

Antiracism education in Finnish teacher education: A study of student teachers' perceptions

Educação antirracista na formação inicial de professores finlandesa:
Um estudo sobre as percepções de estudantes

L'éducation antiraciste dans la formation initiale des enseignants en Finlande:
Une étude des perceptions des étudiants

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Abstract

In recent years, the rise of antiracist movements globally has prompted deep reflection on the dynamics of race, power, and social justice in diverse contexts. Finland, with its unique historical and social backdrop, presents an interesting case study. Based on recent studies, racism in Finland is a serious issue. Racism is often recognised and discussed on an individual level as a part of a personal belief system or attitudes but not recognised as systemic processes where racialisation and Whiteness are embedded in the system. This article presents preliminary results from a research project on antiracism pedagogy in teacher education taking place in four Finnish universities. The data was collected from student teachers who were studying in teacher education programs at these universities. The results indicate that student teachers recognise the existence of racism but can only largely observe it as outsiders who may not recognise the majority (White) privilege and the structural racism that exists in education. This raises a concern over the gap between teacher education and the reality in schools. Moreover, the results suggest some preventative means to tackle racism, as well as the importance of being proactive.

Keywords: racism, antiracism, Finland, teacher education

Resumo

Nos últimos anos, o surgimento de movimentos antirracistas a nível mundial tem suscitado uma reflexão profunda sobre as dinâmicas raciais, de poder e da justiça social em diversos contextos. A Finlândia, um contexto histórico e social único, apresenta um caso de estudo interessante. De acordo com estudos recentes, o racismo na Finlândia é um problema grave. O racismo é muitas vezes reconhecido e discutido a nível individual como parte de um sistema de crenças ou atitudes pessoais, mas não é reconhecido como um processo sistémico em que a racialização e a branquitude são estruturais. Este artigo apresenta os resultados preliminares de um projeto de investigação sobre a pedagogia

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antirracista na formação de professores, em curso em quatro universidades finlandesas. Os dados foram recolhidos junto de estudantes que frequentam programas de formação inicial de professores nestas universidades. Os resultados indicam que os estudantes reconhecem a existência do racismo, mas, em larga medida, tende a observá-lo situando-se do lado de fora, que podem não reconhecer o privilégio (branco) da maioria e o racismo estrutural que existe na educação. Esta situação suscita preocupação quanto ao fosso entre a formação de professores e a realidade nas escolas. Além disso, os resultados sugerem alguns meios preventivos para combater o racismo, bem como a importância de ser proativo.

Palavras-chave: racismo, antirracismo, Finlândia, formação inicial de professores

Résumé

Ces dernières années, l'émergence de mouvements antiracistes dans le monde entier a suscité une réflexion approfondie sur la dynamique de la race, du pouvoir et de la justice sociale dans divers contextes. La Finlande, un contexte historique et social unique, présente une étude de cas intéressante. Selon des études récentes, le racisme en Finlande est un problème sérieux. Le racisme est souvent reconnu et discuté au niveau individuel comme faisant partie d'un système de croyances ou d'attitudes personnelles, mais il n'est pas reconnu comme un processus systémique dans lequel la racialisation et la blancheur sont structurelles. Cet article présente les résultats préliminaires d'un projet de recherche sur la pédagogie antiraciste dans la formation des enseignants, qui est en cours dans quatre universités finlandaises. Les données ont été recueillies auprès d'étudiants participant aux programmes de formation initiale des enseignants dans ces universités. Les résultats indiquent que les étudiants reconnaissent l'existence du racisme, mais ont largement tendance à l'observer de l'extérieur, qu'ils peuvent ne pas reconnaître le privilège (blanc) de la majorité et le racisme structurel qui existe dans l'éducation. Cette situation soulève des inquiétudes quant à l'écart entre la formation des enseignants et la réalité dans les écoles. En outre, les résultats suggèrent certains moyens préventifs de lutte contre le racisme, ainsi que l'importance d'être proactif.

Mots-clés: racisme, antiracisme, Finlande, formation initiale des enseignants

Introduction

The political atmosphere in Finland changed radically with the new government elected during the spring of 2023. Since the appointment of the new government, there has been increasing media and public concern over the openly racist and hatred-filled comments towards the racialised population and non-Whites residing in Finland. The openly racist atmosphere has resulted in both government-level scandals and the opening of the floodgates for racist public opinions (see, for example, Finnish National Broadcasting company, YLE News, 2023). This concern was also mentioned in the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman's 2023 report in Finland (Yhdenvertaisuusvaltuutettu, 2023). At the same time, teachers in schools have to deal with increased tensions within the diverse student population. This has raised a concern over the teachers' preparedness to use approaches such as antiracism education to recognise and tackle issues related to race, power and justice. Finnish teacher education and the professionalisation of teachers have been praised globally. However, scholars have noted that Finnish multicultural education at schools has laid the foundation for categorising racialised children and youth as immigrants or Finnish as second language speakers despite their language or nationality (Layne, 2016, 2021; Paavola & Pesonen, 2021; Rissanen, 2023). In a similar manner, racism as a structural issue (Keskinen et al., 2021) has become part of everyday experiences in school practices (Souto, 2013). The role of antiracism education has been extremely limited in Finnish teacher education, so it is crucial to understand how student teachers view racism and antiracism and how much it is part of their everyday

experiences. Beyond antiracism pedagogy, curricula that recognise Finnish/Euro/Western centrism are paramount.

