

Integration of immigrant students and physical education in preparatory education

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Abstract: Immigration has influenced the cultural and social landscape of Finnish society in recent decades, drawing attention to the integration of immigrant pupils into the education system. Schools are often one of the first structured environments in which young immigrants encounter the cultural norms, language and social dynamics of their new country. Physical education (PE), as one of the subjects taught in schools, can offer opportunities to support integration. In addition to promoting physical well-being, PE can provide spaces for social interaction, teamwork and identity development in a multicultural context. This study explores the role of PE in shaping the self-perceptions and integration experiences of immigrant pupils in preparatory education, highlighting its potential to promote supportive environment. By examining how physical education relates to integration, educators can gain insights into developing practices that meet the diverse needs of immigrant pupils and support their social and academic development.

The importance of PE was examined through the lens of social integration, cultural differences and self-esteem. The data collected from the interviews was analysed using content analysis and revealed that PE provided students with opportunities to make new friends, develop language skills and increase self-confidence. While the experiences of PE were mostly positive, challenges such as cultural differences and barriers to participation also appeared.

This research highlights the critical role of the physical culture of the school in the integration of immigrant pupils and suggests that PE can be a valuable tool for building social networks. It is important for educators to recognise their students' cultural backgrounds and adapt PE practices to suit them so that all students feel included in the community. Based on the findings, the study concludes that integrating physical education into the school day can significantly promote the well-being and integration of immigrant students into Finnish society.

Key words: physical education, integration, immigrant students, preparatory education, self-perception

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1 Introduction

Physical education (PE) has long been recognised as a key element of well-rounded education, playing a central role in promoting both physical well-being and social integration. In the context of modern Finnish society, where immigration has increased significantly in recent decades, the role of PE takes on an additional role. Beyond its traditional focus on physical health, PE is increasingly seen as a platform for promoting inclusion, building self-confidence and shaping identity, especially for students from immigrant backgrounds (Yeasmin & Uusiautti 2018).

The urgency of addressing this issue becomes clear when considering the demographic realities in Finland. The growing foreign-born population, coupled with the challenges of integration, requires a re-evaluation of educational practices to ensure equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their background (Zacheus 2010). Children and young people play a critical role in shaping the immigration experience of families, and their ability to integrate into the educational system is often a determining factor in their long-term success and sense of belonging (Orellana et al. 2001). Education therefore becomes a crucial variable in supporting immigrant children in meeting the challenges of adapting to a new cultural and linguistic environment (Arizpei et al. 2014). The Finnish preparatory education system, designed as a bridge for immigrant students to enter mainstream schooling, provides a unique context for examining the role of PE in this process (Zacheus, Koski, Rinne & Tähtinen 2012). This study focuses on the interaction between physical education and students' self-perceptions in preparatory classes, and examines how physical education can contribute to their integration and overall educational experience.

This research aims to explore how physical education shapes the self-perceptions and integration experiences of immigrant students in preparatory education. This focus is in line with the researcher's aim to understand how to better support the integration and identity development of immigrant students as a future educator. The importance of this topic is reflected in the challenges faced by educators, who often report feelings of inability to meet the complex needs of immigrant pupils, especially in relation to language learning and social integration (Naukkinen & Thermas 2019). By addressing these challenges, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how physical education can serve as a tool to promote positive self-perceptions and ease the transition into Finnish society.

The theoretical basis of this study is based on the understanding of self-perception as a fluid construct influenced by social, cultural and educational experiences. Physical education, with its emphasis on teamwork, communication, and personal achievement, provides an ideal setting to explore how these dynamics become evident in the lives of preparatory students. The structure of this thesis is designed to systematically address the research questions, beginning with a review of relevant literature and theoretical frameworks, followed by an analysis of empirical data collected through qualitative and quantitative methods. By investigating the role of PE in shaping self-perceptions, this research aims to inform educational practices and policies that support the diverse needs of Finland's increasingly multicultural student population.

2 Instruction preparing for basic education and immigrant student

In the second chapter, the background of preparatory education is presented, combining both Finnish and international approaches. In addition to the background, the definitions of both the concepts of preparatory education and immigrant students have been explained, as the meaning of these words can differ depending on the context. In addition, chapter 2.2 highlights the challenges of preparatory education, especially with reference to the integration of pupils. By identifying these challenges, it is possible to take a holistic view of the preparatory education framework. Chapter 2.3 argues for the importance of integration as a contribution to the integration process, which also justifies the importance and timeliness of the topic.

2.1 The role of immigrant student integration in supporting the overall integration process

The integration of immigrant students plays a key role in facilitating the integration process in the Finnish educational context. Naukkarinen and Tiermas (2019) emphasize the critical importance of adequate language skills and resources for students to effectively participate in mainstream education, supporting their language acquisition, integration and identity development. They advocate for a structured approach in which the smaller class sizes of preparatory education are combined with integration sessions tailored to individual students' backgrounds and readiness to learn, thus ensuring a supportive environment conducive to comprehensive language learning and cultural integration (Naukkarinen & Tiermas 2019, 6). After preparatory education, continued support is essential. In Espoo, a pedagogically assessed temporary support system (MMO-support) is implemented, providing intensified language support for 1-2 years, involving close collaboration between language and culture teachers and classroom teachers. This targeted support takes into account the different linguistic needs and learning levels of students with an immigrant background and supports their integration into mainstream education (Naukkarinen & Tiermas 2019, 7).

