minority background, Hilla Finnish background] are in a group with three other girls who did not provide research consent and whose ethnic background is not Finnish. Elmer, Sasu and Joonatan [Elmer and Sasu Finnish background, Joonatan mixed parentage] are a tight group of three boys. Other groups of boys are not so clearly defined or they change during the excursion. (Field notes, non-selective group, December 2019)

Many interviewees from the non-selective group considered the team spirit in their school class group to be positive and inclusive; for example, Amina (non-selective group, ethnic minority background) stated, '(…) we all [in our school class group] get along very well, and we're all friends with each other. We don't leave anybody out.' Peltola (2021) outlined similar findings in her study: the non-selective group was ethnically more heterogeneous than the selective group, and especially the pupils in the non-selective group emphasised the positive social relations within the group. Hence, increased ethnic diversity within a group may be a factor that helps to diminish the space between ethnic groups and shift the boundaries closer to each other. It is however worth acknowledging that this issue can rarely

be simplified: social and ethnic mixing can reinforce cultural learning and bring pupils together in school, but at the same time, pupils' friendships are shaped by their social class backgrounds and different lifestyles (Hollingworth and Mansaray 2012).

In the selective group, most pupils were white Finns and only a few pupils had an ethnic minority background. Most pupils in the selective group regarded the team spirit in their group as positive as well, but there were tensions related to pupils' ethnic backgrounds. The friendship groups in the selective group were more homogeneous in terms of ethnicity than the friendship groups in the non-selective group. A strong classification based on ethnicity was most visible in the boundaries between Finnish pupils and a group of pupils who were from the same ethnic minority. Ariana, a long-term pupil of Goldfinch, compared her current selective group with the one in primary school:

> Ariana: Some [pupils] have left, and we've got new pupils [in our group] (…) we had lots of pupils with different nationalities, non-Finnish, in our group in primary school, and it was real fun. (…) I don't know, we had our own inside jokes and things like that, but now we've got those…
> Mitra: … Finnish [pupils] [laughs].
> Ariana: … new pupils, and somehow, they're a bit different or we're not used to them. But nowadays our group is, maybe a bit quieter than before. (Ariana, selective group, ethnic minority background and Mitra, non-selective group, ethnic minority background)

Ariana, who had an ethnic minority background, saw a clear divide between the white Finnish pupils who were new to the school class group and the ethnically more diverse group of pupils from her previous school class group. She had felt more comfortable when there was more ethnic diversity, because, in her opinion, the previous group had shared a sense of community that was now missing in her current group. In her talk, the insulation between her old classmates and the new Finnish pupils was strong, thus the boundaries between these two groups were made visible. However, Ariana seemed to reflect on whether it was the shared history with her former classmates or the ethnic mix that made the difference (or both). Laura,

one of the new Finnish pupils in the same selective group, explained that 'cultural issues' influenced peer relations; they also sustained the space between pupils from different backgrounds:

> You notice that those who are foreigners, they're sort of, they know [the same] language and they can be very temperamental, and that's why it's easier for them to be in their own group. (…) It can be perhaps related to culture and customs in families, and someone who isn't that temperamental doesn't necessarily know how to interact with them. But in a way, if someone is from outside of Finland, it's almost vice versa, they're not discriminated against here [in this school]. (Laura, selective group, Finnish background)

These pupils from both ethnic minority and Finnish backgrounds in the selective group used cultural and personality-related explanations to make sense of ethnic boundaries; they suggested that pupils who do not share the same background will not necessarily understand the specific aspects that tie their group together. Interestingly, Laura and a few other Finnish pupils in the selective group positioned pupils with ethnic minority backgrounds high in the school's hierarchy; they argued that ethnic minority pupils tend to be more popular than Finnish pupils and 'being an immigrant' is a positive attribute in their school. This finding resonates with Ann Phoenix's (2004) observations on black male students in Britain: they possessed qualities, such as hardness and sporting prowess, that were respected and admired by white boys, but simultaneously, they were racialised by their characteristics and experienced differential treatment from teachers in comparison to boys of other ethnicities. Although this article does not focus on the gendered aspects of classification, it seems that the presumed popularity of minority ethnic pupils served to strengthen the classification and provided a way to bypass potential issues of racialisation.

