

CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND THE TEACHER'S PROFESSION:  
Secondary school English teachers' experiences of cultural diversity  
in teacher training and classrooms in Finland

Bachelor's Thesis

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Maahanmuutto Suomeen nykyisessä muodossaan on kohtalaisen uusi ilmiö. Maahanmuuton lisääntyessä myös koulujen oppilaista yhä isompi osa ovat kasvaneet elämänsä aikana jossain toisessa kulttuurissa. Tämän tutkielman tarkoituksena oli selvittää, miten englannin opettajat kokevat tämän Suomessa jatkuvasti lisääntyvän ilmiön työelämässään. Tutkimuksessa pohdittiin myös opettajankoulutuksesta saatavia resursseja monikulttuuristen luokkien opettamiseen. Tätä selvittääkseni haastattelin kolmea opettajaa, jotka työskentelevät monikulttuurisuudesta tunnetulla alueella. Haastateltavat olivat saaneet opettajankoulutuksensa eri kaupungeissa.</p> <p>Oppilaiden kulttuuritaustojen vaikutusta luokkahuoneopetukseen on tutkittu jonkin verran. Opetuksessa on hyödyllistä huomioida oppilaiden kulttuurillinen ja kielellinen tausta, mutta Suomessa aihetta ei ole tutkittu vielä riittävästi. Aikaisemmat tutkimukset ovat kuitenkin osoittaneet, että Suomessa opettajat kokevat lisääntyvän monikulttuurisuuden isoksi ongelmaksi opettajan ammatissa.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittivat, että opettajat kokevat kulttuurin olevan tärkeä vaikuttaja luokkahuoneissa. Tämän huomioimiseen liittyy kuitenkin useita ongelmia, kuten mahdollinen kielimuuri ja puutteelliset resurssit. Tämän lisäksi tutkimuksessa ilmeni, että pääkaupunkiseudun ulkopuolella oppilaiden kulttuurilliset taustat oli otettu opettajankoulutuksessa huomioon hyvin vähäisesti. Suomen opettajankoulutuksen tulisi kehittyä niin, että jatkuvasti lisääntyvä monikulttuurisuus olisi opettajille helpompaa ottaa huomioon luokkahuoneissa.</p>	
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In today's society, cultural diversity is more present than ever. This is mostly due to the increasing effects of globalization. The crises that are plaguing many Middle Eastern countries currently are driving an increasing number of refugees, and many professions on the job market rely on a workforce that is willing to live in a different country than they were born in. This increase in immigration is also very present in Finland. As the number of immigrants rises, so does cultural diversity become ever more prevalent. In 2014 over 300 000 Finns spoke a language other than Finnish as their mother tongue (The Family Federation of Finland 2016). Immigration in independent Finland is relatively new on a large scale, since it was only since the 1990s when the number of immigrants started to rise significantly year after year.

Cultural diversity is a force that changes the ways in which classrooms are composed and therefore, how they should be taught and approached as groups. Many immigrants come to Finland as children, and thus they enter the classroom environment with their own cultural backgrounds. The background a learner has may be important to them personally, and thus holds value when it comes to learning new skills such as languages. Learners of this kind may be an entirely new prospect for the teacher, however. This creates a scenario, which requires teachers in Finland to be also aware of this change in classroom composition. This study was conducted in order to obtain an impression for how teachers of English in Finland see this ever-increasing cultural diversity. Additionally, this study focuses on the teacher training aspect of teaching and how the current practices take the culture of a classroom into consideration.

This study will look at the cultural diversity in Finland from three English teachers' points of view and is thus a qualitative case study. The teachers who were interviewed for this study are all experienced with cultural diversity through the school they teach in. While the school is not officially multicultural, it is located in a culturally diverse area in Southern Finland. The purpose of the study is to uncover how the participants view cultural diversity and if they consider themselves well versed in the matters of educating culturally diverse classrooms.

## **2 RESEARCH CONTEXT**

In this section, I will discuss the research background related to the study. First, I will look at culture and cultural diversity in general, relating the issues surrounding the terms and why they are of importance. Secondly, I will discuss the connection between cultural diversity and teaching by describing the possibilities and challenges of culturally diverse classrooms. Lastly, I will elaborate on the Finnish context of this study. This will be done through explaining the process of becoming a teacher in Finland, the history of immigration in Finland, and how culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms have been studied in Finland this far.

### **2.1 On the topic of culture and cultural diversity**

Culture is a term that has experienced several changes in meaning during the last few decades. Although originally viewed in a very essentialist manner, in which a culture is its own separate entity, more recent trends have placed much more intricacies to the term, thus creating a concept which takes into account more facets than simply race (Bhabha 2011: 55-58). In other words, the identifiers by which one can be placed into one culture include more complex factors, such as behaviors or interests. Grossberg (2011: 87-88) states that historically culture has been viewed as belonging to a group, usually a nation. The nature of culture and what are the features which create a common collective are constantly renegotiated due to differences in beliefs. In the context of this study, I view culture especially in regard to its subjective nature in order to draw as authentic views as possible from the participants who might view culture in different ways.

