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# Chapter 11

## Conceptions of Diversity Among Finnish Principals



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**Abstract** Principals have a crucial role when leading the school community towards more responsive and equitable education. Changes in Finnish society have occurred rapidly, and there is a gap in Finnish research concerning diversity in education and leadership. Our aim with this study was to form an understanding of Finnish comprehensive school principals' conceptions of diversity. Richard Milner's (2010) outlining of the conceptual repertoires of diversity formed the basis for this examination. This study is a quantitative analysis of the responses of Finnish comprehensive school principals to a questionnaire. The results were obtained through two separate analyses: descriptive analysis about principals' approaches to conceptions of diversity and cluster analysis to identify the profiles of principals based on their diversity conceptions. As a result, we described Finnish principals' conceptions of diversity, as well as identifying five profiles: the Encouragers, the Understanders, the Delegators, the Adjusters and the Discreets.

**Keywords** Diversity · Leadership · Conceptions · Comprehensive school

### Introduction

There has been little research about diversity leadership in Finnish schools. As the role of a leader in education is central in developing a school community that values diversity and experiences it as richness and an asset (Räsänen et al., 2018), it is

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important to have research that has been conducted in the Finnish context. Compared to many European countries, Finland is still homogenous, and the comprehensive schools have maintained and nourished the idea of a “unified Finnish culture”, which is dated, and no longer applicable to a rapidly changing society. Moreover, due to a lack of education policy debate and experiences in practice, comprehensive school principals may not have up-to-date knowledge and skills regarding diversity leadership within schools. The previous Nordic research suggests that leadership competence, such as knowledge, skills and attitudes, need attention and re-evaluation as schools are increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse (Andersen, 2014; Merchant et al., 2012). The climate around the questions of diversity is gradually changing, and the questions concerning minorities have started to be recognised as being politically meaningful. In addition to these factors, we believe that the scattered nature of training for the Finnish principals and the opportunity to qualify as principal through a range of routes can affect the way principals approach diversity in their school communities (Lahtero et al., 2019). That is, the competence of principals in matters related to diversity is varied as it is dependent on the content of their training as well as the practical knowledge gained during their professional careers. Furthermore, the questions concerning the diversity of worldviews and values have become more visible.

Data from several studies have suggested that the most significant feature concerning teachers and principals’ responsiveness to cultural and other forms of diversity is their personal attitude, their ability to take other people’s perspective and their capacity to critical self-reflection (Abacioglu et al., 2020; Khalifa et al., 2016). This quantitative study has focused on principals’ conceptions of diversity, which we believe reflects their current attitudes and relation to diversity within schools. We have used Richard Milner’s (2010) outlining of the conceptual repertoires of diversity as a framework for the questionnaire and for the further profile analysis conducted for the data. The aim was not only to produce new information about diversity leadership in Finnish schools but also to form a basis and starting point for further research planning about this area of interest which in Finland is yet to be studied.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Diversity in Educational Leadership***

In the field of education, the questions of diversity and leadership are generally related to gender, religious and non-religious worldviews, race and ethnicity, sexuality, social justice and equality (e.g. Coleman, 2012). In addition, it usually includes the aspects of ability and capability. The recognised challenges related to diversity within schools are stereotyping and categorisation based on interpreted otherness and what is considered as “normal” (Coleman, 2012; Dervin, 2016). Diversity leadership in education is theoretically closely connected with culturally (and

linguistically) responsive school leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016; 2019; Scanlan & Lopéz, 2015), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018) and many constructions of leadership that are aimed at promoting sustainable and inclusive ways of working in the school communities (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Bottery et al., 2018; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

Principals' conceptions of diversity are important because principals have a significant impact on school improvement as well as on features in school organisation that in turn have a positive effect on teaching and learning (Leithwood et al., 2020). This is connected to developing education that is more equitable, which means discussing not only the equity of opportunity but also the equity of outcome (Anderson, 2007; Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2021). (Culturally) responsive school leadership challenges principals to evaluate their personal conceptions and biases, because at least in western countries, schools are culturally Eurocentric and maintain "the white norm", which presents the students outside these cultures and norms with challenges in their academic achievement and other school activities (Milner, 2010; Khalifa et al., 2016, 2019; Gay, 2018).