Furthermore, Lankinen (2019) emphasizes the individualized planning of integration classes, taking into account students' previous educational background. Despite having completed preparatory education, students' Finnish language proficiency remains at a basic level and

lacks systematic support in mainstream education (Lankinen 2019, 4). To promote their integration, students need to feel a sense of belonging within their school community. Forsell, Hiltunen, Pihlava, and Alisaari (2016) emphasize the importance of students identifying with their school and gradually feeling part of Finnish society, emphasizing the responsibility they grow into as contributing members of society.

However, Forsell et al. (2016) also point out the challenge in preparatory education classrooms, where students may physically share space with peers from different linguistic backgrounds, but still feel emotionally connected to their home country. Therefore, early inclusion in mainstream education is essential to enable these students to fully immerse themselves in Finnish society and effectively participate in their educational journey (Forsell et al. 2016, 5). This comprehensive approach, which includes personalized support, individualized planning and early mainstream integration, serves as a cornerstone in promoting immigrant students' language proficiency and successful integration into Finnish society.

2.2 Perspectives on the concepts of preparatory education

Preparatory education is part of the Finnish education system, designed to meet the specific needs of newly arrived immigrant pupils. It serves as a bridge between students' previous educational experiences and their integration into Finnish mainstream education. This section provides an in-depth exploration of the concept, its implementation and the challenges it seeks to address. Examining the foundations of preparatory education gives a clearer understanding of its role in promoting integration, equality and academic success.

2.2.1 Immigrant student

It is crucial to introduce the concepts and their differences in order to avoid misunderstandings, which has also been suggested by the theoretical literature. Immigrant is a concept with many levels and interpretations, as it has been defined in different ways in international studies. For example, an immigrant can be a refugee, migrant, returnee or asylum seeker (Soilamo 2008, 16). The difference between displacement and refugee status is that refugee youth and their family members are forced to flee their country at the risk of personal harm, violence or death (Amthor & Roxas 2016, 158). The use of the term

immigrant is also complicated by the fact that previously, when defining preparatory education, we also took into account the fact that children and young people with an immigrant background can participate in education both if they have recently immigrated to Finland and if they were born in Finland. Therefore, the definition of immigrant pupils must also take into account children and pupils with an immigrant background and not only immigrants.

In the context of Finnish education, the term 'immigrant pupil' is defined based on the registered language, whereby persons who are not registered as Finnish or Swedish speakers are considered to be of immigrant origin (Kilpi-Jakonen 2011, 80). This definition divides students into first and second-generation, depending on whether they were born in Finland or abroad. While this classification accurately identifies most first-generation students, it's less suitable for the second generation, as it includes students from established ethnolinguistic minorities who are not necessarily foreign-born, making them a second or higher-generation category. However, only those minority students who are not registered as Finnish or Swedish speakers are included in this category. Therefore, this group does not fully represent ethnic minority students (Kilpi-Jakonen 2011, 80).

According to the OECD definition, which is used in this study, first-generation immigrant youth are those born abroad to parents who were also born abroad, while second-generation immigrant youth are those born in Finland to parents who were born abroad (Harju-Luukkainen 2014). Despite the challenges they face, immigrant pupils, especially the first generation, are more likely to drop out of education after compulsory schooling. The risk of dropping out is higher for those born outside the European Union than for those born inside. These differences are partly explained by prior educational attainment (Kilpi-Jakonen 2011, p80). Preparatory education usually lasts one academic year and includes, to varying degrees, participation in general education activities such as arts and skills subjects (Harju-Luukkainen 2014, 99).

2.2.2 Instruction preparing for basic education

Preparatory education (prep-ed), also known as Instruction Preparing for Basic Education or simply preparatory education, refers to the first year of education provided for newly arrived students after immigration. This can take place in separate prep-ed classes or be integrated into mainstream education in line with the students' age-appropriate Finnish- or Swedish-speaking peers (Tainio 2019, 84). The integration of immigrant students into age-appropriate

Finnish- or Swedish-speaking classes is a fundamental aspect of prep-ed, as stated in the curriculum, and promotes the healthy growth and development of students (Opetushallitus 2015b, 5). This integrative role is recognized and demonstrates that direct placement in mainstream education does not always achieve true inclusion. Research highlights that success in prep-ed is statistically linked to later achievement in upper secondary education (Tainio 2019, 90).

