

# Social Injustice Against African Pupils in the Finnish Basic Education System: Deconstructing Institutional Discrimination through the Lenses of Immigrant Twins

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## Abstract

This article analyses the perceptions of fourteen African households having fifteen African children attending Finnish system of basic education in the same grade and from the same municipality using ethnographic method. The article is based on a three-year analysis about the pupils' academic journey from Grade one to three between 2019-2022 and evaluates the parental understanding and perception about 1) the Finnish education system 2) the pupils' performance and 3) the attitude of teachers towards the pupils. This article uses biographical method from parents. The article uses the theory of race and ethnicity to highlight issues in basic education system, especially through the eyes of the twins. The article uses the concept of social injustice to illuminate the separate and unequal treatment experiences of African pupils in the Finnish basic education and how it may affect their education and career trajectory in the future.

**Keywords:** Africans pupils, biographical research, Finnish education system, social injustice, theory of race and ethnicity, twins

## Introduction

The Finnish education system is revered as one of the best education systems in the world<sup>1</sup>. The Finnish Basic Education is guided by the Education Act 628/1998 and the Amendments upto 1136/2010<sup>2</sup>. According to this Act, all children in Finland have access to compulsory basic education between the ages 6-18 years. Finland's prominence and link to quality education arose from posting impressive results compared to other countries in the international large-scale assessments such as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). This is regardless of Finland

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<sup>1</sup> Sjøby, M. (2015). Finnish Education System. *Nordic Journal of Digital Literacy*, 64-68.

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Education. (2010). *Finlex*. Retrieved from Finlex:  
<https://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/1998/en19980628.pdf>

having the shortest learning time for pupils among all the PISA participating countries<sup>1</sup>. The general assumption is that every child going through the Finnish basic education system, including children with immigrant backgrounds, get the best education that is world class and unrivalled in a way.

In this article, the researcher uses biographical method to gather the perceptions and attitudes of fourteen African parents whose children started the basic education in 2019 and analyse their opinions using the social construct lenses versus the reality as deconstructed using the theoretical arguments and supported by a scientifically sound methodological approach. The article uses the term children to mean pupils of school-going age and vice-versa depending on the context. The article also uses the term children with immigrant background to mean African children, unless the context so implies generalization. The children in focus in this article turned seven years old in 2019 and the analysis is based on their education experiences for the first three years of basic education.

The main aim of this article is to illuminate the institutional genesis of everyday separate and unequal treatment hidden in the Finnish education system. The article illustrates using the methodological and theoretical approaches that the separate and unequal treatment in the Finnish society is based on social identities. Additionally, the paper aims to flag the connection between the socially constructed best education system and its linkage to market segmentation that discriminates and positions the racialized immigrants in the lowest tier of the labour market, usually in the service industry. This article deconstructs the institutional-level practices of Finnish society racism<sup>2</sup> and social injustices<sup>3 4</sup> as experienced by pupils with immigrant background in the first three formative years of the Finnish basic education. To achieve the objectives of this article the researcher answers the following questions: What is the African parents' perception and understanding about, 1) the Finnish education system 2) the pupils' performance and 3) the attitude of teachers towards the pupils

This article's aha-moment comes from the participation of one twin-raising household that makes the biggest difference and revelations on how pupils with immigrant background are treated in the Finnish education system. The parent noticed contrasts in the treatment of the pupils by 1) teachers, and 2) the system.

## Literature Review

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<sup>1</sup> Üstün, U., & Eryilmaz, A. (2018). Analysis of Finnish Education System to question the reasons behind Finnish success in PISA. *Studies in Educational Research and Development*, 93-114.

<sup>2</sup> European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2023). *Being Black in the EU: Experiences of People of African Descent*. Vienna: EU.

<sup>3</sup> Yeasmin, N., Hasanat, W., & Ojwang, F. (2021). Understanding Social Justice Towards Immigrants: Finnish Perspective. *Culture Crossroads*, 243-264.

<sup>4</sup> Ojwang, F. (2021). Social injustice in learning of the second language among immigrant children in Finland. *EUREKA Social and Humanities*, 82-100.