The role of a leader in education is central in developing a school community that values diversity and experiences it as a source of richness and as an asset (Räsänen et al., 2018). Principals are responsible for all the school activities and teacher development, but they also have a unique position to be able to develop non-classroom spaces and structures at school (Khalifa, 2019, 25). If diversity is not recognised, it can lead to a situation in which various groups and structural inequalities that may affect them remain unseen. Recent research has pointed out that principals in Finland seem to have narrow conceptions about different worldviews and some other aspects of diversity (Rissanen, 2019; Lipiäinen et al., 2020; Jantunen et al., 2021). This may be because diversity in the Finnish educational context has been close to a synonym for immigration for a long time (see, e.g. Immonen-Oikkonen & Leino, 2010) and that led to a situation in which diversity was seen as something that comes from the outside and needs to be solved, not as something that is an integral part of every individual's identity. However, Finnish research on the topic is limited, and diversity in a broader sense has not previously been studied in the context of Finnish educational leadership.

### *Principals in Finnish Comprehensive Schools*

The main education organisers of comprehensive school education are the local municipalities, and almost all schools are public. Comprehensive school covers grades 1–9, and the pupils typically start their school during the year they turn 7 years old. The work around diversity and themes related to diversity in education in schools has been included in documents or instruments provided to schools. The basic education act (Basic Education Act 628/1998), as the basis of organisation of education, states that the purpose of the education in comprehensive schools is to promote equality in society and to support students' growth to humanity and

ethically responsible membership of the society as well as to promote the conditions for pupils to take part in education (Basic Education Act 628/1998). The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Board of Education [FNBE], 2014) defines all diversities as a value, a resource and richness and acknowledges schools as learning communities which are a part of a culturally transformative and diverse society (FNBE, 2014). In the National Core Curriculum, Finnish culture is described as having been formed in many ways and from several sources and defined as the “diverse Finnish cultural heritage” (FNBE, 2014, 16). The National Core Curriculum clearly states that “being Finnish” does not have any specific requirements or desired features. However, it can be noted that the word used is “Finnish culture” and not “global citizenship”. Further, the municipal education authorities and schools can decide how to emphasise the various principles introduced in the curriculum. Along with the curriculum, the school communities are expected to prepare an equality and equity plan, and the school staff, students, parents and other community members are required to be involved in its preparation.

Finnish principals are traditionally required to have a master’s degree, teaching qualifications, sufficient work experience as a teacher and excellent knowledge of the school’s official language. The set of qualifications must include a certificate in educational administration to provide proof of the knowledge and skills of educational administration gained in another way or by completing university-level study in educational leadership and administration (Asetus opetustoimen henkilöstön kelpoisuusvaatimuksista, 1998; Lahtero et al., 2019). Finnish principals have a high level of autonomy (OECD, 2019), and they do not have a specific national-level job description. In general, Finnish principals are responsible for the school’s use of human and financial resources, pedagogical leadership and leading teachers’ professional development. Other responsibilities are dependent on the organisation of the municipal-level education authority, as a result of Finland’s decentralised nature (FNBE, 2013).

### *The Conceptual Repertoires of Diversity*

Milner’s (2010) literature review from “the empirical and conceptual work in the fields of education and teacher education” to frame “conceptual repertoires of diversity” was used in this study to examine to Finnish principals’ responsiveness to these conceptions. Although Milner’s frame was built through research concerning teachers in the USA, results are equally applicable to principals, as the conceptualisation is similar to that relating to teachers, as they work in the same educational context. However, another aspect to consider is that Finland and the USA are different societies. Diversity in Finland has increased rapidly (e.g. statistically), but the USA has been diverse from its roots. Milner outlined five concepts from research which are critical for teachers to understand: *colour-blindness*, *cultural conflict*, *the myth of meritocracy*, *deficit conceptions* and *(low) expectations*. Here we introduce

these concepts with relevant and more recent research to support and strengthen their content as well as to tie the conceptions to educational leadership.

*Colour-blindness* is generally known to be harmful in perceiving students (or staff or any human being) as it leads to ignoring racial backgrounds and their meaning for an individual's identity, position in the society, power relations, discrimination and structural racism (Milner, 2010). In relation to school leadership, Muhammad Khalifa et al., (2016) outlines in his collection of behaviours of culturally responsive school leaders that "challenging whiteness and other hegemonic epistemologies in school" is an important part of critical self-reflection on leadership behaviours. Similarly, Milner clarifies that colour-blindness is usually due to fear of being considered as a racist if bringing up a student's skin colour, consideration of being politically incorrect and offensive, and to the conception that race does not matter as racism has ended, and it is no longer a relevant topic (Milner, 2010). Critical self-reflection is crucial to recognise and avoid these types of conceptions. However, as the Black Lives Matter movement has shown, racism has not ended, and racial and ethnic backgrounds play a significant role in an individual's life. There certainly is no room for colour-blindness at school, even though the intentions behind it may seem good. Some "good intentions", such as supporting internationalism, may even strengthen "the white norm" and injustice at school (Gardner-McTaggart, 2021).