This study seeks to explore how student teachers understand and define racism and what their approaches to antiracism are. This study was a joint effort of four different universities' teacher education programs in Finland. Drawing on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and Whiteness studies (Tate & Page, 2018), we aim to unpack the underlying structures and ideologies within Finnish teacher education. Understanding Whiteness as a structural issue in a society like Finland is paramount (Keskinen et al., 2021; Kurki, 2019), as is acknowledging that in Finland, students in higher education, mostly represent White ethnicities and middle-class backgrounds speaking the national languages as their mother tongues (Nori et al., 2020). This prompted us to critically examine how Finnish teacher education recognises and deals with racial biases and inequalities. We focus on student teachers' perceptions and understanding of racism and antiracism as they are expected to respond to the increasing diversity in schools. Thus, their views on how Finnish teacher education prepares them for the profession may influence Finnish society. In addition to Whiteness studies, intersectional analysis is applied to help us understand racism not only in interactional or individual incidents but as a part of a larger societal syndrome. Throughout the world, racism persistently endures, evolving into new forms and requiring constant analysis. This also indicates the significance and urgency of this study amongst any other studies and actions to tackle this topic in Finnish society and, specifically, in education (Aminkeng Atabong, 2021a, 2021b). The data consists of surveys targeting student teachers studying in teacher education programs in the universities taking part in this study, namely the University of Oulu, the University of Jyväskylä, Åbo Akademi University (Vaasa campus) and the University of Helsinki. The study seeks to answer the following questions: How do the student teachers define and understand racism and what are their experiences around racism and antiracism in teacher education and in a wider Finnish context?

Whiteness and intersectionality

Whiteness can be understood as a legislative, systemic, and cultural set of norms guiding also education policies, specifically in a society like Finland. Tate and Paige (2018) explored how decolonizing 'unconscious bias', 'White fragility' and 'self-forgiveness' can provide access to recognise hidden institutional Whiteness at the base of (un)conscious bias. As a term, it is used to describe the associations we hold outside our conscious awareness, but these can have a significant influence on our attitudes and behaviour. These biases can be a way to understand discrimination, including universities, in the face of the continued occurrence of racism (see also Equality Challenge Unit, 2013). In addition, intersectionality can serve as a critical tool for understanding racism and antiracism and in analysing intersections of justices and injustices in education (Crenshaw, 1991). Antiracism education research can be beneficial in understanding how multiple marks of identification are mutually and socially constructed and reconstructed in different times and places. Intersectionality is also applied as a lens for the analysis in this study. For examining racism, and specifically the future teachers' perceptions of it, it is crucial to explore the questions related to different sociocultural

categorizations in terms of experiences of inclusion/exclusion and discrimination and disadvantage. Thus, intersectionality in education can contribute to the debate on theorising the (sometimes) disturbing discourses of differences (Lykke, 2010). In the context of teacher education, the intersectional approach can also support acknowledging the hegemonic discourses and enable the questioning of a homogenised 'right way' of being a member of a certain social category (e.g., Crenshaw, 1991). It is important to take into consideration multiple categories because members within one category are diverse, and because differentiation functions in multiple axes: economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential. Therefore, one of the starting points in intersectionality is to oppose the idea that identities are unified or autonomous (Dhamoon, 2011).

One central question in terms of Finnish teacher education is to understand how the student teachers are positioned in the questions and experiences of racism and antiracism pedagogy and how these topics are included and experienced in teacher education. This study only provides a snapshot of the topic and needs to be much further explored in Finnish teacher education.

Race and racism

Aminkeng Atabong (2021a, 2021b), the pioneer in antiracism studies in Finland, defines racism as power, meaning that one dominant group benefits from power which is hidden in politics, history, practices, beliefs, and norms. Racism is not only about personal opinions and convictions; it is about shared attitudes. Structural racism is based on strengthening personal prejudices and collective thinking. A key function of racism is "othering", which removes humanity and creates a system that selectively accepts violence. Another relevant definition for racism by Lorde (1982) is also highly applicable in the Finnish context: "the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance" (p. 496). Race and racism contemplation has always included the assumption of the superiority or inferiority of certain groups, which remains evident today and surfaces in public discussions. The concept of race has been explained first from a religious, then a biological, and now a social perspective. According to Hall (1997), race is a social and political construct created by people, based on the categorization of humans according to external characteristics. People's value, superiority, or inferiority is often linked to appearance and living environment. For example, White dominance and its power to organise social structures in Finnish academia has been recognised as something that further entrenches racism. Souto and Lappalainen (2024) noted that Whiteness is still "a taken-for-granted expectation of the typical university student but also the epistemological framework and perspective that guide knowledge production, institutional practices, conventions, and everyday encounters and meaning-making processes" (p. 11). They argue that racialised practices in Finnish official spaces in academia are hidden and subtle while in informal spaces, they may be unconcealed and even blatant. Since issues related to race are constantly present and thus significant, it is essential to understand what race means and how it affects us, as race creates and produces inequality and hierarchies, particularly in education which is the context of this study.