Prep-ed usually lasts for one academic year, during which students participate to varying degrees in activities within mainstream classes, such as arts and skills subjects (Harju-Luukkainen 2014, 99). The main aim of prep-ed is to improve students' knowledge of Finnish or Swedish (Opetushallitus 2017). However, practices regarding prep-ed vary considerably between municipalities and schools, often influenced by factors such as the size of the municipality and the number of recently arrived students in the area (Lankinen 2019, 3). The composition of prep-ed groups takes into account factors such as literacy, previous educational background, place of residence, cultural background, learning challenges and trauma, highlighting the need for a tailored and supportive approach to early language education for newly arrived students (Forsell, Hiltunen, Pihlava & Alisaari 2016, 2). Although not all migrant students fall into the target group of pre-education, properly supported early language education could equip newly arrived students with the necessary skills for their educational journey. Integrating these different perspectives provides a comprehensive understanding about the nuanced approaches to the education of migrant students in Finland.

2.2.3 Integration as a theoretical concept in relation to the education of immigrant students

Integration as a concept has been defined and approached in different ways depending on the academic discipline and context. In this study, integration refers to the process by which immigrant students participate in the institutional, social and cultural practices of school life while maintaining their cultural backgrounds. The concept is understood as relational and contextual and is used here to explore how students experience belonging, recognition and interaction in a Finnish school environment. Integration is not seen as a fixed end state, but as an ongoing and situated process shaped by both individual agency and institutional structures (Zacheus et al. 2012).

A widely used framework for approaching integration is Berry's (1997) acculturation model, which presents four different strategies of cultural adaptation: assimilation (adopting the host culture while letting go of one's own culture), separation (maintaining one's own culture without engaging with the host society), marginalisation (separating from both cultures), and integration (simultaneously maintaining one's own cultural identity and engaging with the wider society). Integration, as defined in this model, involves both maintaining one's cultural background and participating in the practices of the host community. In the school context, this may require attention to both peer relationships and institutional structures that support or limit such participation.

Zacheus et al. (2012, 65-71) suggest that integration in the school context is shaped not only by the actions of students, but also by the practices, expectations and structures within schools. Teachers, school policies and everyday interactions can influence how migrant students are positioned and how they engage with their environment. Integration can thus be seen as a two-way process involving both the individual and the environment. This approach focuses on how educational practices either make space for or limit the expression of diverse backgrounds and experiences.

This study examines integration through the lens of physical education (PE), which may offer particular conditions for social participation and interaction. Due to the practical and less language-dependent nature of PE, it may provide opportunities for participation that are different from other school subjects. However, as noted by Zacheus et al. (2012), participation in PE does not automatically lead to experiences of inclusion. The way in which physical education is organised and facilitated, such as classroom norms, peer interactions and the extent to which pupils feel recognised, can influence whether or not integration takes place in a meaningful way.

The concept of integration will be used in this study as an analytical tool for understanding how students in preparatory education experience PE, and how these experiences relate to their wider sense of belonging in school. The theoretical approach is used in the analysis of interview material to explore how social dynamics, pedagogical practices and students' perspectives intersect in the context of school sport and physical education. The concept is revisited in later chapters, where it is used to reflect on the findings and consider how physical education may relate to students' experiences of inclusion and participation in the school environment.

2.2.4 Challenges of integrating pupils in the preparatory classes

The integration of immigrant pupils is a difficult task that requires a variety of measures and solutions. Finland, like many other countries, faces the challenge of integrating students from different cultural backgrounds into its education system. An examination of current practice reveals both commendable efforts and areas for improvement.

In the Finnish context, preparatory education is guided by specific guidelines. According to a decision by the Finnish National Agency For Education, preparatory instruction classes should ideally consist of 8–10 students, recognizing the importance of individual attention (Naukkarinen & Tiermas 2019). In reality, however, the classes are often larger, which prevents the effectiveness of individualized instruction (Naukkarinen & Tiermas 2019). This difference highlights the critical need to adjust to these standards in order to ensure an optimal learning environment for each student.

A key feature of preparatory education is the tailored curriculum. Teachers carefully design individual study plans, considering students' previous educational experiences and abilities (Lankinen 2019). This personalized approach is crucial to consider the large differences in students' backgrounds, and to ensure that each student receives an education tailored to his or her needs and abilities. Furthermore, the option to integrate students directly into mainstream education while following preparatory curriculum hours further emphasizes the inclusivity of the Finnish system (Lankinen 2019).

The multicultural education paradigm, as advocated by Banks (2016), underpins efforts to create inclusive and culturally responsive educational practices. Banks argues for a profound restructuring of curricula and pedagogical strategies to enable students to engage meaningfully with their cultural communities and the global society. The integration of multicultural content through various mediums such as drama, discussions and interracial contact fosters understanding and acceptance among students. In addition, extracurricular activities such as drama and debating clubs enrich students' experiences and create opportunities for diverse groups to interact and break down cultural barriers.