Despite increased multi-ethnicity in Finnish schools, studies have observed that white Finnishness remains normative (Juva 2019). Such norms are often invisible to the conforming group, and because popularity hierarchies are very complex, the white Finnish pupils in

Goldfinch's selective group sometimes felt that pupils with ethnic minority backgrounds had better social standings or more influence in the school's informal settings. However, the descriptions of ethnic minority pupils with perceived high positions in the peer hierarchy do not signify a lack of racism or discriminative practices in Goldfinch; indeed, such practices can still manifest in various and even invisible ways. It should also be noted that several pupils with racialised minority backgrounds did not participate in the interviews, and therefore their views on how racialisation and social hierarchies relate cannot be included in the analysis, even though they might offer an alternative perspective on the issue.

'Money doesn't play a role': boundaries between pupils with different social class backgrounds

The interviews with the teachers and other adults from Goldfinch revealed a strong classification between the different areas of the local neighbourhood; this classification was based on a differentiation between the wealthy middle-class people living in detached houses and the clusters of social housing near the school. Some adult interviewees acknowledged that family backgrounds affect pupils' learning, well-being and future opportunities, but there was also a clear reluctance to comment on the socio-economic differences of the pupils' families (see also Huilla, Peltola, and Kosunen 2021). A weak classification of families from various social class backgrounds was evident in the interview with the principal Luukas:

> Interviewer: What kind of families do your pupils have, or what kind of families live in this neighbourhood?
> Luukas: It's an odd question because all families are just normal, with adults and children. I don't know, nice families. (…) I never even think about what the family is like. (Luukas, principal)

This absence of discussion around socio-economic issues creates an impression of a weak classification of pupils from different social class backgrounds. Some adults in the school

perceived that an unofficial norm exists among the pupils, explaining that the practice of showing off about money was undesirable and had an adverse effect on a pupil's position in the social hierarchy:

> People who live here... There are people from many levels of society, like there are those detached houses where people live and it's considered a well-off area. And then there are these apartment blocks and kids who live in them, and all these kids meet here [in the school]. I don't know if it originates from the families but there is one thing that isn't tolerated in Goldfinch, it never has been, and it's someone bragging about their money. That sort of pupil gets a hard time here, very quickly. It's always been like that. So, if someone has a wealthier family, they don't show it that much (…) But it's a fact, if you want to get yourself in trouble in Goldfinch, you show you have money, that's the way it works here. (Herman, teacher)

Herman's perspective was shared by several other adults: while there were different levels of wealth among the pupils' households, emphasising this difference in school via one's appearance, practice or discourse was not considered acceptable by pupils in general. Herman pondered whether this attitude towards wealth might have roots in pupils' families and their values, which suggests that families have the potential to influence the school community and the ways in which pupils interact with each other. In this respect, however, the classification of pupils from different social class backgrounds was strong, as the school staff identified a clear boundary between pupils from different social class backgrounds. On the other hand, this boundary was relatively blurred, as many adults avoided discussing pupils' social class differences.

A potential explanation may be that the principal, teachers and other school staff were cautious about making distinctions between pupils that could reinforce boundaries between them. However, particularly in disadvantaged schools, it is important for school leaders to critically understand the context in which their school operates to respond effectively to the challenges they encounter (Lupton and Thrupp 2013). Our intention is not to suggest that the

school administration in Goldfinch was not aware of these issues, as the school had vast experience in working with pupils and families from diverse backgrounds. Nevertheless, a school's disinclination to openly discuss families' social and economic position and the financial difficulties they face may conceal structural inequalities in society that contribute to poverty, as well as affect pupil performance and well-being (Huilla, Peltola, and Kosunen 2021; Lupton and Thrupp 2013). To an extent, this may also reflect the long-term silences around social class in Finnish society more broadly (Anttila et al. 2016), and the need to raise teachers' awareness of societal mechanisms that marginalise some pupils and reproduce inequalities in education (Juvonen and Toom 2023).