Gilroy (2000) has stated that any racial and ethnic categorisation lays a foundation for racism. This is important in the Finnish education context where multicultural education has emphasised (falsely) cultural differences, and the students are (at times, falsely) categorised as students with immigrant backgrounds. The false categorisation comes from ethnic profiling that paints any non-White, non-ethnically Finnish student as an immigrant who is consequently offered Finnish as a second language teaching despite their actual nationality or home language. These categories have developed over the past decades, and they are strongly grounded in the (education) system (Layne, 2016, 2021; Souto, 2013). Racism manifested in interactions can appear, for example, as shouting, name-calling, gestures, exclusion, and the (sometimes unconscious) use of racist terms or expressions, or microaggressions (Gilroy, 2000; Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015). Previous research has identified that forms of racism could include microaggressions, stereotyping, and exclusionary practices (Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015; Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions are everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, insults, or invalidations that communicate hostile or derogatory messages to marginalised individuals (Sue et al., 2007). Stereotypes, on the other hand, are preconceived beliefs about a group of people, often based on limited information, and can be both positive and negative. Moreover, exclusionary practices can take many forms, including differential treatment, lack of representation in the curriculum and faculty, and inadequate support services (Museus et al., 2016).

Experiencing multiple stressors connected to racial group membership and discrimination, as well as the intercultural context, tends to cause minority stress (Pittman et al., 2017). This could include race-related stress and acculturative stress in addition to more general life-related stress experienced by minorities in societies. Minority stress is experienced uniquely from other stressors that concern everyone; it is rooted in rather stable underlying social and cultural structures; and stems from social processes, institutions and structures beyond the individual. When such experiences accumulate over time, individually and collectively, they tend to adversely affect the behaviour (e.g., alcohol consumption and suicides) and health outcomes (e.g., chronic illnesses, psychological well-being) of individuals. Internalised racism refers to the process by which racism becomes, often unconsciously, an experience of one's own inferiority. Internalised racism is related to minority stress. It can arise from not addressing, downplaying, or ignoring issues and situations related to racism: when the environment silently accepts racism, those subjected to it may learn through repetition and the normalisation of racist actions, words, and thought patterns, and make these types of activities acceptable (Aminkeng Atabong, 2018; Gilroy, 2000; McKenzie, 2017). Racism occurs, and very often may not be paid attention to, and may not always be intentional, but the continued avoidance of the occurrence results in its persistence and prevalence (Denaro et al., 2022).

Contextualisation of the study: Finnish (teacher) education and its antiracism approach

Finnish education policies have a history of promoting equality, equity, internationalisation and sustainable education, as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). The founder of Finnish teacher education, Uno Cygnaeus (1810–1888), was renowned for advising teachers to go abroad, to experience

and learn, and to share their new knowledge with others upon return to Finland in the 19th century. In addition, Finnish early childhood education and basic education policies are inclusive of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The education system for basic education in Finland follows the Nordic welfare model, which rests on the values of democracy and equality. The current education policies from early childhood to basic education have adopted an approach based on cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as the development of cultural identity (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014, 2018) instead of, for example, racial identity or recognition of injustices such as racism (Layne, 2021). The concept and significance of race have been contemplated for centuries. Aminkeng Atabong (2018) identified that Finnish exceptionalism and nationalism are often brought up with a lack of acknowledgement of appearances of racism in Finland and Finnish schools, arguing that racism is often hidden behind seemingly less problematic labels such as culture or nationality. White ignorance is often supported by the image of Finland as a country without a history of racism: those who are racialized as White may show reluctance or even refusal when urged to reflect on racialised power relations (Souto & Lappalainen, 2024). Racism and antiracism are also almost invisible in the national curriculum as racism is mentioned once with reference to the fact that any type of violence and racism is not accepted, but the curriculum does not otherwise support teachers to recognise racism or give guidance in how to implement antiracism pedagogy. There are some discrepancies between Finnish teacher education, curriculum and realities in schools. Souto and Lappalainen suggest that regardless of diversity and accessibility policies, Finnish universities have not only failed to equip students to tackle racism but, furthermore, have failed to challenge the racialised institutional structures and practices within themselves. They claim that the image of Finland as a beacon of equality does not seem to include acknowledging and addressing racism but rather situating racialised power questions and evident White dominance outside of itself.

The national curriculum for basic education emphasises cultural and language diversities. Despite this, different ethnicities and users of different minority languages, recognised national minorities such as the Roma and Sámi are rather invisible in teacher education (Korte et al., 2024). It is important to acknowledge that the university space is not racially neutral, and neither is teacher education. This is one of the first and critical steps towards challenging the White dominance and ignorance of the histories and presence of non-White, non-ethnically Finnish people in academia (Souto & Lappalainen, 2024). In line with what Arneback (2022) has suggested in reference to becoming an antiracist teacher in Sweden, we also see an urgent need to examine and discuss further 'who we are' as teachers in the field of antiracist education, as discomfort with 'difficult knowledge' should not be used as a means to avoid critical discussions (Aminkeng Atabong, 2021a).