Incorporating these multicultural principles into preparatory education fits seamlessly into the Finnish educational ethos. While the curriculum of preparatory instruction adheres to core

educational goals, the integration of multicultural elements can enhance students' ability to participate in the global community (Opetushallitus 2017). It is also essential to actively involve parents in this process. Providing comprehensive information about the Finnish education system, assessment methods and individual study plans promotes cooperation between schools and parents and creates a supportive learning environment (Opetushallitus 2017). The school should not only contribute to the development of positive social integration processes in the school context but must also contribute to the development of socialisation processes that provide migrant pupils with autonomous tools for enabling them to position themselves as citizens in society. (Carter-Thuiller et al. 2018, 62)

Figure 1 is the summary of this chapter's information relating to the challenges of integrating students in the preparatory classes. The challenges mentioned are large class sizes, in terms of the number of students. In addition to that integration process lacks the ways to integrate students into mainstream and incorporation of multicultural principles.

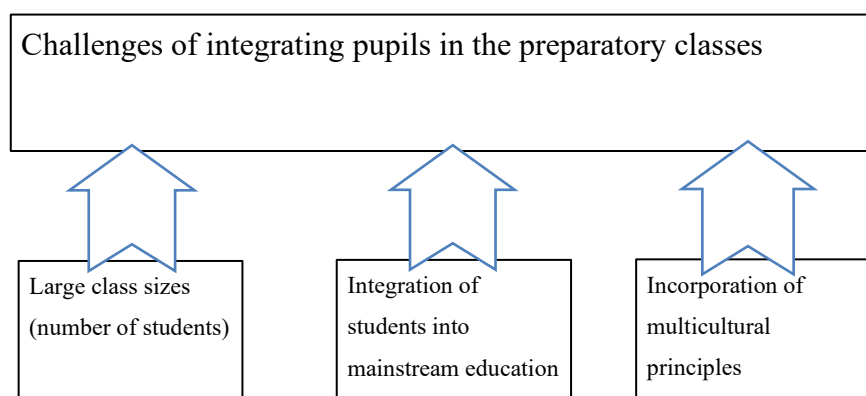


Figure 1. Challenges of integrating pupils in the preparatory classes

3 Physical education and self-perception

In chapter three, the focus will be on the impact of physical education (PE) on self-perception. First, the chapter will introduce the key concepts of self-perception and the theory related to the topic (Competence motivation theory), then discuss the concept and relevance of physical education (PE) in subsection 3.2. Section 3.3 focuses on the challenges faced by immigrant girls, particularly Muslim girls, in physical education and sport, as this group often faces unique barriers due to cultural, religious and gender factors. Understanding these challenges is essential for promoting integration, equality and effective participation in educational settings. Subsequently, Section 3.4 on the other hand will explore the impact of PE on migrant students' self-perception and aim to bring out the literature's views on the topic, which will help to reflect on the relevance of the research findings. Chapter 3.5 focuses on the impact of physical education on the integration of immigrant pupils.

3.1 The concept of self-perception

This chapter explores the meaning of self-perception. It introduces the concept of self-perception and its key components, such as self-esteem. It also introduces Harter's (1981) theory of competence motivation, which helps to explain how an individual's perception of their own abilities influences their motivation and behaviour, for example in the context of physical activity.

3.1.1 Definition of self-perception

The concept of self-perception is complicated and easily confused. In order to continue the study and understand the results, we must first understand the meaning of these concepts. In this way we can understand the impact of sport and physical education on students' self-perception. Self-perception is divided into two concepts, self-esteem and self-concept. Self-esteem tells how students value and feel about themselves as individuals and self-concept on the other hand is a descriptive picture of the students themselves (Crust 2014, 181). Self-esteem can also be the global appreciation of one's value as an individual (Batsiou, Bournoudi, Antoniou & Tokmakidis 2020).

There is a link between sport and students' positive self-esteem. According to Horn (2008), it is not surprising that the physical self has featured prominently in recent developments in self-

concept theory and measurement in sport psychology, given that sport and exercise activate the body's physical system (Horn 2008).

3.1.2 Competence motivation theory

Competence motivation theory, developed by Harter (1981), is a psychological framework that explores the complex interplay between perceived competence, motivation and performance. Harter's conception of competence motivation theory suggests that individuals' perceptions of their own abilities have a significant impact on their motivation and resulting behaviour. The theory proposes that perceived competence and perceived control are basic psychological needs that drive human behaviour, particularly in performance-oriented contexts such as sport.

Harter (1981) empirically tested a hypothesised causal model derived from competence motivation theory. They conducted research with children attending a sports camp and found compelling evidence to support their hypotheses. Specifically, their findings revealed that perceived control played a central role in determining performance and motivational orientation. The study showed that individuals with a low sense of unknown control had higher levels of physical performance and were more likely to have an intrinsic motivational orientation. Furthermore, the research established a direct causal relationship between perceived competence and performance, as well as an indirect relationship between perceived competence and physical performance, mediated by motivational orientation. In addition, the study supported the hypothesised relationship between perceived control and perceived competence, further strengthening the interdependence of these constructs in the context of competence motivation theory.