Finland's Basic Education Act 628/1998 and the Amendments upto 1136/2010 provide the platform on which this research is anchored<sup>2</sup>. Finland is one of the countries that offer the best quality of education according to PISA score and from research<sup>1 1 2</sup>. Since the first PISA administration in 2000, Finnish students have achieved high scores in each of the domains as well as outstanding achievement in terms of educational equity. This has also attracted attention from around the globe about the Finnish educational system. Finnish students have repeatedly scored highly in all domains of PISA making it stand out among the other countries. Finland also has one of the lowest between-school variances in literacy scores along with very high percentage of resilient students as it has scored one of the highest coverages of 15-year olds (97%) among all participants in PISA<sup>3</sup>.

It is alleged that the Finland approach to basic education is to blame for the poor performance phenomenon by immigrant children<sup>4</sup>. Kilpi-Jokanen noted that the structural design of education was disadvantageous to pupils with immigrant background as the children began school at a late age of seven compared to other Nordic countries and had shorter school days which is not the best combination for learners of a new language. This compounded with the fact that the home language was different from Finnish and the parents did not themselves speak fluent Finnish exacerbate the slow pace of learning a new language for education and further disadvantages the pupils with immigrant from the get go. Additionally, Kilpi-Jokanen noted that the teaching of Finnish as S2 to the pupils with immigrant background made learning Finnish separate and unequal in its execution.

There is stigma experienced by pupils with immigrant background when labelled as S2 learners<sup>5</sup>. Classifying the pupils with immigrant background but born in Finland in the S2 category forms the genesis of separate and unequal treatment and in a nuanced way denies the pupils a sense of belonging due to the otherness created by the label. Kurki deconstructed the placement of pupils with immigrant background into S2 as racialization as the rationale was based on social identities especially ethnic or racial basis. Another researcher contested the learning of the Finnish language's linkage to

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<sup>1</sup> Repo, E., Aerila, J.-A., Tyrer, M., & Harju-Luukkainen, H. (2024). Multilingual learning environments in early childhood education in Finland. *Journal of Early Childhood Education Research*, <https://doi.org/10.58955/jecer.129339>.

<sup>2</sup> Pesch, A., & Sundelin, M. (2024). The significance of multilingual children's voices in research. *Journal of Early Childhood Education Research*, <https://doi.org/10.58955/jecer.130198>.

<sup>3</sup> OECD. (2016, p. 207). *Analysis of Finnish Education System to Question the Reasons Behind Finnish Success in PISA*. Retrieved Apr 28, 2024, from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330289073\\_Analysis\\_of\\_Finnish\\_Education\\_System\\_to\\_question\\_the\\_reasons\\_behind\\_Finnish\\_success\\_in\\_PISA](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330289073_Analysis_of_Finnish_Education_System_to_question_the_reasons_behind_Finnish_success_in_PISA)

<sup>4</sup> Kilpi-Jokanen, E. (2011). Continuation to upper secondary education in Finland: Children of immigrants and the majority compared. *Acta Sociologica*, 77-106.

<sup>5</sup> Brunila, K., Ikävalko, E., Kurki, T., Masoud, A., KatariinaMertanen, Mikkola, A., & Mäkelä, K. (2017). Transitions, Justice, and Equity in Education in Finland. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*, DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.130.

learning difficulty as it was often misinterpreted to mean that the pupils with Finnish language challenges had learning difficulty<sup>1</sup>. Kalalahti added that the difficulty in learning the Finnish language should not be linked to learning difficulty as the pupils with immigrant background already had another language that they were potentially good at and could succeed exemplarily when used for learning. Kalalahti found that many pupils with immigrant background were placed in the S2 against their will.

An article that studied the learning of Swahili as a second language by white children belonging to expatriates in Tanzania. Tanzania uses Swahili as the official language and thus basic education is delivered in Swahili. The researcher reported a similar phenomenon among the white children that were studying at an international school in Tanzania, as having similar challenges as reported among pupils with immigrant background in Finland. The children struggled with learning Swahili as a second language. This was exacerbated by the lacking support at home as the families spoke a different language from Swahili at home and they only had a few lessons and hours at school to learn Swahili in a week<sup>6</sup>.

In 2017, a European Commission report suggested that Finland had the largest gap between university education of ethnic Finns and immigrant-background pupils. The EC reported found that only 27% of immigrant-background individuals had university degrees, the lowest in the Nordic region. This was confirmed by the OECD 2016 report that found that first and second-generation immigrants were glaringly under-represented among university graduates. OECD reiterated that the situation in Finland was more unequal than in any other country in their analysis.