The 1995 Act on Pedagogical Studies and Teacher Education (*Asetus kasvatustieteellisen alan tutkinnoista ja opettajankoulutuksesta*) defines which universities in Finland can educate teachers and, on a general level, the content requirements of each program (Harju-Luukkainen & Kangas, 2021). For example, the main goal of Finnish teacher education is to develop inquiry-oriented teachers (Jyrhämä & Maaranen, 2012). In doing so, teachers will be able to combine both theoretical and practical knowledge. Teachers in Finland are

praised for their autonomy and the opportunities teachers have in exploring and being creative in their everyday practices (Husu & Toom, 2016). Entry to university-level teacher education programs in Finland is subject to an entrance examination. Prospective students are first required to complete a written examination, with the most successful applicants selected to proceed to an interview to gauge their suitability to study teacher education. The written examination requires a highly abstract level of Finnish/Swedish language proficiency and may, therefore, present a challenge for applicants who speak languages other than Finnish or Swedish as their mother tongues or home languages. This also largely narrows the intake of Finnish teacher education students to those who are born and fully educated in Finland with a dominant Finnish or Swedish language background, hence limiting the diversifying of the student body in teacher education.

Based on a recent new law (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, ECEC 549/2018), an ECEC teacher's qualification requires a three-year bachelor's degree from a university (Harju-Luukkainen & Kangas, 2021). Classroom teacher education is a five-year university education in Finland. A master's degree has been the requirement for the classroom teacher qualification since 1979 (Takala et al., 2023), and since 2005 the program has been divided into three years of bachelor's level studies and two years of master's level studies (Saloviita & Tolvanen, 2017). All universities providing teacher education programs in Finland produce the same teacher qualification, which is the requirement for a permanent position in Finnish schools and in early childhood education and care settings. Even though all universities have to follow some general guidelines in their curriculum work, they do have autonomy in determining major parts of their curricula (Tirri, 2014). Examples of this are the two universities taking part in this study and providing teacher education in their English medium programs: the University of Oulu has provided classroom teacher education in English language in their Intercultural Teacher Education (ITE) program (starting in 2025, the ITE programme will be Finnish-medium with some courses in English) and Åbo Akademi University provides subject teacher education in English in their Master's Degree Programme on Teaching and Learning (T-Learn).

Data used in this study

Qualitative-oriented survey data was collected from student teachers studying in the four universities taking part in the study, namely the University of Oulu, University of Helsinki, University of Jyväskylä and Åbo Akademi University. The University of Oulu has early childhood teacher education, elementary and subject teacher education programs in Finnish, as well as an Intercultural Teacher Education program which gives an elementary school teacher qualification. Both the University of Helsinki and the University of Jyväskylä have three teacher education programs in the Finnish language: early childhood, classroom teacher and subject teacher education. Additionally, the University of Jyväskylä has teacher education programs for guidance and counselling, as well as on special education. The University of Helsinki also has an early childhood teacher education program in the Swedish language, the other official language in Finland. Åbo

Akademi University has an elementary teacher education program in the Swedish language and an English medium program in Teaching and Learning, providing subject teacher credentials but not a full qualification. The survey was distributed to the students studying in these programs.

The survey was first designed in Finnish and distributed to students of teacher education at the University of Jyväskylä during a lecture in the fall semester of 2023. For this survey, we first received 23 responses. The survey was later translated into three languages (Finnish, Swedish and English) and distributed in the four universities taking part in this research. For this survey, we received an additional 88 responses. Overall, in the surveys, not all the questions were compulsory, so the number of responses to different questions varied. In particular, the surveys addressed not only definitions of racism but also examples, reactions to and opinions about racism in the context of Finland. The definitions of racism were received from altogether 111 students. The other responses varied from 107 to 111.

The survey consisted of seven questions: 1) What is racism? 2) Is there racism in Finland? 3) Please give some examples of racism in Finland; 4) Should something be done about racism in Finland? If yes, what? If not, why? 5) Do you know how to act when you observe racism? 6) If you answered YES to the previous message, please give examples; 7) Would you like to share any observations or experiences? Question 2 had only “yes” and “no” response options. Questions 4 and 5 had both “yes” and “no” and open-ended responses. The number of responses for each question is reported in the results section.

Analysis

The data was analysed using applied segmented thematic analysis. This means that the analysis applies a technique for bounding the text in order to assess and document the overall quality of the data and explore the thematic elements’ similarity, dissimilarity and relationships (Guest et al., 2012). This is a useful technique for a rather small data set and the type of data used in this study, which is mainly short open-ended qualitative survey responses. We divided the data between the research team. In teams of two, one team first worked on Q1, “What is racism?” and on question Q3, “Give some examples of it.”

Q4, “Should something be done about racism?”, Q5, “Do you know how to act when you observe racism?” and Q6 – examples for Q5 – were analysed by another two members of the research team. Then the teams met and presented the results, after which we had discussions and checks on the data.

For example, to identify how the student teachers defined racism, we first used the Atlas.ti to explore the frequencies of the words used to describe racism. Discrimination was the most frequent theme, and then we further manually started to identify subthemes under discrimination. Abstraction of the themes from the data often takes place having both data-driven and theory-driven elements (Guest et al., 2012). Racism was explained in different elements such as race, religion, and ethnicity. At times, additional intersections, such as gender or social class, were mentioned. The discrimination was themed as intersectional if it had more than three different intersections mentioned. For example, first, we categorised racism as a separate theme defined as something that is initiated by Finns towards local minorities as well as immigrants. Other themes

were, for example, racism in the school context and everyday racism. However, the structural Whiteness of Finnish society impacts the fact that minorities are the focus of discrimination, and therefore it connects with all the themes (see Table 2).