Building on Harter's (1981) work, Weiss and Chaumeton (1992) developed a comprehensive conceptual model that further explains the dynamics of motivation in sport. In their model, motivational orientation is identified as an individual difference variable that influences the individual's tendency to engage in mastery attempts. These attempts are integral in shaping an individual's perceptions of competence and control, as they lead to feedback from significant others and contribute to the development of criteria for evaluating success and failure. Motivational orientation, together with external feedback and defined success criteria, shapes the formation of internal or external criteria that guide behaviour. Central to Weiss and Chaumeton's model is the notion that individuals' perceptions of competence and control are influenced by both internal and external factors, which in turn affect their affective

experiences. Affect, or emotional response, is assumed to be a critical determinant of motivated behaviour, which ultimately shapes an individual's persistence or cessation of participation in the given activity.

The reason that competence motivation theory was selected for this study is that it provides a valuable framework for understanding the complex interplay between perceived competence, motivation and performance. Although the competence motivation theory wasn't originally developed for school education but for the sports industry (clubs, etc.), it can be integrated into physical education (PE). Harter's foundational research, along with subsequent contributions by Weiss and Chaumeton (1992), has significantly advanced our understanding of how individuals' beliefs about their abilities influence their motivation and behaviour in performance-oriented contexts such as sport. By exploring the causal relationships between perceived competence, control, and motivational orientation, this theoretical framework offers valuable insights into the psychological processes underlying human performance and provides a foundation for further research and practical applications in a variety of fields.

3.2 Physical education

According to Finnish National Agency for Education (Opetushallitus 2016), physical education in schools is seen as an important way to promote physical activity and encourage children and young people to adopt a physically active lifestyle. The main aim of physical education is to promote both growth in knowledge, skills and attitudes towards physical activity and growth through physical activity, thus supporting a lifelong active lifestyle among students.

According to Jaakkola et al. (2017), PE serves as a platform not only to promote physical health but also to foster personal growth and development, including social and interpersonal skills. Students who enjoy PE tend to be more motivated to engage in physical activity, and this positive attitude correlates with increased levels of physical activity (Wiseman & Weir 2017).

A study by Wiseman and Weir (2017) highlighted the positive impact of PE classes on students' overall health. Positive PE ratings were associated with better health outcomes, demonstrating the importance of an enjoyable and engaging PE experience. However, a

decline in PE enrolment has been noted, raising concerns about declining levels of physical activity among youth and children.

Individualized strategies within schools are needed to address this decline. Schools can play a pivotal role in influencing adolescents' physical activity levels by implementing changes to PE programs (Wiseman & Weir 2017). By creating enjoyable and motivating PE experiences, schools can bridge the gap between the benefits of physical activity through PE and students' willingness to participate. This requires a collaborative effort between school administrators, department heads and teachers to re-evaluate PE curricula and make them more engaging and inclusive.

3.3 Challenges faced by minorities in physical education

Regarding gender differences it has generally been found that girls show more self-determined motivations for studying than boys do (Alivernini et al. 2018). Nevertheless, until the age of fourteen, girls and boys participated in clubs at roughly the same rate, after which girls' club participation declined significantly more than boys' (Zacheus & Saarinen 2019). In the realm of physical education (PE) and school sports, the challenges faced by immigrant students, particularly Muslim girls, are significant and diverse. Research studies, such as those conducted by Bichi (2018), highlight the complexity of these challenges. The requirement for communal showers and culturally inappropriate clothing in school sports creates discomfort and actively discourages participation among Muslim girls, leading some to skip classes (Bichi 2018, 6). This phenomenon highlights an important issue: the profound influence of cultural sensitivity and inclusivity in shaping young Muslim women's attitudes toward sports and fitness activities (Bichi 2018, 6).

Furthermore, the process of cultural integration in schools may inadvertently undermine the cultural identities of migrant populations. Assimilation-oriented integration, as discussed by Carter-Thuiller et al. (2018), often forces immigrant students to adopt the dominant cultural characteristics of the host society. This assimilationist logic, practiced within the privileged platform of the education system, challenges the preservation of students' original cultures and leads to constant cultural conflict (Carter-Thuiller et al. 2018, 62).

Linguistic and social barriers add further complexity. For students who are deeply attached to their mother tongue, adapting to a new linguistic and educational context is a major challenge

(Desmée & Cebotari 2023). In the context of sports, children from ethnic minorities face derogatory remarks related to their ethnicity, which exacerbates the difficulties they encounter in social interactions (Agergaard 2015, 218). In addition, the lack of awareness among PE teachers about the cultural needs of immigrant pupils further hinders their experiences in PE (Caldeborg 2022, 74).

Physical contact in PE classes adds another layer of complexity. Finland's compulsory and coeducational PE subjects pose challenges, especially when male teachers find physical contact problematic when teaching immigrant girls (see Van Doodeward & Knoppers 2018). Negotiating these boundaries becomes essential, highlighting the need for a delicate balance between cultural sensitivity and effective teaching methods (Caldeborg 2022, 82).