As stated, pupils in Goldfinch came from various types of families and the school was a site where pupils with all these different backgrounds met daily. Jeremias was one of the pupils whose home was not close to the school but in a middle-class area a few kilometres away. According to Jeremias, he chose himself to apply for a place in a selective group, but he had had to discuss this option with his parents. The following excerpt from Jeremias's interview shows a strong classification between the location of his home and the surrounding neighbourhood of the school and its inhabitants:

> Interviewer: Did you discuss this school choice at home?
> Jeremias: Yes, we discussed it, and I was told [by my parents] that there are more apartment blocks here, you are attending a school in an area you're not that used to… You may see people who are much poorer than people you're used to. And now I'm trying not to sound too bourgeois but… [laughs] (Jeremias, selective group, Finnish background)

Jeremias explicitly stated that people living in the Goldfinch catchment area are less affluent than the people in his own social circles outside the school neighbourhood. This finding and that his parents felt the need to point out these differences to Jeremias align with Reay's (2007) observations on middle-class families' negative perceptions of residential areas that

are populated with people from lower social classes and minority ethnicities. Despite the family's preconceptions of the socio-economic composition of the residential area around Goldfinch, Jeremias wanted to apply to the school because, in the selective group, he could receive additional instruction in the subject that he was passionate about as a hobby. While classification is strong when Jeremias talked about the residential areas and his parents' views, the classification based on pupils' social class backgrounds turns weak in the following excerpt where he talked about pupils' interactions in the school, especially the role that money plays—or does not play—in peer relations:

> Interviewer: Does money play a role in friendships, like someone having or not having money?
> Jeremias: Not really; in my opinion, people don't pay attention to it here [in Goldfinch]. Everyone is free to be what they want to be, regardless of their background or wealth. (Jeremias, selective group, Finnish background)

In Finland, discussions of social class are relatively rare outside of academia, which is why we decided not to use this potentially unfamiliar concept in the interviews with the pupils. Instead of social class, we discussed money and the role it has in young people's lives. In Jeremias's selective group, the social class backgrounds of the pupils were more homogenous—more often middle-class—than in the non-selective group, and this may have influenced his perceptions of the importance of money. However, many of the pupils we interviewed shared Jeremias's views, both in the selective and non-selective groups. In the next excerpt, Amin (non-selective group) and the researcher discussed money and name brand items that are often popular among young people. When responding to the researcher's question, it appeared that Amin had not considered the issue of money and its importance in friendships:

> Interviewer: Like having money, is it important to have, for example, an iPhone or a specific phone [model] or [brand] clothes?
> Amin: I don't know, it shouldn't be. At least I haven't seen anything like that.

Interviewer: So you haven't noticed?
Amin: No, I've never been with someone, like, hey, why aren't you wearing Adidas, okay, I'm not your friend. There's never been anything like that.
Interviewer: This is a strange idea to you.
Amin: Yes. (Amin, non-selective group, ethnic minority background)

Pupils in Finland do not wear school uniforms, and recent studies have demonstrated that young people use clothing for social class-based self-representation or to simply communicate social differences (Oittinen, Peltola, and Bernelius 2022; Peltola 2021); thus, clothing can create boundaries between pupils from different social class backgrounds. In the previous excerpts, Jeremias's and Amin's approach to this issue can be interpreted as inclusive, as they did not want to categorise their friends or classmates based on their wealth. Jeremias, Amin and other pupils were aware of families' different economic situations, but the Goldfinch pupils' varying access to brand items did not appear to strengthen boundaries between them. The idea among school staff that bragging about money was not acceptable in the school was not highlighted in the pupils' interviews, which also suggests that from the pupils' perspective, the classification based on social class was rather weak in Goldfinch.

Conclusion

In this article, we examined boundaries between pupils in an urban Finnish lower secondary school in relation to selective and non-selective school class groups and different ethnic and social class backgrounds. More specifically, our aim was to analyse how classification of pupils based on these different categories affects the construction of an inclusive school community. Bernstein (2000) stated that all pupils should have the right to be included socially, culturally, intellectually and personally, and our analysis was informed by the social dimensions of this statement.

Our findings indicate that a relatively weak classification of groups based on the studied categories promoted pupils' right to inclusion in Goldfinch. Most of the school staff and pupils celebrated their school as diverse, and in general, the boundaries between pupils from different social class and ethnic backgrounds were blurred. Weak classification seemed to support interaction between pupils from various backgrounds and bring them closer together, and low boundaries between pupils increased their opportunities to feel included in the school community (see also Walton 2023). It is noteworthy, though, that the pupils and school staff had slightly different viewpoints on the boundaries between the school class groups and pupils, which implies that classifications of categories are not static; they are prone to changes and their strength may vary depending on whose perspective is considered and in which context they are examined.