## Methodology

This is a qualitative research that analysed the perceptions of 14 households with 15 children that started school in the first grade in 2019. The research analysed the perceptions of the parents based on their assessment of the first three years of basic education for their children. The interviews were conducted between in between January and October in 2023 when their children were in the fourth or fifth grade. The researcher circulated a call for interested research participants through the Foreigners in Finland social media pages with concrete instruction about the geographical location of residence – Helsinki, profile of participants being parents with children that started grade 1 in 2019 and continued in grades 2 and 3 in the same school, and same teachers during the period. A total of twenty-one participants expressed interest but only fourteen parents were eligible. Five eligible participants were identified through social media while the remaining nine participants were found through snowballing method. The researcher conducted a pre-screening using a set of questions to ensure that the minimum criteria was met before an interview

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<sup>1</sup> Kalalahti, M., Niemi, A.-M., Varjo, J., & Jahnikainen, M. (2020). Diversified transitions and educational equality? Negotiating the transitions of young people with immigrant backgrounds and/or special educational needs. *Nordic Studies in Education*, 36-54.

was scheduled. The researcher administered an open-ended questionnaire with ten guiding questions that were linked to the research questions in this study.

The researcher used the biographical method to create a relaxing environment for open discussion based on trust and established rapport, and to gather as much information as possible. The interview sessions were recorded after obtaining consent from the participants and each session lasted about 2 hours with flexible health breaks in between. The researcher used the residential common rooms of the participant or nearest café where each person covered own cost at the café. The recordings were transcribed using NVivo transcription software and analysed using the NVivo analysis software. The transcribed data were coded into the three research questions and categorised based on the 10 research questions using NVivo software. The themes were signalled by lexical items, phrases and cases used as examples. The data revealed various aspects of dominant themes, providing additional insights into the research questions and study objectives. The data was further analysed by drawing insights from critical multimodal discourse analysis to examine the representation of social constructs and the corresponding realities.

### Data collection

The study gathered information from 12 women and 2 men that are the parents of the 15 children. 13 of the 14 participants had one child each and 1 participant had a set of twins. All the children turned 7 years old in 2019 and had gone through the Finnish pre-school system. The researcher did not collect any data regarding the children.

Parent #	Number of Children turning 7 in 2019	Parent gender	Total # of children
PT01	1	F	2
PT02	1	F	1
PT03	1	F	1
PT04	1	F	3
PT05	1	F	1
PT06	1	F	1
PT07	1	M	1
PT08	1	F	4
PT09	2	F	3
PT10	1	F	1
PT11	1	F	3
PT12	1	F	2
PT13	1	F	2
PT14	1	M	1
TOTAL	15	14	

*Table 1. Aggregated description of participants*

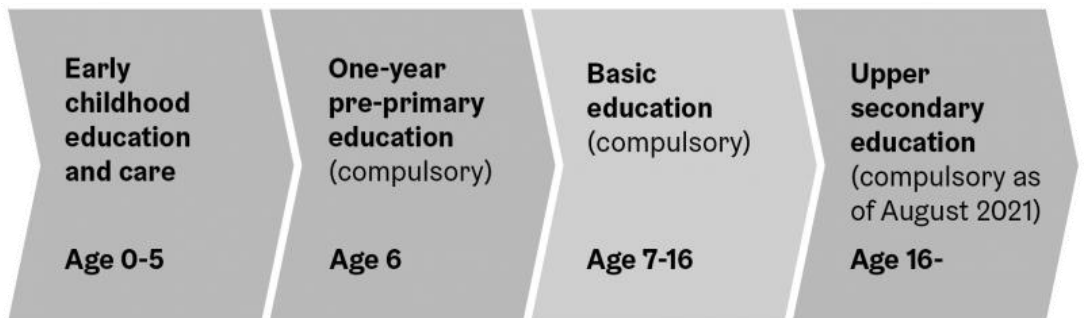
## Data Analysis

The data gathered was transcribed and entered into the NVivo software where it was analysed and the analysis is summarised below.