Milner's *cultural conflict* is also about power and power relations at school. When creating the school culture, principals and teachers can be profoundly inconsistent with that truly reflecting the students or the school community's cultural experiences. According to Milner, behind this are most often the ideas of adaptation or assimilations to the school or classroom culture. Principals and teachers may then be in a constant cultural conflict with their students, which leads to interpretations of what is considered to be "normal" behaviour (Milner, 2010). In Khalifa et al., (2016) theory, culturally responsive school leaders take responsibility for developing culturally responsive teachers and to promote inclusive school environments. This requires accepting all the identities at school, modelling what culturally responsive teaching is and reforming the school curriculum. Relating to this, socially just leadership and schooling require that all students and their families feel welcome at school (Scanlan & Theoharis, 2015, 3).

*The myth of meritocracy* in teachers' thinking, Milner claims, is a result of beliefs that everything one has is earned, and success (and failure) is the result of choice, ability and effort, not as a consequence of economics, whiteness, privileges or benefits. Meritocratic thinking relates to believing that everyone has the same opportunities and equality of opportunity (Milner, 2010). Meritocratic ideas are not promoted by Sahlberg and Cobbold (2021) either, but they promote the idea of the equality of outcome in education, not as an equal outcome of individuals, but as an equal outcome between the groups, which they call "social equity". Their claim arises from global concern that the educational outcomes between different social classes, genders, races and ethnic backgrounds continue to grow (Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2021). The hard questions are about what an adequate outcome or fair opportunity in education would be, which need not only to be determined but also

lived up to at the societal level (Anderson, 2007). When it comes to leadership in education, it has been argued that educational leadership has adopted neoliberal norms, which has led to supporting practices at school that promote meritocracy, “merit” and competition (Wijaya Mulya & Sakhiyya, 2021). Considering this trend, it is a valid concern to pay attention to meritocratic conceptions.

*The deficit conceptions* in Milner’s outlining are mainly related to influencing practices at school. If there is a firm mindset that students of colour, students from lower socioeconomic status or those whose native language is not the school language, do not bring as much to the classroom as other students, cannot do as much or do not possess as much cognitively, the students’ learning opportunities are shaped and affected, and not in a desirable way. Sometimes this type of thinking among teachers and principals is due to a belief that they are being sensitive towards (culturally) diverse students when they are not “too demanding”, feel sorry for them and make up for what (they feel) the students are lacking (Milner, 2010). This can lead to marginalisation, and to avoid that and to ensure academic achievement of culturally and linguistically diverse students, principals, as school leaders, are required to take a role as a creator of communities of practice, as teachers do not change their practices in isolation (Scanlan & Lopéz, 2015, 22). Additionally, Khalifa emphasises the principal’s role as a developer of teacher capacities for more responsive pedagogy and as a professional who resists deficit images of students and their families (Khalifa et al., 2016).

*The (low) expectations* are closely related to deficit conceptions, as the expectations in education influence teachers’ thinking, discourse and actions. According to Milner’s perceptions, teachers lower their expectations from their students especially when the students’ problem-solving, expressions or acting in a situation is different from those of the teacher. Lowered expectations become the norm in curriculums, both explicitly and implicitly. Typical thinking patterns of teachers (and principals, we assume) are that lowering expectations are helping the students to build more self-esteem and that the teacher’s main task is just to have everyone pass their (standardised tests or) class, as it would require too much to do anymore for certain students (because they lack the capacity to do any better) (Milner, 2010). Also Gay (2018) points out the importance of teachers’ faith in their students’ intellectual capabilities. She argues that culturally responsive teachers are able to use an array of methods and approaches when designing and implementing education as a whole, including curriculum, instructions and assessment, in any context in which the students are diverse (Gay, 2018, 52–53). In practice, this concerns all the teachers at every school, because if a broad perspective is taken, all the classrooms are diverse. What comes to the role of a school leader, according to Khalifa (2019), principals are between policy and practice, and they are therefore held accountable for their teachers’ professionalism and actions, as well as possible resistance to cultural responsiveness at school (Khalifa, 2019, 25).

In this study, we used Milner’s frame of conceptual repertoires of diversity as a basis for examining Finnish comprehensive school principals’ reflections on

diversity. In addition, this framework has been used in this study to conduct a profile analysis of the principals based on their conceptions of diversity.

## **The Study**

### ***Aims and Research Questions***

The aim of this study was to investigate Finnish comprehensive school principals' conceptions of diversity. In this study design, we drew from Milner's (2010) work on teachers' common conceptions of diversity and used this as a framework for a questionnaire and further profile analysis.

The research questions in this study are as follows:

1. How do Finnish comprehensive school principals approach the conceptions of diversity?
2. What profiles of principals can be identified based on their conceptions of diversity?