Participation in extracurricular activities, such as sports clubs, also reflects social inequalities. Agergaard (2018) found significantly lower membership rates among immigrant girls compared to their peers, highlighting the need for inclusive practices in sports organizations. To comprehensively address these challenges, it is imperative to adopt a holistic approach. Reframing the discourse, as suggested by Knez, Macdonald and Abbott (2012), is crucial. Exploring ways in which Islam, gender and physical activity can coexist harmoniously within family, school and community contexts offers a promising avenue for promoting inclusivity and understanding.

It is essential to recognize and address these multiple challenges. By integrating cultural sensitivity, promoting inclusive teaching methods and fostering understanding, educational institutions can create an environment where migrant pupils, including Muslim girls, feel valued, respected and empowered to actively participate in physical education and school sports.

3.4 The impact of physical activity on the self-perception of immigrant students

When exploring the influence of physical education on the self-perception of immigrant students, it is evident that various challenges hinder their integration into the Finnish physical education system. Language proficiency, cultural understanding, finding appropriate activity groups, communication barriers and financial constraints act as barriers to their seamless integration (Junala & Lallukka 2012, 25). Feeling marginalized or distanced from mainstream

education adds to this challenge and can affect children's motivation, engagement and overall learning outcomes (Desmée & Cebotari 2023).

Preparatory education programs provide a common ground for diverse students and foster shared experiences related to immigration and language learning challenges (Forsell, Hiltunen, Pihlava & Alisaari 2016, 2). For example, students in selected preparatory education classes seamlessly participate in physical education alongside their peers, providing valuable experiences of belonging and equality. These shared experiences would play an important role in promoting inclusivity and bridging the gap between immigrant students and their Finnish counterparts.

Self-perceptions emerge as a key factor in this context, encapsulating an individual's thoughts, attitudes and feelings about their skills, abilities and overall identity (Horn 2004; Crust 2014, 181). Higher levels of global self-perceptions, such as self-esteem and self-concept, have a significant impact on motivation and sustained participation (Crust 2014, 181). Formal PE lessons, where pupils develop specific skills and competencies, have a significant impact on physical self-perceptions, enabling comparisons and increasing confidence (Crust 2014, 187). Positive feedback and recognition of skills in physical education classes contribute significantly to the self-esteem of immigrant students, fostering a sense of belonging and achievement (Agergaard 2015, 220).

In addition, participation in sports and physical activity contributes to children's social and emotional development, fostering discipline, self-confidence, self-control, adaptability, cooperation and problem-solving skills (Batista et al. 2016). Stein et al (2007) confirm that increased physical activity is positively correlated with changes in social and athletic self-esteem, highlighting the central role of physical education in shaping self-perception. This connected web of experiences, perceptions, and interactions in physical education suggests that physical education can have a significant yet complex influence on the self-perception and overall well-being of immigrant students.

Multicultural education goes beyond mere academic achievement; it promotes social integration, and citizenship and increases self-esteem, emphasizing the overall impact of inclusive physical education on immigrant students' self-perception (Desmée & Cebotari 2023). This comprehensive approach ensures that physical education becomes a platform not only for developing skills, but also for fostering a sense of belonging and self-worth among immigrant students.

3.5 Physical education in schools as a tool for the integration of pupils with a migrant background

In the context of immigrant integration, schools play a pivotal role as a primary arena where cultural diversity converges, shaping immigrants' future social and economic participation (Carter-Thuiller et al. 2018, 62). The education system not only influences current social integration but also determines future prospects, including employment opportunities, highlighting its importance in promoting a cohesive society. However, integration frameworks often fall short in addressing the complexities faced by immigrants, such as overrepresentation in low-paid jobs and experiences of discrimination (Carter-Thuiller et al. 2017). As a result, the school system becomes a crucial space for addressing these challenges, requiring a nuanced approach to immigrant integration.

Interpersonal relationships within educational settings contribute significantly to integration efforts, acting as a facilitator of social differentiation and inclusion (Carter-Thuiller et al. 2018, 64). Sport, recognised as a potential tool to promote integration, becomes instrumental when embedded in an environment that promotes mutual respect for cultural differences (Carter-Thuiller et al. 2018, 66). However, the role of sport in the integration of migrants remains ambiguous, with different approaches being observed. Study highlights the importance of inclusion as a primary strategy, emphasising the importance of mutual respect and curiosity in the two-way integration process (Flensner, Korp & Lindgren 2020, 79).

Participation in sport and physical activity serves a dual purpose for immigrants, acting as a means of exploring self-identity while enabling their integration into societal norms (Fagerlund & Majjala 2011, 19). The effect of integration through sport and physical education comes from group activities that make it possible to learn the rules of sport, but also those of the rest of society (Myrén 2003, 108; Fagerlund & Majjala 2011, 19). However, challenges persist, as evidenced by cases of exclusion and discrimination in sport, which negatively impact integration efforts, especially in school contexts (Elling & Knoppers 2005). Building trust between teachers and students, especially in multiethnic classrooms, emerges as a fundamental factor in fostering caring relationships, which are essential for successful integration (van Doodeward & Knoppers 2018).