## Understanding the Finland Basic Education System

The researcher sought to find out if the parents were aware about the Basic Education Act 628/1998 and the Amendments upto 1136/2010 guide<sup>2</sup>. The 14 parents interviewed did not know about the existence of the Basic Education Act but they knew that education is free for all immigrant children with Finnish residence. The researcher asked about the general understanding of the Finnish basic education system using a scale of 1-10 to which 9 of the parents felt that they only know the basics and rated themselves below 5. Some 4 parents rated their understanding at 6 and 1 parent rated self at 7. The researcher asked the parents why they rated self as they did and the general response from 7 parents was the they did not know what lay ahead in the education system in concrete terms. The parents that rated self above 5 had older children and thus felt a they had some basic information about the education system. None of the parents understood the curriculum development process and how pedagogical technique was engaged in learning. Additionally, only 3 out of 14 could explain the Finnish education system with confidence. A parent PT08 that explained the education system comprehensively said,

“I participated in an immigrant-targeting workshop where they sensitized immigrant parents about the Finnish education system. Funnily, only about 5 parents turned up. The workshops were a series with themes but each of the workshop was poorly attended.”



*Fig. 1: Education System in Finland (Source: Helsinki City<sup>1</sup>)*

## **Support to Immigrant Parents to Understand the Finnish basic education system**

The researcher sought to find out if the parents knew about any form of support or sources of information if they wanted to learn about the Finnish education system. The parent PT08 was more curious and thus took initiative to search for information to know about the education system. The parents that had 2 children or more tended to show more interest in understanding the education system. 3 out of 14 parents had participated at an event in-person or remotely, where some aspect of Finnish education system was being discussed. The sources of information mentioned by the 3 parents include NGO (2PTs), municipalities (1PT), government agencies (1PT), and school (3PTs). 9 out of 14 parents got information from their friends or within their networks. On being asked how confident the 9 felt that the information from their friends helped, 5 felt that the information was adequate and that they understood the Finnish basic education system. The researcher prodded further on the response in 3.2.1 as they rated self below 5 to which PT02 and PT14 said that the information they had was limited to what their friends or networks shared with them. The parents were asked to what extent they felt the understanding of the education system was important in guiding their children. All 14 parents said that it was extremely important.

## **Understanding the Lesson Structures and Duration**

The study sought to find out whether the parents understood the duration each lesson lasted and the scheduling of lessons. 3 parents indicated 1 hour, 5 parents indicated 40 minutes, 3 parents said 45 minutes while 3 parents did not know how long each lesson lasted. On being prodded for the ones that gave wrong figures whether they had checked Wilma, they responded that they were not keen on the duration of the lessons. 12 parents did not understand the lesson structures of their children at school with only 2 confirming that they knew about the lesson structures. All parents knew at the top of their head when school started at 9 but did not know when school ended on a daily basis at the top of their heads.

## **Pupils Well-Being support**

All 14 parents were not fully aware about the nature of well-being support offered at the school. The PT12 knew that there was some form of support but did not understand how and when to get it in details. PT06 felt that asking for well-being support could prompt the social welfare visit as it could indicate that things were not well at home. 4 parents were aware that the schools had counsellors but did not know

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<sup>1</sup> City of Helsinki. (2020). *InfoFinland*. Retrieved May 02, 2024, from <https://www.infofinland.fi/en/family/children/childrens-and-youths-rights-and-obligations>



when to engage them for their children as they did not yet fully understand how the system works. PT11 said that she received a message about counsellors' availability at school but that was it. 11 parents felt that their children were happy and did not need any counselling services yet. 2 parents did not know whether to say that their children needed or did not need any form of counselling. 1 parent felt that the child was bullied and needed to be counselled, but the parent did not know how to go about it, and further did not trust a Finn to give the best counselling support for aggravation by a Finn. The parent had informed the class teacher about the child's situation while in third grade but nothing much was done. Overall, the well-being support information was not understood by the parents.

In regards to other forms of support including afternoon activities, transport and other welfare services, parents felt that they were OK. PT09 said that the children did not need transportation as the school was near the house. All participants shared that the schools were near the homes and none of the children needed transport. The children participated in the afternoon activities at the school and did not pay anything. The parents were satisfied with school meals. On being asked what the school meals included, all female parents knew the meals offered at school with certainty while the male parents interviewed struggled to name the meals. The parents were not aware about the three-level support except PT12. The three-level support is flexible and based on long-term planning. This depended on each child's individual needs. 13 parents did not know about individual support in detail and what it entailed but they knew that their children were receiving some form of support with their studies the structural consequence of which they did not know.