### ***Participants***

An electronic survey was sent to 1930 comprehensive schools across Finland in January 2020. The total number of responses after deleting the forms that were not completed was 740. An accurate response rate cannot be calculated, because the total number of possible respondents is unknown. However, the number of respondents was considered representative regarding the total number of principals in Finland. Respondents were working as principals, vice principals, assistant principals and head teachers, but in this study, we have referred to all of these school leaders as "principals".

The data represented Finnish principals in terms of age and gender as 60% of the participants were aged 50 years and older, 30.8% were 40 to 49 years old and 9.2% were aged from 25 to 39 years. The majority were women with 58.8% and 40.8% were men. Three respondents did not want to share their gender identity. The percentages are close to the national level numbers which supports the representativeness of the data. Nationally, 52% of the principals are women; 30.5% of the principals are 40–49 years old and 61.7% over 50 years old (FNAE, 2020). A total of 96.1% held a master's degree and 2.4% a bachelor's degree. Eight of the participants possessed a doctoral degree, and three had studied some other degree. Slightly more than half of the participants (51.9%) had more than 10 years' work experience as a principal; 20.1% had from 5 to 10 years' experience; and 28% had less than 5 years' experience as a principal.



## *Measures and Data Collection*

The data came from a quantitative electronic survey. In this study, the focus was on Likert scale questions about principals' conceptions and attitudes about a range of aspects of diversity in a school context. Items presented the five aspects of the conceptual repertoires of diversity, constructed by Richard Milner (2010). The five aspects were colour-blindness, cultural conflicts, the myth of meritocracy, deficit conceptions and (low) expectations. We created four items per aspect to reach the essence of each of the themes. The aim when creating the items was to contextualise the features to suit the Finnish comprehensive school context at the same time. The questionnaire we used was pilot tested with a group of Finnish principals ( $N = 30$ ), and based on the results and the written feedback received, we slightly modified the items to be more precise and clear. The pilot group did not take part in the actual research.

The respondents were asked to evaluate the items on a 7-point Likert scale ("1, completely disagree"; "4, not agreeing or disagreeing"; "7, completely agree"). In addition, there was an eighth option: "not applicable at our school".

## *Data Analyses*

We examined individually each of the items from various features of conceptions of diversity and identified the strongest as well as the most descriptive in terms of content. This was done using frequencies table and by comparing means, standard deviations and skewness and kurtosis. In addition, we used histograms of each item to examine how well the participants' responses followed the normal curve. Through this information, five items, each representing one of Milner's features of conceptions of diversity, were selected for further cluster analysis. First, we conducted a two-step cluster analysis to see what type of solution it would offer. Second, we conducted K-means cluster analysis (more suitable for sample size like this) with 2, 3, 4 and 5 clusters. We ended up using the five-cluster solutions as it was also suggested by the two-step cluster analysis. Cluster analysis was performed with standardised items. At the end, due to violating the assumption of homogeneity of variance, Brown–Forsythe  $F$  statistics with Tamhane's T2 post hoc tests were used to analyse differences between the five clusters in terms of conceptions of diversity.

## **Results**

### *The Finnish Principals' Approaches to Conceptions of Diversity in School Leadership*

The first aim of the study was to detect how the Finnish comprehensive school principals approach the conceptions of diversity. In Table 11.1, the items chosen from the data to present the conceptions and their means and standard deviations are presented.

**Table 11.1** Means and standard deviations of selected items of the conceptions of diversity

Item	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. dev.
<b>Colour-blindness:</b> It is not appropriate in any circumstances to mention students' skin colour	687	4.21	2.06
<b>Cultural conflicts:</b> Other cultures and worldviews should be taken into account in school as comprehensively as possible	716	5.61	1.27
<b>Myth of meritocracy:</b> Students' success is based entirely on how hard they work for it	740	3.38	1.71
<b>Deficit conceptions:</b> Expectations about a student cannot be as high as to others if the student does not speak the school language as fluently as a native speaker does	697	3.65	1.84
<b>(Low) expectations:</b> The teacher has succeeded in their work, if all the children pass their class	733	3.44	1.69

The first item presented the conceptions related to colour-blindness, and it strongly divided the principals. Questions about race and ethnicity are still quite new in Finnish educational discussion, and the topic may often be found to be difficult and sensitive. The mean of the item is slightly above the middle answer with a wide standard deviation above 2. The respondents more often felt that it is always inappropriate to mention students' skin colour, as 35.2% ( $N = 242$ ) of the participants had selected 6 or 7 ("completely agree") from the Likert scale. However, 23.7% ( $N = 162$ ) of the respondents felt that skin colour was something that could be said out loud as they had selected 1 ("completely disagree") or 2 from the Likert scale. It is worth noting that a substantial number of the principals selected 4 ("not agreeing or disagreeing"), a total of 18.6% ( $N = 128$ ). The respondents had an opportunity to complement their answers after the Likert scale questions, and there were several notes and descriptions in which the principals explained that they did not have any students other than white students at their school.