Furthermore, Muslim organisations use sporting activities as a means of preventing marginalisation, supporting mental health and assisting young people in their identity

formation, suggesting a potential avenue for integrating these methods into school sports and physical education programmes (Agergaard 2018). While schools are important platforms for integration, the effectiveness of integration efforts depends on the development of integrative environments in education and sport that emphasise mutual respect, understanding and support for the unique challenges and experiences of immigrants.

Figure 2 (Carter-Thuiller et al. 2018, 67) below shows that Physical Education (PE) is a tool that could significantly contribute to the development of intercultural educational attributes, by having educational principles and objectives as a consequence to strengthen the processes of integration and inclusion of immigrants. The figure highlights the link between PE and key educational principles - such as participation, continuity and versatility, that support the integration of immigrant students. Central to the model is the idea that PE must be placed within an educational environment that actively promotes cultural diversity and inclusion. Professionals working in these settings have a crucial role to play in applying intercultural competence in practice. According to Soler et al. (2012), such a structured and inclusive approach to PE can increase the participation of immigrant students, provided that pedagogical interventions are planned accordingly.

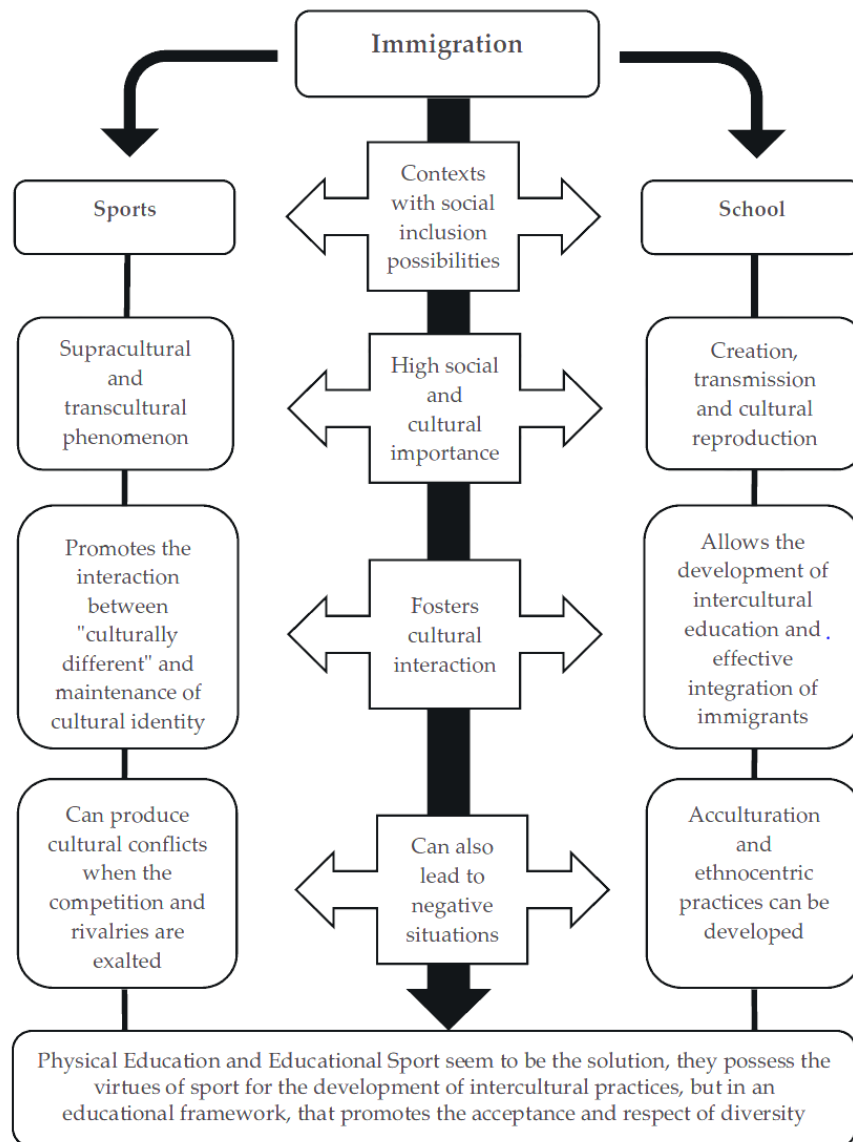


Figure 2. Description social inclusion possibilities of immigrant population from sports and school (Carter-Thuiller et al. 2018, 67)

4 Research question

This study is based on constructivism, which states that there are no absolute truths or predetermined knowledge in the world or in science. Still, instead, scientific knowledge and truth are constructed by researchers (Koppa of the University of Jyväskylä 2015). The research aims to investigate the relationship between self-perception and physical education experiences of preparatory school students with an immigrant background. The research questions based on this purpose are:

1. *How do preparatory education students perceive the role of physical education in their integration?*
2. *How do preparatory education students perceive the effect of physical activity on their self-perception?*
3. *What is the role of physical education and teachers in supporting the integration of immigrant students?*
4. What are immigrant students' wishes and suggestions for improving school physical education?