If the term culture is disordered in the sense that its strict meaning is constantly renegotiated, the same applies for cultural diversity. Diversity itself is a topic that may seem straightforward when it comes to the definition of the word itself, but it contains many intricacies which require discussing before adopting the term. At first hand, the words may be taken to mean the inclusion of people from different cultures in a single group or community. However, even this seemingly simple definition has uncertainties tied to it. For example, this definition does not elaborate how many cultures are required to reach cultural diversity, nor

what groups are eligible to be diverse. When these uncertainties are combined with the previously discussed status of defining culture, it creates an idea of cultural diversity that is hard to pin down. The mindset that culture is often seen in regards of ownership also extends to cultural diversity, as discussions about cultural diversity often devolve into drawing a line on who is native and who is not (Bennett 2001: 24). In other words, every person who does not fit the criteria of being a native to a given country is grouped together regardless of the history of any specific cultures individuals might belong to. Issues about culture can easily be overly simplified to this extent, while in reality culture is an extremely complicated issue with many different facets connected to it (Blommaert and Verschueren 1999: 14).

Ultimately, it seems that culture, and in extension cultural diversity, are heavily subjective areas of study. Because of this inherent subjectivity, it can be difficult to state which group is culturally diverse and which is not. Drawing such a line is something that each person decides on their own depending on their personal reaction. Regardless of the many ambiguities surrounding the term, cultural diversity is still generally considered an important issue. In an official statement by UNESCO (2002), cultural diversity is closely connected to human development and the ensuring of human rights. Therefore, it can be stated that cultural diversity is viewed as a force towards benevolence, but the indefinite features may make this a problematic issue. However, it may be that cultural diversity is seen as such an issue in which more is better, and that the actual limit of what constitutes as a culturally diverse group does not matter, as long as reaching diversity is attempted.

## **2.2 On the connection of culture and teaching**

Culture and its connection to teaching practices have been studied relatively thoroughly, and some connections have been found. Firstly, it has been noted that being aware of the cultural backgrounds of the pupils in one's classroom is often attributed with overall good teaching practices (Hachfeld et al. 2015; Cenoz and Gorter 2011). It is important for a teacher to pay attention to the individual needs that may exist in any given classroom, and the cultural background of the pupils is an important facet of this paradigm. This importance is not only highlighted on the teacher's side of the issue, but also from the learner's point of view, as the personal experiences and the cultural background of a learner are of importance when it

comes to language learning (Kramsch 2009). Additionally, taking a pupil's cultural background into consideration in a language classroom will enrich the language resources obtained in class (Lytra 2011).

However, culture in a classroom is also an aspect of teaching that has many possible problems related to it, which are crucial when discussing culturally diverse classrooms. Martin (2012) notes in a study on race, culture and politics that many teachers tend to evaluate themselves as well informed on the matter of teaching culturally diverse classrooms. Interestingly, however, many of the participating teachers noted a change in attitude after learning more about cultural diversity in classrooms. The results of this study could be taken to mean that cultural diversity is an aspect of teaching that is often taken for granted by stating that the knowledge about the importance of culture is obvious and requires no effort to internalize. This possible mindset is worrisome since these beliefs in the status of culture may themselves be internalized and thus difficult to change. These beliefs are also complemented by the thoughts held by some teachers that culture is not an aspect of education teachers are responsible of (Coronel and Gómez-Hurtado 2015). This stems from the possibility that the school may have employed other personnel who are more involved with the cultural backgrounds of learners. This creates an idea where the cultural background of learners should not be acknowledged in the classroom.. While treating every learner in a class the same way with no regard to culture is a noble goal, it may ultimately lead to less effective teaching and, in extreme cases, even discrimination (Hachfeld et al. 2015).

### **2.3 The Finnish context**

Becoming a teacher in Finland could be considered a relatively arduous process. This is in order to keep the occupation within a certain level of professionalism. In universities, one can study pedagogy and gain the right to work as a teacher. All teachers of a subject in Finland have, therefore, studied pedagogy as at least their minor subject. The main portion of the teacher studies are the Intermediate level studies. They require an interview process to get access to, and require almost a full academic year of work. The amount of academic credits (ECTS), the Intermediate level studies give is 35, equal to approximately 945 hours of work. These studies are also extremely significant for a future teacher, since they include actual

teaching practice in a real classroom and may be a teacher trainee's only concrete experience of authentic teaching.