The last question of the survey (Q7) was: “Would you like to share any observations or experiences?”. These responses were used to complement the rest of the data. We received 38 responses to this question. We further also noticed that the definitions had diverse elements in them and putting them simply under certain themes was difficult. We further developed some themes that were identified across the definitions and cross-tabulation was adjusted to organise and identify key themes and patterns in how racism is perceived and defined. As a final step, we were curious to see how the AI would organise the themes arising from the data for definitions of racism. We inserted the main categories and themes that arose from the data and how we organised it. We had named the main categories as: Basis of Discrimination, Nature of Discrimination and Categories for discrimination. Under each category were the themes that are listed in the result section for definitions of racism. We then asked how the ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2024) would organise the themes. ChatGPT generated an explanation for each main category based on the themes, which we did not use in this paper. We decided to use the list of themes under each category. The main categories for the two first thematic areas ChatGPT named them how we had already named them: Basis of Discrimination and Nature of Discrimination. For the third one, we used Categories for Discrimination, but ChatGPT generated it as Forms of Discrimination. We decided to use that for the third theme.

Results

The results are organised and reported based on the survey structure and the main themes identified from the data. The responses were collated and then numbered. Numbers in the excerpts indicate the number of the respondent (response). The first section for the results focuses on the definitions of racism and then the second section explains what should be done with racism in Finland.

Racism equates to different forms of discrimination (Q1 and Q2)

First, we wanted to understand if the student teachers believed that racism exists in Finland (Q2). For the question “Is there racism in Finland?”, we received 111 responses, of which 109 respondents believed that racism exists in Finland. Only 2 responded no to this question. For the definition of “What is racism?”, we received 111 responses meaning that all the survey respondents answered this question. Altogether, 94 definitions out of 111 explained racism as some form of discrimination. Overall, the definitions were linked to power dynamics, superiority beliefs, prejudices and stereotypes, which aligns quite well with Aminkeng Atabong’s (2021b) definition of racism as a use of power. Superiority and inferiority beliefs were mainly related to majority and minority relations. Atlas.ti frequency analysis showed eight mentions of White and not enough for Western to be calculated in, so White privilege exceptionalism was not widely recognised.

This is quite an important finding, as it shows the need to unpack the unconscious biases and make the White structural dominance more visible in teacher education (Tate & Page, 2018). Mkwesha and Huber (2021) wrote about their own position as Black scholars and artists in Finland and about the danger of maintaining the discourses where the difference is portrayed between the White majority and those who are racialised, as it maintains the racist representations of us and others. At the same time, in our data, racism is mainly described as prejudice and discriminatory actions that are often directed towards minorities.

Racism refers to the idea that people are divided into races based on biological and social characteristics based on their ancestry, and that these different races are thought to have different tendencies, talents, and behaviours. (99)

Racism is actions and thoughts that target a person or group because of their ethnic background. Racists consider these people inferior to, for example, White Western people. (23)

Racism is a negative attitude towards someone other than one's own culture, age, gender, sexual orientation, belief, origin, health or level of development. Racism can be seen, for example, in belittling or discriminating against another person so that the other person is not perceived to be equal and as valuable in their own right as the person with that attitude perceives himself to be. (33)

Definitions of racism were organised in three themes explaining the basis, nature and forms of discrimination. The themes are the following: i) Basis of discrimination: Social/Biological and Intersectional, including *skin colour, ethnicity, culture, language, religion and others* (e.g., *age, gender, sexual orientation*); ii) Forms of discrimination: Individual, Group based and Structural, including *intentional acts, unintentional acts, structural racism, individual behaviour* and *beliefs/attitudes*; iii) Forms of discrimination/Racist acts: *verbal (hate speech, name-calling), physical (violence, physical abuse), social (exclusion, ignoring), institutional (laws, rules), other* (e.g., *bullying, harassment*).

Then we further investigated the forms of discrimination based on intersectional elements (three or more intersections mentioned as a basis of discrimination). Although the student teachers were encouraged to define racism using their own words, we could not determine if outside sources were used for the respondents' answers. We identified 25 responses that connected racism (as discrimination) with intersectionality. The other basis of discrimination was identified as social-biological, see the table below:

TABLE 1

Definitions of racism based on social/biological and intersectional elements (Q1)