### **Second Language (S2) Group**

All 14 children were taking Finnish as a second language and thus were registered as S2 students in grades one to three. PT12 had one child in the language support class and the second child was in the normal Finnish class. The two children had different Finnish levels. PT01, PT02, PT04, PT05, PT08, PT09, PT10, PT13 and PT14 did not know about S2 categorization but they acknowledged that their children were not native Finnish speakers. PT03 expressed concerns on the consequences of being an S2 category learner as she indicated that she had heard that the categorization was used to profile and discriminate the children. The PT12 had also heard the same from her networks. The parents were asked what they thought about learning in Finnish in general to which 7 out of 14 parents felt that it was OK as the children lived permanently in Finland. 2 parents felt that Finnish language was limiting for the children if they would wish to work abroad in the future. 5 parents did not have any thought about the Finnish language as a medium with one parent stating that the child also knew English.

### **Enhanced Support - Academic Capacity Categorization of Pupils**



The researcher sought to find out if the parents knew about enhanced support given to pupils and the easy and normal books used at school. 13 out of 14 parents did not know about existence of easy and normal books. Only PT12 knew about the existence of easy and normal books. 8 out of 14 children were receiving some form of support and the parents could not distinguish the various forms of support available to their children at school. PT12 said that the teachers had the unilateral authority to assign a book to the pupils that they perceived as weak. She added that the Finnish language skills was used as the basis of making this discriminatory unilateral decision.

### **The Optimal Use of Wilma Functionalities**

The parents were asked if they used Wilma for everyday engagement with the school. All 14 parents had access to and used Wilma to access messages from the school. 12 out of 14 parents did not use the other functions within Wilma. 1 parent felt that he used the Wilma functions moderately while 1 other parent felt that he used the Wilma menu exhaustively. The PT07 said, "I use Wilma for checking the timetable sometimes, messages from the school, checking test feedbacks, to report absences and much more." The 12 parents used Wilma for messages only. On being asked whether they knew about the other menu options, 11 of them said they did not know any other uses while 2 parents said they had an idea that there were other options but were not aware about the details and how to use them optimally such as accessing attendance feedback, assessments updates, timetable, absences reporting, development discussion report and much more.

### **Homework Support**

The study sought to find out how support with homework was given at home. 9 parents said that they did not support the children with homework as the schools supported the pupils well. 1 parent said that the spouse supported with homework especially mathematics, 4 parents offered modest support as they knew some Finnish. PT01 said, "the homework in the grades 1-3 was little and needed little support that I can afford as I speak some Finnish." Overall, the parents did not feel well equipped and knowledgeable enough to support with the homework. PT07 said, "if I do not understand the homework, I refer it back to the teacher." The PT11 said, "I am always having conflicting shift that makes it hard for me to help with homework." 3 out of the 14 parents felt that their work did not allow them to help the children with homework when they were in grades 1-3, and as at the time of the interview, that was still a challenge.

When asked about their confidence in the teachers and schools, 13 out of 14 parents felt content with the school and the much it was doing. PT03 said, "Finland has the best system of education in the world. I do not worry as I have total faith in the school." PT05 was worried that the support may disadvantage the immigrant children like hers as the children did not receive the same level of support as their Finnish counterparts. On being asked whether they were satisfied with their children's

performance at school, 4 parents said they were extremely satisfied, 6 parents were satisfied while 3 parents were moderately satisfied and 1 parent was dissatisfied. The dissatisfied parent cited that her child's homework was not checked at school save for some exceptional instances. This meant that whether the tasks were done well or not was not clear as the feedback was missing.