Of particular interest in this study was the classification of pupils based on their ethnicity. Teachers and other members of the school staff praised Goldfinch's multi-ethnicity, and this discourse was also observed among the pupils we interviewed. However, the interviewees reported that pupils with ethnic minority backgrounds sometimes faced discriminative practices related to school assessments (Luoma 2021), which highlights the important role of teachers, school leaders and other adults in promoting equitable and inclusive practices in school. Moreover, earlier studies in the Finnish context have found that, among young people, a primary division in terms of ethnicity often exists between white Finnish youths and those from various minority ethnic backgrounds (e.g. Kivijärvi 2013). In Goldfinch, this was visible particularly in the selective group, where the relatively strong boundaries between some Finnish and ethnic minority pupils shaped friendships. Smaller friendship groups within a school class group can be socially inclusive, but a strong insulation between small groups keeps them separate from each other. This may affect how inclusive the

class group feels to pupils in it, and separate, small groups of pupils can also complicate the construction of an inclusive school community.

The classification of the selective and non-selective groups appeared to be relatively weak among the pupils. This is important, since school class grouping is a school-based practice that has potential to reinforce the boundaries related to social class and ethnicity (Peltola 2021)—in Goldfinch, this seemed not to happen. Moreover, the classification of pupils from different social class backgrounds was somewhat weak, and this finding differs from the results of recent studies in other urban Finnish schools in similar areas as well (Oittinen, Peltola, and Bernelius 2022; Peltola 2021). Presumably, these issues are context dependent and related to the culture that has been constructed by the school community, which incorporates pupils' families and their values as well as the surrounding neighbourhood and its characteristics. It is also noteworthy that pupils' social relations are often complex, and there are categories other than social class and ethnic background that shape pupils' friendships and feelings of belonging, such as gender. These different categories may intersect and vary in strength, which is reflected in pupils' peer relationships and consequently influences the inclusive nature of the school community.

Nevertheless, an interesting question to consider here is why the boundaries between different types of school class groups and pupils from diverse backgrounds appeared generally rather weak in Goldfinch. Bernstein (2000, 15) emphasised that a change in classification, for example in pedagogic practices or in relationships between persons, comes 'at the level of framing'. This suggests that the weak framing in the interactions between pupils and adults may be one of the factors that can weaken the classification of pupils' social groups. Indeed, the relationships between Goldfinch pupils and school staff were mainly positive and based on mutual respect, which might have fostered trust between pupils as well (see also Ulmanen et al. 2016).

It is important, however, that the adults in the school remain aware of the potential and possibly changing boundaries between pupils, and the school leaders and teachers should not be distracted by a perceived harmony in the school environment; construction of an inclusive school requires constant work and reflection. From the equity perspective, it may even be considered important that the school staff are aware of how social class or ethnicity potentially works as a boundary between pupils. If the current trend in urban Finnish schools continues and separate selective school class groups remain mainly white Finnish and middle class, there is a risk for increasing within-school segregation, even though the situation was fairly good in Goldfinch at the time of the fieldwork. Overall, the school must acknowledge that particularly in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, pupils come to school with varying resources, and it is the school's task to provide all pupils with equal opportunities for learning and sense of belonging (see also Juvonen and Toom 2023). When pupils know that their needs are met in school, there is a chance that they feel included in the school community.

We began this article with Reay's (2011) call for democratic schooling that emphasises a focus on what pupils share, and we conclude that this approach can be identified in Bernstein's notions of inclusion: when pupils feel that they share a common ground, the boundaries are lower, which in turn creates a productive environment for constructing an inclusive and democratic school.

Funding

This work was supported by the Academy of Finland (decision number 314735).

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Table 1. The pupils and members of the school staff who participated in the interviews.

Pupils	**Selective group**	**Non-selective group**
Social class background		
Middle-class	11	5
Working-class	3	4
Unknown		1
Ethnic background		
White Finnish	11	4
Ethnic minority	1	5
Mixed parentage	2	1
Gender		
Girls	11	6
Boys	3	4
Total	14	10

Members of the school staff	
Teachers	11
School administration	1
School welfare group	2
Total	14