Discrimination - Intersectional	For example, discrimination or belittling of another person or group of people based on e.g., skin colour, country of origin, language, religion, age, gender or sexuality (16)	Racism is stereotypes and prejudices, as well as thinking and actions based on them, which discriminate against people on the basis of 'race', culture, language, origin or ethnicity. (47)	Discrimination based on perceived or visible difference. It can be based on, e.g., skin colour, language, dialect (accent), clothing or other things associated with culture. (44)
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Discrimination - biological/social	Racism is more than just using the N-word. It can be, for example, discrimination based on someone else's skin colour. It is the belief that some people (usually White) are better than others. There is also structural racism, where racism exists in the structures of society, e.g., discriminatory practices, laws, rules (9)	Racism is discrimination or different (worse) treatment of someone based on skin colour. (100)	Discrimination on the basis of race. (3)
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“Skin colour” and “ethnicity” seemed to be the most frequently mentioned bases for racism. Both “intentional acts” and “structural racism” are mentioned, indicating that the student teachers understand racism as actions by individuals, but also as a societal issue. When comparing with the frequency table, the word “skin” was mentioned 45 times, the word “colour” 43 times, the word “person” 26 times and the word “culture” 24 times. “Structure” or “structural” were not mentioned in the table, meaning they received fewer than six mentions. The frequency of these specific terms gives some indication that racism is mainly linked to individual characteristics such as skin colour and also to culture, which might be familiar to the students through their studies that focus mainly on multicultural education. The culture was presented in the definitions as one form of discrimination. In Finland, multicultural education has categorised students mainly based on ethnicity and skin colour, forming the (false) category of immigrant students. Culture also merely corresponds to geographical or religious cultures inferior to the Western or European (Kurki, 2019; Layne, 2016). It is also problematic that in the Finnish ECEC national curriculum, culture is connected to diversity in ways that are not discussed nor critically explained, thus leading to somewhat self-evident values (Paavola & Pesonen, 2021). Based on the definitions, there are some limitations in the way in which racism is understood, and especially how Whiteness as a structural construct is not recognised. McKenzie (2006) has stated that racism is not only discrimination, but it is a social stress, which is further associated with the development of mental illness. This shows a common understanding of racism as an ideological and belief system maintaining discriminatory practices. We will further discuss in our conclusions how the results bring forward the need in teacher education to more profoundly emphasise intersectional theory as well as criticism towards Whiteness and Eurocentrism.

Examples of racism (Q3)

In the survey, we also asked respondents to give some experiences of racism. The following themes were identified from the data. Racism was identified as something that takes place between Finns vs. Immigrants and local minorities. Many of the definitions were linked to ethnic diversity and acts against foreigners/migrants or the local minority. This is one good example of how often the White majority is safe from racism, but at the same time also too little recognition for other types of discrimination towards sexual minorities or towards people with lower income status. Student teachers brought in their answers some

examples from the topics discussed also in the media. For example, the research has shown that the study counselling at schools is discriminatory towards immigrant youth. Girls are guided towards practical nursing studies and boys towards car mechanic studies despite their personal career inspirations (Vehviläinen & Souto, 2022). Racism in the school context follows what was mentioned in the introduction on how ethnicity and language (*deficit*) are the categories for racism in the school context and are also recognised by the student teachers. However, one response also included blatantly racist comments towards the Finnish local Roma minority. It was a conscious decision not to repeat that racist comment here in the text. Table 2 will further explain the themes around the examples of racism.

TABLE 2
Examples of racism

Racism in school context	Everyday racism	<i>Poor employment of Roma and discrimination in job search.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study counseling • Language support • Ethnic background 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structural • Traditional minorities • Name calling, attitudes 	<i>Using the wrong terms in a demeaning way about people.</i> <i>A selective way for individuals to choose tenants. (3)</i>
Ethnic profiling (everyday racism, structural/individual) Crossing many themes like individual, structural and everyday racism		<i>Racist comments, acts of violence because of ethnicity and discrimination in e.g., recruitment situations. (5)</i>
Actions Racist comments, acts of violence, using slurs, avoiding or belittling groups, slurs, generalising		<i>People of foreign background are shouted at, Roma are followed in shops, left out. (13)</i>

Due to the fact that the student teachers and teacher educators are representative of the White majority Finnish population, we realised that many examples were observed and not personal experiences. It is possible that the respondents were not willing to share personal experiences, however, in Q7, where we asked for additional comments, we had one personal experience which also shows how important, but also tiring the theme of antiracism is for those who face racism:

Personally, I don't have any specific and orthodox way of acting if I see someone encountering racism. I'm usually the one who experiences racism myself and I've had many different ways to respond to it. Perhaps my worst habit has been to answer back and start a shouting match with someone else. My second way is to show a thumbs up and continue on my way, the third and maybe the best is to just not care. I think this is the most difficult, because I always want to somehow respond to racism. I've faced racism so many times that I'm so tired of talking about it (especially to White People) because I feel that the racism I face is often downplayed. They always say it wasn't racism, or I just imagined it. It feels like I can never tell you how it really feels to always be the one being treated badly, looked at angrily, yelled at (like the N-word). (5)

Tate and Page (2018) concluded that (un)conscious bias keeps people racialized as White, and the non-White entombed within White racism. Racism needs to be understood as a systemic practice maintained by a White majority. What makes it difficult to unpack racism, for example in Finnish teacher education, is that it is often invisible to those who hold that majority power position (Aminkeng Atabong, 2021b). In other words, without deliberate efforts to acknowledge the systematic nature of racism and to develop

consciousness among those in the White majority, the White majority tends to remain blind to the realities of those who do not share the same discourse and experiences of the mainstream. To give an example and to understand the contrast of how people experience the topic, the next response reflects the privilege of not having had to encounter the topic at all:

I've only seen it on TikTok, I haven't come across it in real life. (6)

In relation to school context, the examples were often related to what had been read from the local newspaper and also based on media reports or expectations other than those of the student outcomes:

Helsingin Sanomat [the largest newspaper in Finland] just reported on how teachers unconsciously or consciously evaluate students with a preference for native Finns. Everyday racist examples are, for example, using slurs about people or groups of people, avoiding or belittling groups of people, or other prejudiced or generalising behaviour/thinking. (2)

Students are directed to preparatory/language-supporting classes based on their names without checking their language skills. (8)