### **Attitude of Teachers towards Pupils**

This was responded to differently depending on individual situations. A parent complained that the teachers were targeting her daughter. She shared that the teachers were biased towards her child and that she was considering changing schools after 5 years in the same school with no change. She felt that the targeting was due to race. Another parent felt that the child was treated unfairly because s/he had a special need and was treated as a nuisance by the teachers. Overall, 9 parents felt that the teachers were fair and treated all children equally. PT06 said, "the teachers are fair, they do their best. I know because of the feedback from my child and the love by my child for school has increased." 3 parents felt that the teachers in the grades 1-3 were always nice as the children have not developed much. PT08 said;

"I note that there is equal treatment in the early years compared to advanced years. I have had my older children go through school and the upper grades had so many challenges. They were in different classes and the patterns were the same."

In general, 9 parents felt that teachers in the early years had a positive attitude towards learners.

### **Attitude of Teachers towards Parents**

The attitude of the teachers towards the parents was rated on a scale of 1-10 where 10 was extremely positive and 1 was extremely negative. The average perception by all 14 parents was 5 representing average. 3 parents felt that the teachers at their child's school had a negative perception and attitude about them. "I once had an issue with the social workers and since then, I have observed that the teacher treated me differently," said PN09. PN04 and PN07 felt that they were racially profiled and thus treated with a negative attitude. PN04 said, "they treat us based on what they think or know we do as work, and not based on our skills or qualification." 8 parents felt that the teachers were treating them respectfully and had a good attitude towards them. PT08 said that she did not have an attitude problem with her child's teacher, but noted that there was always a change as the children advanced in grades. 2 parents did not have any comment on the attitude situation.

It was difficult to pin down the definition of attitude by the parents. The researcher sought to find out what they understood attitude to be and why they rated the teachers as they did. 8 parents said that attitude in the research conversation context related to the way a teacher talked to someone (mentioned 8 times out of 8 parents), treated someone (mentioned 3 times out of 8 parents), handled someone (mentioned

6 times out of 8 parents), even looked at someone (mentioned 1 time out of 8 parents). Also, 1 parent said that it was felt in the energy levels by the teacher towards the parent, and as compared with other teachers' energy reciprocity. Another parent said, "you just know it when someone has a negative attitude towards you." 3 parents did not respond to the attitude definition as they said that attitude was just attitude. 1 parent did not respond at all.

### **Attitude of Teachers towards the System**

The researcher sought to find out the parents' opinion about the teachers' attitude towards the system of education in their opinion and based on their interactions. The parents understood the question differently and the responses differed from every parent with the exception of PT05, PT07, PT10, PT11 and PT13 that said they did not know. Due to the different understanding of the question, the researcher did not consider the question in the analysis and conclusion in this article.

### **Deconstructing the Results using Conceptual Analysis**

This article uses the concept of social injustice to articulate the African pupils' experiences in the Finnish education system through the prism of parents understanding and perception about 1) the Finnish education system 2) the pupils' performance and 3) the attitude of teachers towards the pupils. Social injustice occurs when an individual or group treats another individual or group within a society unfairly, resulting in disadvantages to that individual or group<sup>1</sup>. Some of the root causes of social injustices include racism, economic inequality, and class discrimination. Social injustice can affect anyone and typically arises when a group with wealth, power, or authority gives preferential treatment to its own group over members of another group. This article interrogates the understanding and perception of the parents to deconstruct the experiences of (in)justice and equity in the Finnish basic education system.

Drawing lessons from America, where Jim Crow ensured that the social caste system of the South continued, and the role of education in resisting the injustices as championed by W.E.B Dubois<sup>2</sup>, African parents message relay the presence of Jim Crow in Finland. The majority parents' poor understanding of the Finnish basic education system disadvantages the pupils as they are left depending on the teachers and the system for their academic and potentially, career trajectories. The heavy reliance and assumption that teachers know what they are doing because Finland has the best education system is a risk and a gamble on the future of the pupils with immigrant backgrounds.

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<sup>1</sup> Stone, M. (2023, Nov 21). *Study.com*. Retrieved from Study.com:  
<https://study.com/learn/lesson/social-injustice-causes-consequences.html>

<sup>2</sup> Waite, C. L., & Crocco, M. S. (2004). Fighting injustice through education. *History of Education*, 573-583.