Before discussing culture and culturally diverse classrooms in the Finnish context, first the status of immigration in Finland must be established. Even though Finland has experienced immigration all throughout its existence, the current wave of immigration in Finland is a relatively new phenomenon. The number of immigrants is rising each year, and in 2014 over 300 000 people spoke a language other than Finnish or Swedish as their mother tongue (The Family Federation of Finland 2017). The main sources of immigrants in Finland are unsurprisingly the neighboring countries, i.e. Russia, Estonia and Sweden. However, immigration from many Western countries only began in larger scale in the 1990s after the Cold War had ended (Martikainen 2013: 4–5; Koivukangas 2002: 8). Additionally, while asylum seekers have created large scale public discussion throughout the years in Finland, their numbers are very low when compared to other forms of immigration (Finnish Immigration Service 2017).

Because of the relative newness of the immigration, however, the effect of the increasing immigration on teaching practices is for the most part unstudied. This state should be remedied since immigration is a force that will undoubtedly shake the classroom material in the future. Nevertheless, some pilot studies on the topic have been conducted, which help in evaluating the importance of the topic. A study made by Jalkanen, Pitkänen-Huhta and Taalas (2012) indicates that the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in classrooms is one of the biggest challenges for educators. This is understandable, as the sudden nature of the change has possibly made the adjusting for this change difficult. Additionally, the historically bilingual populus has created a scenario where the teaching of languages is done primarily through Finnish or Swedish. The increasing linguistic diversity, then, may make many teachers feel powerless as no tools to teach such learners have been provided. This creates an interesting juxtaposition, because while the Finnish system of educating teachers is very well safeguarded to prevent inexperienced teachers, it may be inefficient at reinforcing teachers to take into consideration the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of learners (Pitkänen-Huhta and Mäntylä 2014).

### **3 THE PRESENT STUDY**

#### **3.1 Research questions and aims**

The purpose and goal for this study is to examine teachers' experiences dealing with culturally diverse classrooms. To get a clear picture of the situation at hand, the interviews were about two distinct areas which will be the main focus and thus, the research questions for this study. Firstly, the goal of the interviews was to gauge the personal experiences and feelings surrounding teaching culturally diverse classrooms. Therefore, the first research question is:

- What thoughts and experiences do the participants have about cultural diversity, both in general and in connection to the teacher's profession?

With this question, I am interested in investigating the matter of multiculturalism from a teacher's point of view from two distinct angles. Even though a teacher's experiences about cultural diversity may come mostly from their own experiences as a teacher, it is also important to note his or her general thoughts when it comes to culture. As discussed previously, the term 'cultural diversity' is divisive after all, and it is crucial to first know what is a culturally diverse classroom to a teacher before delving into the experiences a teacher has had with cultural diversity. Secondly, the study will attempt to examine the participants' reflections on their own teacher training in connection to their own work experience. Therefore, the second research question is:

- What experiences do the participants have about cultural diversity in their teaching training and how satisfied are they with them?

The purpose of this research question is to simply measure how satisfied the participants were with the training they received now that they have experience of teaching genuine classrooms. The intention is to have the participants reflect on their teacher training with all of the information they have gained in order to evaluate the efficacy of teacher training when it comes to the cultural diversity of classrooms. Additionally, the participants were asked if there are any opportunities available to learn how to teach culturally diverse classrooms now

that they are working as teachers and if they find a need for such.

### **3.2 Data and methods**

The data for the study is comprised of three interviews. Interviewing allows for data collection in a free form, and any potential uncertainties in the answers can be clarified. The importance of this is highlighted especially in this study, because the teachers who were interviewed received their training many years ago. Memory is not completely reliable, and therefore, loose control over the data collection situation may overall help the study to be epistemically virtuous (Brinkmann 2013: 153). Additionally, the participants were provided with the interview questions in advance, in order for the data to be more “pure” so that the participants would not have to try to recollect their old memories during the interviews themselves. Furthermore, interviewing allows for a closer inspection of the personal feelings of the teachers that would otherwise be left undiscovered, which is important since teachers' memories of their training period and overall thoughts on cultural diversity in the classroom are subjective.

The interviews were all semi-structured, with open ended questions. Depending on the answers the participants had given, however, the questions were slightly modified or additional questions were asked in order to gain more information of a specific topic. The interviews had a loose structure, in that the participants could talk about their own experiences at more length if they wished or deemed it necessary. Additionally, in order to keep the data pure and free of any possible misunderstandings, the interviews were conducted in Finnish even though the participants are fluent in English.

The questions for the interviews, and the interviews themselves, were divided into three different categories. Firstly, the interviews began with general information of the participants, i.e. where they received their teacher training and how much teaching experience do they have. Secondly, the participants were asked their thoughts on cultural diversity and multiculturalism in general, along with their teaching experiences of culturally diverse classrooms. Lastly, the end of the interviews was dedicated to the teacher training experiences and how they prepared them for their teaching career in regards to cultural diversity. The aim was to get a full rounded account of the participants' thoughts on culture

and teaching. The basic outline of the questions used in the interviews is found in the appendix of this thesis.