The second item presents the conceptions related to cultural conflicts by arguing that different cultures and worldviews should be considered as comprehensively as possible at school. According to the analysis, Finnish principals found it to be very important to take different cultures and worldviews into account at their school. Cultural conflict was an item that the participating principals were the most harmonious about. The mean for this item was 5.61 with a standard deviation of 1.267. Most of the principals, 60.7% ( $N = 435$ ), completely or almost completely agreed with the item, while only 2.8% ( $N = 20$ ) completely or almost completely disagreed with the item.

The third item was selected to present the participants' conceptions of meritocracy. It can be interpreted that in general, comprehensive school principals in Finland do not emphasise students' effort as the most important factor in success. The mean was 3.38 with a standard deviation of 1.710. A total of 37.6% ( $N = 278$ ) of the participating principals completely or almost completely disagreed with meritocracy. Principals completely or almost completely agreeing with the meritocratic idea of hardwork leading to success were 10.7% ( $N = 94$ ) of the respondents.

Deficit conceptions were examined with an item which suggests that not as much can be expected from the students who lack the skills of a native speaker of the school language. The respondents' thoughts about this theme varied considerably, but slightly more often the principals did not find that the lack of language skills would affect the expectations. This item had a mean of 3.65 with standard deviation of 1.842. Similar to the first item, which also had a wide standard deviation, a fairly large number of respondents for option 4 reported "not agreeing or disagreeing" (18.6%,  $N = 128$ ). A total of 33.1% ( $N = 231$ ) of the respondents completely or almost completely disagreed with the item, as 17.4% ( $N = 129$ ) completely or almost completely agreed with it. In addition, in the complement box after the Likert scale questions, several of the respondents expressed the view that they did not have speakers of any languages other than Finnish or Swedish (the official languages of Finland) at their school.

The fifth and the final item was about the principals' conceptions about low expectations. This was examined by arguing that a teacher has succeeded in their work, if all the students pass their class. In general, principals valued other aspects of the teachers' work more than having all the students pass their class, although several of the respondents did not take a stand. The mean for the item was 3.44 with a standard deviation of 1.687. The item was more disagreed than agreed with 34.9% ( $N = 156$ ) of the respondents completely or almost completely disagreed and 13% ( $N = 96$ ) completely or almost completely agreed with it. The group that did not agree or disagree was seemingly large: 24.6% ( $N = 182$ ).

### ***The Principal Profiles Based on the Cluster Analysis***

The second aim of the study was to identify the profiles of principals based on their conceptions of diversity. This was done with cluster analysis, in this case K-means cluster analysis.

As a result of the analysis, we ended up with five clusters. Cluster centres are presented in Fig. 11.1 with distances from the item means. The clusters were formed using standardised items, and the profile analysis was completed by characterising and naming the profiles.

The principals in cluster 1 were named *the Encouragers* ( $N = 151$ ), as they seemed to be leaders who wanted to encourage their students and staff to accomplish as good results as possible, but mainly through students' and teachers' personal effort. Principals in this group have more of a tendency to believe in meritocracy, meaning that a student's success is based on their effort and working hard enough. In addition, the idea of a teacher's success related to students just passing their class is elevated compared to the other groups. It can be interpreted from the data that principals in this group tend to emphasise performance. In this profile, all five conceptions were elevated.

The second profile based on cluster 2 was named *the Understanders* ( $N = 146$ ). The Understanders do not believe in meritocracy or emphasise passing a class as a