PT12 that had twins observed that the schools had two books – an easy book and a normal book. The easy book was assigned to pupils perceived as weak while normal books were given to average and above average pupils. The books were assigned to children without involving parents. This places many African pupils that use Finnish as a second language in a disadvantaged position as the performance of the pupils that is linked to their Finnish skills as assessed by the teachers can lead to separate and unequal treatment. Difficulties with the Finnish language can easily be misinterpreted as learning difficulties, when it may not be the case<sup>1</sup>. PT12 noticed this while checking the twins' homework, that they had the same book but with different content. This means that a parent that has no child to compare the book or homework with may not notice about the normal or easy book. PT12 added that the teachers have the discretion to decide without informing or consulting the parents. The situation is exacerbated by the teachers' irregular review of pupil's work;

“One of my child's book was not checked or marked as seen by the teacher, and I sent messages via Wilma for a review of the same, and it would only happen occasionally and the cycle continues. The teacher does not regularly check the classwork and if the teacher does the checking, then there is no evidence of the same.”

Thirteen parents did not know about the easy or normal book and thus did not know whether their children had easy or normal books. Such a gap can be used to systematically disadvantage the immigrant pupils in their educational and career trajectory. Structural functionalism explains how the easy book was assigned to pupils perceived as weak and potentially led to profiling of the students on the basis of their academic capacity. This is supported by symbolic interaction where the easy book is a symbol of separate and unequal treatment that follows the pupils in the years to come as reported by other researchers. Nine parents did not understand S2 categorization even though all the 14 pupils were S2 pupils. Symbolic interaction is at play as S2 categorization resulted in stigmatization of immigrant-background children in later years even when they have been born in Finland<sup>10</sup>. PT12 that was aware about the situation also felt concerned about the implication of S2 categorization on the future learning and career trajectory, citing an already discriminatory labour market. The concerns are exacerbated by knowledge that results suggested that children of immigrants had higher school drop-out rate out of education<sup>12</sup>.

These systemic issues played a role in how the teachers treated the pupils and influenced the attitude of the teachers towards the pupils according to 3 parents. Additionally, the teachers operated within the confines of the education Act and guidelines, which did not for instance, involve parents in key decisions such as the

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<sup>1</sup> Zacheus, T., Kalalahti, M., & Varjo, J. (2017). Cultural minorities in Finnish educational opportunity. *Research on Finnish Society*, 132-144.

books to use – easy or normal. The risk of operating with such systemic and structural biased guidelines is that they result in social injustices to the pupils and their families.

Social injustice is seen in the education policy and guidelines that inform the profiling of immigrant pupils to S2, in the discretion of assigning the easy or normal book, in the restriction to Finnish language for learning and other areas. The theory of race and ethnicity proves that the basic education is built on a separate and unequal premise making the Finnish education system discriminatory to pupils with immigrant background thus not the best for such pupils. The social injustice is extended to the performance of the pupils that are compared with the native Finnish children and expected to be at par. The narrative that immigrant pupils perform poorer than their Finnish counterparts leads to a general perception and attitude that immigrant pupils are not good learners<sup>12</sup>. This has been proven otherwise in a research on white children in Tanzania<sup>6</sup>.

## Discussion

The theory of race and ethnicity helps outline through three fundamental arguments, the social injustice experiences by African immigrant pupils in basic education. The early grades do not explicitly paint a picture of separate and unequal treatment, but the seeds of discrimination are sowed through systemic avenues that are nuanced and subtle, and that form parts of everyday unconscious discrimination. Structural functionalism is seen when the learners are grouped into the S2 category, a separate and unequal platform as we see the impact in the future of their academic trajectory that also has a connection with the segmented labour market. For example, on student said, “students of Finnish as a second language (S2), we always do the same easy assignments and watch movies. So the difference between (Finnish and immigrant) students gets larger all the time. Then people wonder why our (PISA and other tests) results are bad<sup>1</sup>.” This categorization plays into the labour market segmentation entrapment as the end game<sup>2</sup>. The African pupils are profiled as ‘not good learners’ and judged on the basis of their Finnish skills.

Symbolic interaction is seen when pupils are labelled through narratives such as immigrant pupils do not do well in their studies and inadequate Finnish implies poor learning skills. The use of easy books and allocation into the S2 category form labels that form part of a pupils’ entire academic label that is hard to shake off in later years. These labels are assigned at the formative stages of basic education and institutionalized throughout the education trajectory as the labels influence and determine the progression of the pupils. Additionally, being referred to as an immigrant or black comes with some pre-conceived perceptions and opinions about capacities, academic and otherwise.