All of the interviews took place in Southern Finland, during January of 2017. All of the interviews lasted for approximately 30 minutes and were recorded. The recordings were later transcribed following the need for data analysis. The data was analyzed according to the research questions of the study, following recurring themes to codify for analysis.

### **3.3 The participants**

The participants are all teachers in a secondary school in a city in Southern Finland: Anna, Emma and Vera. All of the teachers teach English, among other languages, in an area that is generally considered culturally diverse. Anna and Emma have teaching experience of roughly 5 years, whereas Vera has been teaching for approximately 15 years. The former two teachers received their teacher training in the years 2007–2009, while Vera received hers in 2002. Only Vera underwent her teacher training in Helsinki, while Anna and Emma studied in Jyväskylä and Tampere, respectively.

### **3.4 Ethical issues**

Because the study is a qualitative case study, there are some key ethical issues that need clarifying before delving into the analysis portion of the study. The first, and perhaps most crucial, ethical issue surrounding the study is the anonymity of the participants. In order to protect the anonymity of the teachers participating in this case study. Case studies take a detailed look into specific people, which opens risks of the informants being identifiable. In order to prevent this from happening, the participants' names are pseudonyms. Additionally, the specific area where the participants work is left purposefully ambiguous. The universities where the participants received their teacher training, however, are important for the research aims of the study and are, therefore, unchanged.

The second major point of interest in regards to ethics is the reliability of the participants. As discussed earlier, this is a possible issue in any study dealing with human memory, as

memory is not completely reliable. For this study, however, I have attempted to circumvent possible problems surrounding this as effectively as possible. In addition to providing the interview questions for the participants in advance, I have also chose not to highlight comments made by the participants that they were not confident in.

## **4 ANALYSIS**

In this section, I will present the findings of the study based on conducted interviews. The sections are divided based on the research questions at hand. Additionally, the first research question has been divided into multiple segments for ease of navigation.

### **4.1. The participants and cultural diversity**

#### **4.1.1 The participants' thoughts on culture and cultural diversity**

All of the participants saw Finland as a culturally diverse country. This was mainly attributed to the ever-increasing immigration and how different cultures are more visible at a societal level in everyday life. Interestingly, however, both Emma and Vera pointed out the inherent cultural diversity which exists within every culture. This shows understanding of the deeper levels of culture, since culture cannot be only construed to mean national cultures. Adept descriptions of their overall thoughts about what could be defined as culture are in the following statements:

“It’s interesting because the first thing that comes to mind is everyone who’s not a Finn. But if you start splitting hairs then, well, we have pupils who have come from Northern Finland, so it’s that... there is diversity even within Finland. (1) (Emma / translated by me)

“When you start to think about it, I’ve been really interested in the history of Finland and all, and recently I’ve been reading about where Finns have come, and we are just such a mixed people!” (2) (Vera / translated by me)

Additionally, Vera expressed a viewpoint which was that considering Finland multicultural is “kind of required after all of the refugees”. This refers to the news surrounding the refugee crisis that has been covered during the last few years. As discussed in the background, however, the number of refugees equals only to a very minor portion of total immigration.

This shows that the attention the recent waves of refugees have received in the various news outlets have affected the thoughts Vera had on immigration. Interestingly, however, neither Anna nor Emma mentioned the refugees who came to Finland during the interviews. While not concrete enough information to draw solid conclusions from, this could be inferred to mean that they do not see refugees as a major facet of immigration.

Additionally, Vera stated that she experienced the impact of different cultures in Finland very drastically due to her age of nearing retirement. According to her, the Finland she knew in her childhood is now different than before due to the different cultures visible in the society. Anna and Emma, on the contrary, expressed no such wistfulness when it came to different cultures being present in their communities. However, all of the participants also noted that the cultural status of Finland relies heavily on the city one is discussing. The general consensus between the participants was that the area surrounding the capital can be considered culturally diverse, while other regions may not fulfill the criteria. Further, all of the participants also agreed that the growing cultural diversity also shapes the profession of a teacher into something different than what it used to be. However, especially Emma has experienced fear from this, since this change is an aspect of being a teacher that she was not prepared mentally for. She felt relief after working in her current school for a while, because the school is multicultural enough to give a grasp of teaching culturally diverse classrooms without being overwhelming in that regard.

Even though the participants agreed that Finland is a culturally diverse country, there were differences in opinion of what constitutes a culturally diverse classroom. Emma and Vera held practically the polar opposites on this front. Emma stated that just one learner from a different cultural background is enough to see the classroom in a different way, while Vera's view is that approximately a quarter of a classroom's material needs to be from a different culture than the majority in order to fulfill the criteria for cultural diversity. Anna, on the contrary, did not have a clear answer on where to draw the line. Rather, she said the following about the subject:

“It (cultural diversity) like changes a lot depending on the class at hand. Sometimes you never really realize it because if they know Finnish then it won't really have an effect.” (3) (Anna / translated by me)

This statement draws the issue away from culture and into another major affecting factor surrounding culture: language. In this sense, Anna sees that culture itself is not as important when it comes to teaching as long as there is a common language between the learner and the teacher. However, while this is possibly a common belief, there are studies that weigh cultural awareness as an important factor in learning. Otherwise, these results signal that what constitutes a culturally diverse classroom is highly subjective. As discussed in the background section, opinions on cultural diversity are very personal with few hard facts surrounding them, which may be an indicator as to why cultural diversity was seen in such different light by the participants.