What also shows the importance of applying the antiracism pedagogy and awareness, but also teaching critical thinking in teacher education are examples that rely on highly problematic media discourses:

"Different" people are easier to point the finger at and blame, on the other hand, e.g., in youth crime, immigrants play a big role in gangs. (6)

Media and right-wing politics have effectively linked youth crime to immigrants, and again, ethnicity and skin colour play a role in how the youth are categorised as immigrants despite their actual origin. This has resulted in vast polarisation in Finnish society and immigrant (racialised) youth are being put under the spotlight. One student teacher was also able to demonstrate the seriousness of the racism. Yet, at the same time, this statement repeated the false image created by the media and government leaders about immigrant youth and crime:

Racism is everywhere, it is the cancer of society. I believe that the majority of Finnish racism stems from prejudices (especially older generations) and the causes of crime, which for example occur in the capital region. "Different" people are easier to point the finger at and blame, on the other hand, e.g. in youth crime, immigrants play a big role in gangs. (6)

One recent case of racism in Finland took place on December 13th, 2024, during the Saint Lucia Day celebration, which is a festival of light. A 20-year-old girl with Ghanaian and Finnish roots was selected to represent Saint Lucia, which led her, her relatives and the organizers to receive a barrage of racist abuse (YLE, 2024). This once again underscored the critical need to address racism in Finnish society.

Then what to do with racism? (Q4, Q5 and Q6)

For the question "Should something be done about racism in Finland?" (Q4), we received 110 responses. Altogether, 107 agreed that something should be done about racism, and three respondents responded no. This question was followed up with "if yes, what?", "if not, why?" questions. We received 81 open-ended

responses proposing what could be done, and kind of one to “if no, why” question. This one response suggested that racism is acceptable:

No, because the definition of racism is met by many things, which are nevertheless generally considered acceptable. Thus, one should not make any larger conclusions based on the concept of racism. (18)

This type of discourse, where the existence of racism is downplayed, has become more common with the advent of right-wing political leadership in Finland. Therefore, education for bias recognition, whether conscious or unconscious biases, is sorely needed. It is important to understand the power dominance of Whites through colonial histories. Understanding what type of power position we hold in the world is essential, as is also reconstructing subjectivities, institutions, epistemologies and discourses on the human and regimes of recognition (Tate & Page, 2018).

The suggested themes for acting against racism by the students’ teachers’ responses were *Education and Awareness*, *Individual Attitudes*, *Community and Societal Actions*, *Structural and Systemic Changes*, as well as *Policy and Legal Actions*. In terms of *Education and Awareness*, antiracism education and pedagogy were mentioned together with learning about diversity and tolerance. *Individual Attitudes* relate to changing personal attitudes and how teachers and adults need to be positive examples. *Community and Societal Actions* include educating parents and discussing uncomfortable topics. *Structural and Systemic Changes* refers to addressing racism at the policy level, organising, for example, anonymous recruiting and, in this way, eliminating structural racism. Regarding *Policy and Legal Actions*, stronger interventions and consequences, as well as zero tolerance policies (removing racism from politics) were mentioned as solutions.

One response suggested including minority experiences and the voices of those who are victims of racism. The diversity of experiences, histories and knowledges are important to include in the curriculum. Indeed, it also requires involving minorities in the decision-making and curriculum writing (Keskinen et al., 2021). More common comments were in relation to general multicultural awareness and understanding of diversity. The word tolerance is often brought up in conversations on racism without a critical review of its power-laden meaning, where some are tolerated and others have the power to tolerate (Aminkeng Atabong, 2021a; Layne, 2016). White ignorance is also visible in the way that awareness and emotional work is believed to solve racism without necessarily unpacking unconscious biases, for example:

Awareness should be increased. Also, emotional work to accept differences, empathy skills and tolerance as well. The issue should be brought up for discussion on a regular basis, themes should be talked about more in education and training. (23)

There has been increasing attention to empathy and emotional work at schools in Finland. However, this discussion is often separated from racism and antiracism discussions. Indeed, empathy and positive pedagogy are often used to sensitise racism. When studying early childhood education teachers on everyday multiculturalism and racism, racism was found to be a negative term by the early childhood education and care teachers and, therefore, not discussed with the children (Layne, 2021). One response suggested ending racism but throwing back the question of how. There was also the recognition of the challenge but hope for the impact of small actions. The current political situation was also mentioned:

Even small actions can have a big impact, but racism is so deep in our structures that there is no one right way to remove it. However, by doing actively anti-racist work, we can learn for the better. (25)

It is also very worrying that some of the decision-makers in our country behave and write in a racist manner, what kind of model they are setting for the Finnish population. Zero tolerance to racism in parliament and in public at work also. (27)

New pedagogies and methods are needed for teacher education to be able to discuss sensitive topics. These pedagogies and methods need to be developed strongly within the human rights framework to respond to the evolving ways in which racism emerges and has become somewhat acceptable in Finnish society. This study also shows that there are critically aware students and students who are also equipped with openly racist opinions. At the moment, for example, in Finland, it is impossible to even have zero tolerance for racism by the parliament and the public. After various cases of prior racist writings by the Minister of Finance, Riikka Purra, from The Finns Party, were brought forward in public discussions; in 2024, the government published a campaign called the “Action, not only words”. The campaign was criticized for being only a superficial act and not admitting the concrete changes. The Finns Party did not even engage with the campaign.