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<sup>1</sup> Yle News. (2020). *Education*. Retrieved Apr 21, 2024, from <https://yle.fi/a/3-11434180>

<sup>2</sup> Lillie, N. (2011). Subcontracting, Posted Migrants and Labour Market Segmentation in Finland. *International Journal of Employment Relations*, 148–167.

The Finnish education system in keeping with the theory of race, ensures that the pupils with immigrant backgrounds such as African pupils, begin their education with labels that they have to wear for the rest of their lives in Finland. The labels assign them to various trajectories and labour market trajectories in the future with limited provisions for resistance<sup>1 2</sup>. The labels also qualify any social injustice and justify the separate and unequal treatment as the Finnish society normalizes any discrimination and inequality that come through normalized avenues and everyday practices of discrimination. The Finnish education system is thus designed to separate the pupils along the social identities and language skills, and treat the pupils unequally on the basis of perceptions and opinions that are formed about African people and pupils from African households or households with pupils from immigrant backgrounds.

As a result of the systemic foundation of basic education, the pupils with immigrant background get a back seat in the classroom as their performance is pre-conceived and built on the assumption that Finnish pupils are superior. The use of Finnish language as the primary metric for measuring intelligence and academic ability in the Finnish education system makes it difficult for immigrant pupils to compete fairly and on a level playfield as their peers as they are left behind and have to catch up with little or no support from home, and with the young innocence to make informed choices. The assignment of the easy book to pupils without consultation or involving parents, and giving the pupils in such groups a fewer academic tasks is profiling of pupils with immigrant backgrounds on the basis of assumptions that lack of fluent or adequate Finnish skills means poor academic capacity<sup>12</sup>.

The findings of this research indicate that the Finnish basic education system is built on a nuanced and subtle separate and unequal treatment platform that is inspired by the structural functionalism towards pupils with immigrant background. The twin household and all other households point out to the fact that structural and systemically-inspired discrimination and separatist treatment are normalized through nuanced and subtle legally-supported government policy and guidelines that form the framework that disadvantages the average and above-average pupils with immigrant background going through the Finnish system of education on the basis of their social identities. The profiling and perception of African pupils and other pupils with immigrant background is structurally motivated and segmented from the first grade based on the theoretical argument presented in this article.

The assumption that the Finnish system of education is among the best in the world deludes immigrant parents to assume that everything is in control and that their

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<sup>1</sup> Kurki, T. (2019). *IMMIGRANT-NESS AS (MIS)FORTUNE? Immigrantisation through integration policies and practices in education*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.

<sup>2</sup> Ndomo, Q., & Lilie, N. (2023). Resistance Is Useless! (And So Are Resilience and Reworking): Migrants in the Finnish Labour Market. In I. Isaakyan, A. Triandafyllidou, & S. Baglioni, *Immigrant and Asylum Seekers Labour Market Integration upon Arrival: NowHereLand* (pp. 161-184). Springer, Cham.

children are getting the best education through the Finnish education system. It took the engagement of a twin-hosting family to unearth some unknown but everyday incidents of separate and unequal treatment in the Finnish classrooms in grades one to three. Other services such as school psychologists, school nurse, career counsellors and other added services including but not limited to learning immigrant mother tongue has been misconstrued to mean that the quality and standard of education received by pupils with immigrant background is equally cascaded and fair. It is further assumed that with highly qualified teachers come fair and equitable treatment to the pupils with immigrant background too. This ignorance by majority of immigrant parents leads to the disadvantages that the children experience from the consequences of being profiled as an S2 pupil, to the discrimination consequences on the allocation of academic capacity that determines the book given to pupils – easy or normal book, with the judgement of the pupils with immigrant background being judged on the basis of their Finnish language skills.

The research gap points to the need to conduct a research study among the Finnish teachers about their understanding and evaluation of 1) the Finnish education system as experienced by pupils with immigrant background; 2) the pupils' performance on the basis of S2 categorization; and 3) the attitude of parents with immigrant background towards the teachers. The research further acknowledges the need to study more twins and triplets with immigrant background to understand the everyday experiences of (in)justice in the Finnish education system.

### **Disclosure Statement**

There is no conflict of interest or anything to declare in this research.

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