#### **4.1.2 The participants' experiences of teaching and cultural diversity**

When it comes to culturally diverse classrooms, all of the participants had experience of teaching classes they consider culturally diverse. This is not surprising considering that the area where the participants work is very culturally diverse. However, the number of learners from different cultures the participants taught varied greatly. Anna had supervised a class that was known for its cultural diversity, since the group had learners from around seven different cultures. She stated that this was a departure from her previous experiences of having taught classes in overwhelmingly monocultural regions. Emma's experiences are roughly similar, with having taught culturally diverse classrooms often in her current school but not in her previous ones. Vera had arguably the broadest experiences of cultural diversity due to her longest working experience out of the participants, which has enabled her to see more than her colleagues. Nevertheless, all of the participants held extremely strong opinions about their experiences in regards to cultural diversity.

The participants had differing strategies at use when teaching classrooms with learners from different cultures in them. The general consensus was, however, that culture does not play an important role in classroom teaching, but rather, it is used as an auxiliary tool in order to aid teaching. Vera in particular held the view that while culture would be an interesting aspect to include in teaching, it would be counterproductive in the end, which is shown in this excerpt:

“There's just such a hurry and you have to have time to go over all the chapters. I haven't really seen culture having an effect on my teaching methods. A teacher just has to go through all the grammar topics and the tests have to be done in a given way..” (4) (Vera / translated by

me)

This statement also highlights a mindset, which is that culture and teaching proper languages are fundamentally incompatible. In other words, while Emma could choose to believe that she simply lacks the information to integrate culture into teaching grammar, she instead sees the matter as unreachable. Additionally, Vera's statement raises the facet that a teacher simply has no time to include cultural elements into his or her teaching due to the other constrictions in place, such as the tests which have to measure certain grammatical elements. Of the participants, only Emma attempted to remedy the situation by taking culture into account in her own teaching practices. The participants were all interested in culture and therefore, had paid attention to it in the classroom. Emma in particular gave a fitting concrete example of how she has integrated the culture of the classroom into her own teaching practices:

“I don't really have anything truly concrete in mind now but like for example if we're talking about food you can talk a little bit about what do you eat if you have an Asian background. I don't mean like pointing out people's culture, but rather focus on how people are not necessarily similar and that that's okay.” (5) (Emma / translated by me)

### **4.1.3 The benefits and challenges of culturally diverse classrooms**

All of the participants considered a culturally diverse classroom to be a boon to society. This stemmed from the belief that diversity in general is required to create a community where differences are not something to be feared. This was thought to be especially important when the mingling of cultures is introduced starting from a young age. Anna found this especially important in the case of multicultural classrooms, perhaps due to the experience of being the homeroom teacher for a very culturally diverse class. Adequate representation of her feelings is in the following excerpt:

“Yeah, it (having culturally diverse classrooms) maybe reduces “the Finland is best at everything” thinking, that sort of patriotism where we only think about what's Finnish and what is not.” (6) (Anna / translated by me)

This statement is in line with previous studies which have found that prejudice against other cultures is effective even in elementary school age children in Finland (Rissanen 2012). Even though this mindset was most weighed by Anna, all of the participants at least mentioned that

culturally diverse classrooms help in reinforcing tolerance towards differences. In addition to helping create a more tolerant society, the participants also felt that teaching culturally diverse learners helped them become more understanding towards differences. Especially Emma considered this an important facet in her teaching experiences. She said the following about the issue:

“And I think that I have to think about what is taken for granted is a good thing, for example these basic “Let's make Christmas cards” tasks, oh wait, not everyone celebrates Christmas! I just think that it's .. nice to have to think about these.” (7) (Emma / translated by me)

Emma considers herself a more open-minded person now that she has begun teaching culturally diverse classrooms. Indeed, seeing cultural diversity in effect may be an effective method of realizing the differences between different cultural backgrounds.