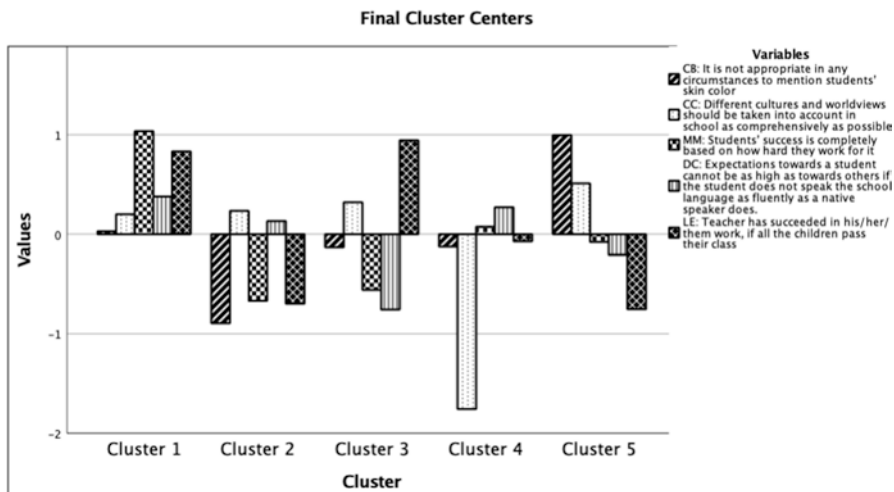


Fig. 11.1 Cluster centres based on standardised items

success factor for a teacher. The Understanders have a tendency for deficit conceptions, which may be because they want to understand every student’s situation and might be concerned that they are too hard or demanding of a student for whom it is more difficult than the others. In this profile, taking cultural and worldview diversity into account at school, as well as lower expectations of students with non-native skills in the school language, are elevated. In addition, colour-blindness was the lowest compared to all the other profiles, and it is assumed that this group might be aware of its harmful nature.

*The Delegates* form the profile based on cluster 3 ( $N = 103$ ). Our interpretation was that in this profile, the principals have conceptions that are supportive of diversity in their school community but are eager to hand responsibility to the teachers. In other words, diversity at school is important, but the primary goal is that the students pass their class. The Delegates are unique compared with the other profiles by their increasingly elevated intensity for evaluating teachers’ success based on whether the students pass their class. They do not support colour-blindness, meritocracy or deficit conceptions about students and find supporting cultural and worldview diversity important.

After interpretation of the results, we described the principals in cluster 4 as *the Adjusters* ( $N = 98$ ). The Adjusters are principals whose objective is to have students adjusted to the school and school culture despite their background. In addition, the Adjusters do not put great emphasis on students passing their class as proof of the teacher’s success, and they are relatively comfortable about mentioning skin colour. Cluster 4 creates a profile which differs from the others greatly in supporting cultural and worldview diversity as comprehensively as possible in their schools. As other groups found this type of support at least somewhat important, in cluster 4, this conception was reported as clearly being below the mean. Additionally, belief

about meritocracy as well as deficit conceptions were slightly elevated. The Adjusters form the smallest of the profile groups as only 14.8% of the respondents were located in this group.

The fifth and the final cluster creates a profile that in many ways is opposite the Adjusters, and we have named them *the Discreets* ( $N = 150$ ). This profile is as mindful as possible: They feel that mentioning skin colour is always inappropriate; it is important to support cultural and worldview diversity and do not support the meritocratic approach to student success. In this group, students' language skills do not necessarily lead to deficit conceptions, and teachers' success is evaluated using factors other than every student passing their class. The Discreets is the largest of the profile groups, with approximately 25% of the participants belong to this group.

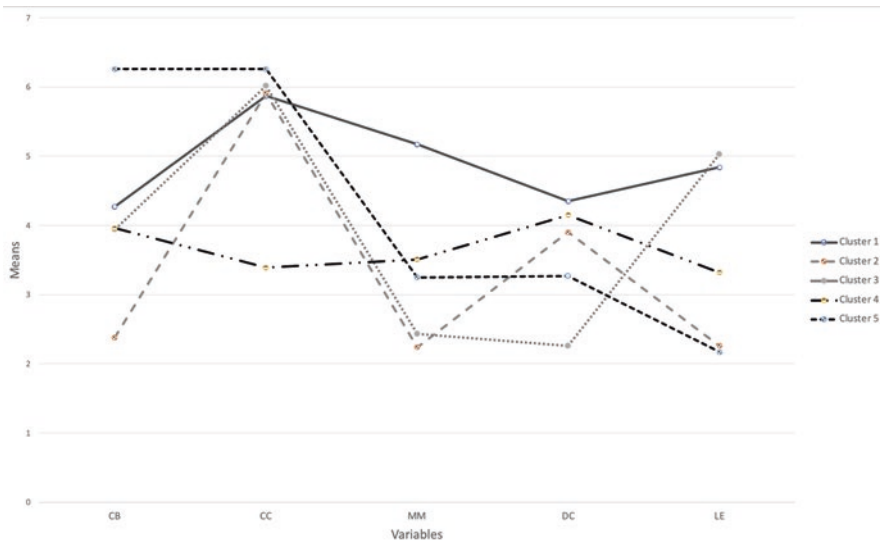
Differences between the profiles were further investigated with Brown–Forsythe  $F$  statistics together with Tamhane's T2 post hoc tests because of violating the assumption of homogeneity of variance between the groups. The means and standard deviations of each cluster on the five conceptions of diversity are shown in Table 11.2. In addition, the means are presented in Fig. 11.2.