For the question “Do you know how to act when you observe racism?”, we received 111 responses, 81 responses for yes and 30 for no. This question had a follow-up question: “If you answered yes to the previous question, please give examples.” We received 68 responses to the examples. To tackle racism, we combined the open-ended questions.

Intervening was the most common response, mentioned in 36 responses, but there were many layers of intervening, which we will explain here further. One response suggested intervening when it is safe, indicating how the respondents can externalise the racism and choose their own position:

It depends on the situation, in a serious situation it can be dangerous to intervene, but you can call the police. In a milder way in the situation easier intervene. (23)

A total of six of these types of responses were identified. It was also mentioned that it is sometimes difficult to intervene when the racism is structural or someone is very small in size, a reference to physical safety. Another way to intervene was by reporting racism. These types of examples were identified in 12 responses, and they suggested reporting, for example, to the police, security, teacher, school staff or supervisor. Social media and the Equality Ombudsman were additionally mentioned in relation to reporting racism. Education-related responses were in 46 responses. These included: intervening as a teacher, intervening in an education institution, as well as providing education as a teacher. Below we have provided examples of each.

As a teacher:

For example, as a teacher at school, you immediately intervene in situations where you hear racist language or bullying and don't just look through your fingers and say nohnoh and move on, but explain strictly why it's wrong, why some terms are offensive and what they really mean. (66)

One critical question is how much teacher education prepares students to recognise racism and, even more importantly, towards preventative antiracism work, not only to react to it. Also, in the next example, there is advice on how to react when recognising racism.

Inside an educational institution:

In educational institutions: when you notice racism by students or teachers, it should be addressed at the entire educational institution level. Educates students and teachers about what racism is and what it causes. And how it can be avoided and why it is important. (33)

Providing education as a teacher:

Not all racist situations can be dealt with. Perhaps there could be situations in my own life where my student behaves racist towards another student, in which case I would have a conversation with my student without blaming him or attacking his personality. A factual discussion on the topic, pointing out the same thing often enough and confirming the desired action could be the means to guide the student's thinking and actions towards antiracism. (27).

In the previous example, there is also a slight excuse for racism in terms of not pointing out the one who has been racist. Often, we do not consider that the one who has been the object of racism does not have an option to be attacked or not. Overall, there is a good intention of not shaming anyone, but the White normativity structures seem to keep the discourse of racism mainly on one side, although there were also some responses supporting the victims. Supporting victims was mentioned in 17 responses. Examples of support mentioned included responding to racist jokes and defending the victim. In some responses the support was more abstract, but also in one response the educating self is seen as important:

I try to support if I witness an incident of racism. I also try to educate myself on the matter constantly. (38)

Additionally, different types of discussions were mentioned as well as focusing on equality, in a more abstract way than direct intervention. However, discussing the matter and including the discussion in teaching is one way to focus on equality. Moreover, equality needs to be understood as a controversial term, and its meaning should be discussed and defined jointly as a part of antiracism education.

Conclusions

This study set out to understand how student teachers in Finnish teacher education define, understand and encounter racism. Our analysis shows how student teachers often define racism in relation to discrimination based on ethnic diversity. Rather uncritically and with bias, immigrants were often grouped as one minority group, thus dismissing the diversity of individuals within categories (Dhamoon 2011). Further, the definition of racism was, to some extent, limited to the idea of discriminatory practices. One referred to racism as the 'cancer' of society, and as McKenzie (2006) has mentioned, it is a threat to one's mental health. Uncomfortable conversations are needed in terms of understanding the root cause for anti-Black acts, and how this is currently embedded in the learning materials, everyday practices and even in the political decision-making processes in Finland (Souto & Lappalainen, 2024). The colonisation of the Sámi and the

forced assimilation processes in the history of Roma children need to be included as a part of history teaching in schools. Radical changes are needed in terms of who can be teachers and teacher educators in Finland.

Based on our results, we suggest that Finnish teacher education lacks an antiracist approach, which champions the theorising and discussing of disturbing discourses of differences (see Lykke, 2010), in addition to (un)conscious biases and structural Whiteness (Tate & Page, 2018). The challenge lies in not only imparting the seriousness of racism but also creating an understanding of racism that is free from denialism. In addition, student teachers and teacher educators need training to become aware of their power position and how everyone is positioned in the racism discussion. This perspective was not included in our survey and is one of the limitations of this study. Souto and Lappalainen (2024) have argued that university students should not solemnly be blamed for their ignorance in matters related to Whiteness and privileges, as there is an urgent need for a critical reflection and dismantling of normative Whiteness within the academy at large. Considering responses that suggested “removing racism”, as if implying that racism can simply be unplugged or abolished.

In terms of reacting to racism, the respondents first considered the overall safety of the situation and only mentioned intervening if their own lives were not in danger or if they felt that they could not be verbally or physically abused in the situation. This clearly indicates that racism is a very violent and aggressive form of ideology – and challenging it in public can lead to anyone experiencing its rage. This calls attention to intersectional matters: it seems that people do not feel safe or equipped to address racism when they observe or experience it. As one respondent who has experienced racism said, they are left alone to defend themselves. More understanding is needed about how schools and education institutions use opportunities to do antiracism work, for example, during parent meetings and within the work that has been done in the community.

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