The challenges of teaching culturally diverse classrooms are manifold according to the participants. Firstly, the differences in culture are an aspect of personality, which needs to be crossed in order to be an effective teacher. This, however, takes effort from the teacher and creates additional work in extension. Anna stated that teaching a diverse classroom requires a lot of additional effort from the teacher, since he or she has to pay attention more carefully that everyone is able to follow the classroom instruction. Additionally, even though Emma considered having to think about culture in greater detail as a teacher, she still saw it as a taxing affair. Vera lamented the change that has been occurring in a teacher's workload by saying that the requirements of a teacher have risen while the resources are taken away. Secondly, there is a risk of becoming overly sensitive when teaching culturally diverse classrooms. As discussed earlier, culture changed how the participants viewed classrooms and how they are viewed. However, this can also take a form of assuming that culture creates a greater difference than it actually does. Even though cultural awareness is important, it is another matter entirely if a teacher is afraid due to cultural differences. Emma discussed this issue at length and described the situation as follows:

“I try to keep in mind that we are not all similar and that I can't assume anything but then when you have a class full of people from different cultures you just .. become more sensitive and start wondering “was it ok to say this” or “did I say something stupid” or “did I make this too big of a number”. (8) (Emma / translated by me)

This excerpt shows that there is a legitimate fear of sounding too discriminatory against

people from different cultural backgrounds. According to the participants, however, this is an issue that will be remedied through being aware of the cultural differences that exist. Vera, for example, stated that meeting the parents of learners helped significantly in clearing up the cultural stereotypes which affected her thinking. The final significant challenge in regards to cultural diversity that was raised in the interviews was cultural differences themselves. This may surface in form of not simply understanding how learners learn or are used to processing information due to cultural norms. This was especially highlighted by Vera, who stated that she has had difficulties controlling classrooms simply due to the cultural backgrounds having power. Her view on the issue is one of frustration, as can be seen from the following excerpt:

“There was this one class which had like 6 or 7 whose parents were not Finnish. And they really bonded together. And when I said something negative to them, suddenly I was the RACIST there! I sensed that there was this culture question that they thought I was telling them because of their culture.” (9) (Vera / translated by me)

The biggest challenge for the participants in regards to culture, however, is teaching a classroom which has at least a single learner who does not understand either English or Finnish adequately. All of the participants had experience of teaching such a classroom, and the emotions surrounding the experiences were varied. I have included fitting excerpts from all the participants in order to illuminate the thoughts of frustration held by the participants about the issue:

“It’s just sad that there is no progress, that they will just graduate with 5s or 6s (the lowest passing grades) just so that they have gone through this system. And after all a teacher is a teacher, we have a teacher’s heart in that we wish that everyone could learn or that I could explain this in a way that you could learn.” (10) (Vera / translated by me)

“I tried really hard to find extra materials to help him (a Chinese immigrant), but I really couldn’t find anything in Chinese! It would be really great if there were material available to help teach immigrants.. Maybe even recruit immigrants to help in the creation of these materials.” (11) (Anna / translated by me)

“There was this one pupil ... Well, we make these word lists: the most important words of the chapter. I almost always forget but I always have to check if he even knows the words in Finnish. And always point out that he can ask his friend if he doesn’t know what’s a national park. And and these Alias methods (a word explaining game) have to be used a lot.” (12) (Emma / translated by me).

The excerpts show that all of the participants have struggled with teaching pupils whose first language is not Finnish or Swedish. For the most part, these struggles stem from the lack of support a teacher has in teaching such learners. Additionally, the excerpts show differences in how the participants have tried to make learning in traditional classrooms easier for the immigrant pupils. Emma has attempted to create her own methods in trying to make pupils in her class participate in regular classroom teaching, while Anna has sought out external materials to help in teaching without much success. Vera, then, expressed the most verbal frustration about the state of affairs, but mentioned no concrete example of how to make learning for non-native speakers of Finnish easier. Ultimately, however, all of the participants expressed a need for resources in helping to deal with this aspect of teaching a culturally diverse classroom.

#### **4.2. The participants teacher training experiences in connection to cultural diversity**

The participants had vastly differing experiences about cultural diversity during their teaching training. As far as they could remember, Anna and Emma were taught basically nothing about cultural diversity. They stated that it is possible that some optional courses on cultural diversity could have been available, but in general the focus on culture of the learners was not a focus. On the other end of the spectrum, Vera claimed to have gotten a sizable amount of information about the topic. She had discussions about teaching intercultural classrooms with her peers during training, as well as written assignments about how cultural backgrounds might affect the learning process. These kinds of experiences were in fierce contrast with the experiences of Anna and Emma. They stated that the time spent on teacher training left them woefully underprepared for teaching culturally diverse classrooms. Vera, on the other hand, enjoyed her time during training immensely. She said that having those experiences made it easier for her to adjust to working in a culturally diverse school. In order to highlight the results for this question, below are excerpts from all of the participants:

“We didn’t really cover multilingualism or anything, I mean that when you become a teacher there is a certain .. fall into reality.” (13) (Anna / translated by me)

“It’s really strange, like it shouldn’t really affect in what university you study in. Because even Tampere isn’t really a small town, you know? \$\$ It’s just so absurd.” (14) (Emma / translated by me)