From both Table 11.2 and Fig. 11.1, it can be seen that for colour-blindness, the principals come from three directions: either finding mentioning it to be completely inappropriate could not form a clear opinion, or that it was somewhat acceptable. The means concerning cultural conflicts are gathered close together, meaning that this conception is not noticeably varied between the clusters. The exception is cluster 4, which differs greatly from the others. The myth of meritocracy and deficit conceptions divide the principals' views, although clusters 2 and 3 are certainly like-minded about not believing that a student's success would be all about hard-work. Clusters 1 and 3 differ from other clusters concerning (low) expectations. The respondents in these clusters support the idea that a teacher is successful when all the students pass their class.

**Table 11.2** Cluster means and standard deviations of the five conceptions of diversity

	Cluster 1: the Encouragers ( $n = 151$ )		Cluster 2: the Understanders ( $n = 146$ )		Cluster 3: the Delegators ( $n = 103$ )		Cluster 4: the Adjusters ( $n = 98$ )		Cluster 5: the Discreets ( $n = 150$ )	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Colour-blindness	4.27 <sub>a</sub>	1.93	2.38	1.10	3.94 <sub>a</sub>	1.92	3.96 <sub>a</sub>	1.84	6.26	1.00
Cultural conflicts	5.87 <sub>b</sub>	0.91	5.91 <sub>b</sub>	0.82	6.02 <sub>b,c</sub>	0.84	3.39	0.89	6.26 <sub>c</sub>	0.71
Myth of meritocracy	5.15	1.12	2.24 <sub>d</sub>	1.21	2.43 <sub>d</sub>	1.04	3.51 <sub>c</sub>	1.53	3.25 <sub>c</sub>	1.62
Deficit conceptions	4.35 <sub>f</sub>	1.67	3.90 <sub>f</sub>	1.79	2.26	1.31	4.15 <sub>f</sub>	1.64	3.27	1.88
(Low) expectations	4.84 <sub>g</sub>	1.24	2.26 <sub>h</sub>	1.14	5.03 <sub>g</sub>	0.94	3.32	1.35	2.17 <sub>h</sub>	1.10

Note: Means sharing the same subscripts is not significantly different at the  $p < 0.05$  level



**Fig. 11.2** Cluster means. Note: *CB* colour-blindness, *CC* cultural conflict, *MM* myth of meritocracy, *DC* deficit conceptions, *LE* (Low) expectations

## Discussion and Conclusions

This study explored Finnish principals’ conceptions of diversity and aimed to present common approaches to diversity in schools by forming principal profiles based on cluster analysis. The first aim was to detect how the Finnish comprehensive school principals approach the conceptions of diversity. Principals found the speaking about students’ skin colour mainly as a sensitive topic. According to Milner’s studies, this may reflect a conception that the respondent is concerned about what others think of them if the race or ethnicity of an individual is mentioned. In a leadership role, the demand for political correctness may feel too great, especially when questions about race and ethnicity in the field of education are still quite new. However, challenging “the white-norm” and fighting injustice require acknowledging race and skin colour which can be acquired as self-reflective leadership behaviour (Gardner-McTaggart, 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016).

When it comes to cultural conflicts, the principals greatly supported considering different cultures and worldviews at school as comprehensively as possible. In the past 5 years, several reports and studies regarding cultural, worldview and linguistic diversity in education have been published, and based on them, additional training for schools and teachers has been offered (e.g. Räsänen et al., 2018; Tainio et al., 2019; Alisaari et al., 2020; Tamm et al., 2021). In addition, there has been a larger change in the climate about diversity, and many teachers and principals were educated in totally different societal atmosphere. It is possible that these concepts and understanding them in the school context are generally at a good level. However, a

positive attitude about an idea does not necessarily indicate what happens at a practical level. Promoting a culturally responsive school environment may still be shallow rather than building a community that values and respects diversity with staff, students, their families and other community members. In following the guidelines of culturally responsive school leadership, it is school leaders' responsibility to enhance teachers' competence and to promote inclusive and all families welcoming school climate (Khalifa et al., 2016; Scanlan & Theoharis, 2015, 3). It is worth noting that rather than working completely solo, principals (at least in larger schools) can utilise a shared leadership model for matters concerning diversity and inclusion. In Finland, principals generally have high trust to teachers' professionalism (Eisenschmidt et al., 2021).

The myth of meritocracy had the lowest mean of all the items explored, so it seems that Finnish principals in general do not strongly support meritocratic thinking in their schools. This suggests that Finnish principals have yet internalised neoliberal norms which would promote meritocratic thinking and competition in schools (Wijaya Mulya & Sakhiyya, 2021). The respondents did not support the lack in school language skills as a reason to expect less from the students academically, which in Milner's outline is known as deficit conceptions. This is a promising result, because it gives a hint of school communities which avoid marginalisation and ensures academic achievement for linguistically, and culturally, diverse students if the principals take the role in creating communities of practice with their teachers (Scanlan & Lopéz, 2015, 22). More research are needed to find out whether the principals actually take actions to support their teachers in meeting the needs of diverse students.