Vera: “We had loads of discussions on the subject! We had like these imaginary situations where you were a teacher in a very multicultural school. Yeah, I feel that my experiences were very enlightening.” (15) (Vera / translated by me)

Interestingly, the participants had their own firm ideas of why the situation might be as it is with their teacher training experiences. The main reason which was raised by everyone during the interviews is the city where the teacher training took place in. Anna and Emma both saw the cities where they received their teacher training (Jyväskylä and Tampere, respectively) as being dominated by Finnish culture. Because of this, they viewed that the people managing the training process might not have considered the possibility of a classroom being culturally diverse. Anna also stated that culture might have been omitted on purpose if the consideration for a classroom’s cultural diversity was not seen as a prominent enough issue to warrant discussing. Vera showed similar thinking in her opinion on the matter, as she saw Helsinki’s multicultural status as one of the important factors as to why cultural diversity was covered in her training. What is noteworthy, however, is that Anna and Emma both had strong beliefs in that they would have obtained a better training in regards to culture if they had gone to university in Helsinki. Additionally, Vera thought that her age might be also be a contributing factor to the results. This is because her teacher training occurred after she had already graduated from university a decade ago. In her eyes, she and the other people in her course had matured more than younger teacher trainees and therefore, would see cultural diversity as a real problem in teaching due to the life experience accumulated. This belief, however, does not answer the differences in how the teacher trainings were designed even though it offers a feasible answer to the behavioral differences in teacher trainees.

However, ultimately all of the participants exhibited behavior which points toward teacher training to be unimportant when it comes to preparation for working as a teacher. The participants all expressed the view point that even though the training is beneficial in theory, a teacher can only learn how to teach effectively through work itself in practice. There seemed to be a consensus that the first few years of proper teaching are spent on learning the profession in greater detail. Even Vera, who had the most positive experiences from her training period, described the situation as follows:

“I just have this feeling that is the training really necessary? Isn't it about the practice? Theory may be nice but in the schools themselves you just have to manage. But on the other hand all kind of education is good for you.” (16) (Vera / translated by me)

Additionally, even though Anna and Emma expressed frustration about their teacher training, they still showed similar beliefs to Vera. This creates an interesting juxtaposition between the two mindsets the participants followed. On the one hand, teacher training is valued and deemed important when one strives to become a teacher. On the other hand, however, these experiences are disconnected from reality and that the truth of teaching culturally diverse classrooms is an aspect of teaching that can only be learned through sheer practice. Interestingly, however, Emma seemed to exhibit regret at having to mention this, while Anna and Vera saw the issue more as a fact. In other words, Emma has seemed to accept the current situation of having to train oneself into professionalism with reluctance. Additionally, Anna also stated that while it was a negative experience to have to learn how to teach through the support of colleagues and sheer hard work, she still considered it an effective learning method.

Similar to the way cultural diversity was viewed in teacher training, the participants expressed similar opinions on opportunities of receiving additional education on cultural diversity. All of the participants would value opportunities to train themselves further on the topic of cultural diversity in classrooms but only Emma considered it necessary. Anna and Vera saw the opportunities as being overall positive, but not as needed since teaching is learned best through practice. Emma stated the following about the subject:

“Yes, there definitely is a need for further training on this. I haven't really thought about it for myself only, but for everyone as a group.” (17) (Emma / translated by me)

This statement reflects Emma's thoughts about the issues well, as she had firm beliefs on the topic throughout the interview. Emma also answered the question regarding further training very quickly, which reveals that she had thought of the issue before on her own. Anna and Vera, on the other hand, hesitated before giving answers, which could indicate that they only during the interview considered the usefulness of training on culturally diverse classes. Further, in her statement Emma reveals a hope of the teacher collective at her school working on the issues about culture together as a group. While thinking about these questions on your own may be helpful, she sees that public discussion would be beneficial to create a

community that is more tolerant towards differences.

## 5 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the experiences English teachers in Finland have about cultural diversity both in the classroom and in their teacher training. Even though preliminary studies on the effect of cultural diversity on teaching in Finland have been conducted, for the most part this area of study is still unresearched (Pitkänen-Huhta and Mäntylä 2014). However, as immigration becomes more prevalent each year, it should not be ignored as an area of study. The effect of immigration also affects the profession of a teacher, as classrooms are composed of pupils who may have their cultural roots in other societies. Of the participants, Vera had worked as a teacher for over a decade, while Emma and Anna had approximately five years of teaching experience each. The goal of this study, illuminating the issue of cultural diversity in Finnish classrooms, was particularly successful due to the participants' extensive experience of teaching culturally diverse classrooms. Additionally, the differing opinions between the participants helped in highlighting a variety of possible mindsets surrounding culture and cultural diversity.