The respondents rarely demanded that their teachers only had to have students pass their class. In relation to the previous statement, the deficit conceptions, principals in Finland are more likely to support the teachers to have their students achieve as much as possible in an academic sense, and it is likely that ideally, deep learning was preferred over formal tests, results and passing a class. Having faith for students' capabilities is crucial for teachers (Gay, 2018, 52). Again, it is on school leaders' responsibility to take care of their teachers' professionalism to ensure that they are equipped with methods and approaches to design their teaching as a whole to suit the context with diverse students (Khalifa, 2019, 25; Gay, 2018, 53).

The second aim of the study was to identify the profiles based on the principals' conceptions of diversity. As a result, five principal profiles were formed: the Encouragers, the Understanders, the Delegators, the Adjusters and the Discreets. The largest profile ( $N = 163$ ) was the Discreets, which were the most sensitive about mentioning the students' skin colour and in other ways indicated responsiveness about diversity at school. The Encouragers ( $N = 151$ ) differed from the others by having the strongest tendency towards meritocratic thinking as well as deficit conceptions. The Understanders ( $N = 134$ ) was a group with the most (culturally) responsive profile, but they had a slight tendency to deficit conceptions. It was assumed that this was because of their will to mainly understand every student and their unique situations. The Delegators found significant importance in teacher performance, and in this case, that teachers had students who passed their class. The

smallest group ( $N = 96$ ), the Adjusters, was different from the others as they were surprisingly comfortable about not promoting culture and worldview diversity in their schools. Interestingly they also did not have a problem with mentioning skin colour, and with this combination, our interpretation was that this is a profile of principals who see their students as they are but want them to adjust to the (Finnish) school environment rather than trying to develop the school and staff to be more responsive to diversity.

These results indicate that Finnish comprehensive school principals predominantly have good premises for promoting responsive diversity leadership in their school contexts. The main concerns are related to conceptions of colour-blindness, which the Finnish principals seem to support, at least to some extent. As stated earlier, questions and discussions about race and ethnicity have not been common in the field of education in Finland. However, due to the harmful nature of colour-blindness, it is a conception that should be studied further. This is related to the principal profile: the Discreets, which may reflect the attitudes of Finnish society on a larger scale. Traditionally in Finnish society, it has been important to be sensitive about diversity, which in practice has meant not pointing out any differences too much. In addition, for further research, the Adjusters, which did not aim to promote cultural and worldview diversity at school, is an interesting group to examine in more in depth. Lastly, deficit conceptions at least towards Finnish/Swedish language learners were more common than were assumed and are also something that should be studied more thoroughly.

Taking diversity into account is important if we want to support equality and equity in the school system. Principals have a crucial role while leading the school community towards more responsive and equitable education. The quantitative data used provides one perspective but lacks the depth of qualitative perspectives. With a mixed method study, we would have been able to examine the phenomenon more comprehensively. By answering the research questions in this study, we have formed a preliminary understanding of what some of the strengths and weaknesses are of diversity leadership at Finnish comprehensive schools based on the principals' conceptions. The results could be used for further research design and as a basis for developing training for qualifications required by principals and for professional development. As this was a pioneering study, the results should be interpreted as a starting point for more in-depth study and hypothesis testing for research that is due to be conducted in the near future. However, the study provides an interesting insight to a topic that has not featured much in research in Finland.

The purpose of this study was to draft an understanding of Finnish comprehensive school principals' approach to diversity, based on Richard Milner's (2010) conceptual repertoires of diversity with descriptive data and using profile analysis. This study has limitations as it is a pioneer study in the Finnish schools. Changes in Finnish society have occurred rapidly, and there is a gap in Finnish research concerning diversity in education and leadership, and the discussion perspective as a whole is a new one. Applying a North American research and framework to the Finnish educational context is problematic because of ecological validity, and the societies differ from one another in many ways. Developing diversity leadership in



comprehensive school education in Finland is also yet to be done. The roots of North America are diverse, and Finland has diversified quickly in the past 10–20 years. The societies differ markedly, and the structure of the population is different. Furthermore, the tradition of promoting a diversified society is different. However, there is a demand in Finland for research in the field of education about diversity, and this study is one response to that demand. Research about diversity and educational leadership has been limited, although interest in it has been growing lately. As mentioned, our study has limitations but provides indications about continuing the research. Furthermore, it also gives perspectives and approaches on how to develop educational leadership with diversities.

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