However, it needs to be stated that because of the limited amount of data provided by case studies in general, generalizations about the issues of cultural diversity cannot be made. Further, the topic of memory makes studying a topic such as teacher training particularly difficult, since memory may not be completely reliable (Brinkmann 2013). However, for this study the participants claimed to have clear recollections of their time as teacher trainees, which helped the data collection. Additionally, while all of the participants for this study were specifically chosen from a culturally diverse area in Finland, I did not expect them to have such distinct opinions on the matters. Therefore, all three of the participants showed a different understanding of cultural diversity which made the differences in the results particularly stark, e.g. in the case of defining a culturally diverse classroom. Nevertheless, even though the results of this study may not be completely applicable to every English teacher in Finland, the study helps in highlighting some of the potential issues connected to cultural diversity and teaching.

The first research question focused on the participants' general thoughts on cultural diversity

and additionally, on its connection to teaching. Regarding culture, the participants had differing thoughts on how culture should be defined. Emma and Vera appeared to see culture in deeper detail, for example by stating that the “culture of Finland” has inherent complexities. Nevertheless, both Emma and Vera still saw cultural diversity in the classroom based on the number of learners with cultural backgrounds outside of Finland. Anna did not mention the more complex nature of culture at all, which might indicate that she sees culture itself as not particularly crucial in classroom teaching. This is also highlighted by the fact that she views a classroom’s cultural diversity based on the level of Finnish of the pupils. However, this level of thinking may be disruptive to a teacher, as the cultural background of a learner itself does play a role in the learning process (Kramsch 2009; Lytra 2011). On the other hand, Emma and Vera had very strict definitions for what constitutes cultural diversity in a classroom but it was not limited to the use of languages. For Vera the line was very strict, in that a quarter of the pupils need to have family from outside Finland, while Emma saw that a single pupil is enough for her to see the whole class in a different light. These results only emphasize the personal nature of culture, even when it is connected to teaching practices. Nevertheless, even though there are distinctions on how teachers see culture, the cultural backgrounds of learners should be embraced as they have a beneficial effect on teaching outcomes.

Further, all of the participants had distinct experiences about their teacher training when it comes to culture. Interestingly, however, these differences were not based on generational differences even though Vera graduated ten years earlier than Emma. Rather, the results for the study show that teacher training in Finland may have geographical differences. Vera, who received her training in Helsinki, stated that she had been informed very well on teaching culturally diverse classrooms, while Anna and Emma received basically no education about the topic. Therefore, the results point towards a situation in which some universities fail to provide future teachers all the tools they need to work in an increasingly culturally diverse country. This is problematic since ideally every university should provide the same tools for graduating teachers in order to avoid hierarchy between universities. Even though currently immigration affects Southern Finland the most, it cannot be accounted for that the situation will stay the same in the future. Regardless that many graduating teachers stay in the region where they studied, they may still have been provided lacking resources in regards to the cultural and linguistic background of learners.

It is to be noted, however, that while Vera claimed to have been well informed on the potentiality of culturally diverse classrooms, she had little concrete information on how to take cultural diversity into account in actual teaching practices. She even stated that a teacher simply has to teach certain grammatical forms, which leaves little room for improvisation in the teacher's part. From this it can be inferred that while Vera did receive information on the topic of cultural diversity, it only helped her in preparing mentally for the teaching of culturally diverse classrooms. Anna and Emma, on the contrary, felt anxiety in having to teach a type of learner they had not been made aware of through education. Therefore, even though the teacher training program in Helsinki may have succeeded in raising awareness for culturally diverse classrooms, it did not give any resources for teachers to take the diversity into account in teaching practices. This is a crucial weakness in teacher training regardless of it being a topic in the training itself.

Ultimately, the current state of teacher training in Finland seems to rely heavily on *what* is taught, but not *who* the teachers are teaching. This creates a problematic situation, as the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of learners are important factors in the learning process. It is worrying if a teacher enters working life thinking that combining culture and grammar are fundamentally incompatible. In addition, some teachers may find themselves unequipped when dealing with learners who do not speak Finnish or Swedish as their mother tongue due to the lacking resources provided in teacher training. While the teacher training process in Finland is constantly being updated, cultural diversity needs to be taken into account as soon as possible. The whole teacher training in Finland needs to be updated in order to take into account the increasing cultural diversity present in classrooms, in order to foster a positive atmosphere for everybody.

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## **APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

All of the questions were translated by me from Finnish to English

Where and when did you receive your teacher training?

How was cultural diversity handled in your teacher training?

Did you have any discussions outside of lectures or classrooms about culture and its connection to teaching?

Have you ever reflected on the usefulness or connection about teacher training and culture?

Do you have any experience of teaching culturally diverse classrooms?  
If yes, what kinds?

Have you ever had a child in class who could not communicate effectively through Finnish alone? If yes, how did the experience make you feel?

Do you think that Finland is culturally diverse or multicultural?

What do you think of the ever more culturally diverse Finland in general?

How should culturally diverse classrooms be taught in your opinion?

What does a culturally diverse classroom mean to you? Why?