The selection of preparatory education students with immigrant backgrounds as the research subject is based on broader considerations relevant to the field of education. Each subject area has its own internal value orientations, concepts of humanity, and goals of action, which influence how material and research subjects are defined (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). In formulating the research problem, a legally and socially relevant and well-defined question was chosen, with the aim of providing answers to current issues (see Miettinen 2016, 55).

5 Research methods

5.1 Research method

This study uses a qualitative research method, which is particularly suited to gaining an in-depth understanding and description of the phenomenon under research. Attention is focused on the perspectives, meanings and views of the participants (Kananen 2014, 16-18). The choice of a qualitative approach is based on the understanding that it is complex to understand and uncover the meanings associated with individuals' relationships with physical activity. Often, individuals are not fully aware of all the factors influencing their physical activity relationship, and the diverse range of meanings makes it difficult to create a simple scale (Koski 2015).

Qualitative research is distinguished by the voluntary selection of the research population (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2009, 164). In this study, the research population was selected based on familiarity with the theoretical framework and prior research, ensuring both reliability and relevance. The data were carefully selected to maintain the neutrality and reliability of the research. The present study employs qualitative methods with the objective of providing a detailed understanding of the role of physical education in shaping the self-perception of preparatory education students with immigrant backgrounds.

5.2 Data collection

The topic of this research was inspired by prior teaching experience in physical education within preparatory classes at upper primary schools, where school sports and their surrounding social environment were observed to significantly influence the integration and well-being of students. This phenomenon was important to explore further to contribute to academic understanding of how it is experienced and perceived in the school context. By doing so, both current and future educators could use this information to develop their methods of integrating preparatory students into society, helping them to become more secure and healthy both physically and mentally.

The first step in the process was to formulate appropriate research questions, followed by the development of thematic interview sections based on the phenomenon. The theoretical

framework helped to shape the research questions. There was already some literature and previous studies on the topic, which made it easier to write and conceptualize the theory and relevant concepts. The target group for this study consisted of upper primary school students, as physical activity tends to decrease and physical inactivity increases during adolescence (Kokko et al., 2019). The research was conducted in preparatory classes in schools located in Southwest Finland. Contact was made with suitable schools in the selected region, extending beyond familiar schools to include others as well.

Pre-test interviews were conducted with two student classroom teachers who acted as simulated respondents to assess the clarity, structure, and overall flow of the interview framework. The primary goal of the pre-test was to identify potential issues within the framework that could hinder the effectiveness of the data collection process. Feedback from the pre-test revealed that some questions were too broad, making it difficult to gather specific and detailed responses. Additionally, it was noted that some questions overlapped, which could lead to repetition during the interviews. In response to this feedback, the interview framework was revised to make it clearer and more coherent. Broad and unclear questions were replaced with more focused and precise ones to encourage participants to provide specific examples. These adjustments resulted in a final interview framework that was both clear and logical, significantly improving the quality and depth of the data collected in the subsequent interviews. The pre-test process proved valuable for identifying and addressing weaknesses, ensuring that the framework was fully prepared to support the research objectives.

The interviews were conducted between January and April 2024, either through FaceTime or face-to-face at the students' schools. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed only after all interviews were completed. The interview questionnaire (Appendix 1) was divided into two main themes: experiences and perceptions related to school sports and future development aspirations in this area. The interview framework was developed based on the theoretical framework. It is crucial to familiarize oneself with the research topic prior to conducting interviews, as the themes are based on the theoretical framework and leave room for personal interpretation (Eskola, Lääntti & Vastamäki, 2018). After the interviews, the data were transcribed, and only the information that answered the research questions was highlighted. The interview material was categorized into main themes and sub-themes using the content analysis method outlined by Puusa, Juuti, and Aaltio (2020). Thematic analysis was carried out based on the number of common features found in the interview material.

The research was carried out through interviews because the goal was to gather the feelings and perspectives of preparatory education students regarding the research topic. The decision to use interviews was based on the desire to obtain direct responses from the target group, which is typical for interviews in qualitative research (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). A thematic interview method was chosen as it allowed for an open discussion within predefined themes, which facilitated a broader understanding of the students' experiences and perceptions. This method enabled the researcher to delve deeper into the phenomena and experiences that emerged during the interviews, enriching the research material from the researcher's perspective. Thematic interviews emphasized the conversational nature of the research, a characteristic of interview-based methods (Eskola, Läntti & Vastamäki, 2018). Unlike a discussion, however, the themes of the interview guide directed the search for meaningful answers (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018).

A total of nine preparatory students participated in the interviews, which were arranged with the help of teachers and school staff. Interviews were conducted individually in familiar and private settings, such as the school building, to help participants feel comfortable and encourage open communication. The discussions were supported by school counsellors, who communicated with participants in their first language to ensure students were able to express themselves as comfortably and clearly as possible. Each interview lasted between 25 and 40 minutes, depending on the depth of the discussion. The process was carefully planned to foster an open and trusting atmosphere. With the participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded using both phone and computer and transcribed into 32 pages of written material for analysis. Ethical considerations, such as ensuring anonymity and voluntary participation, were rigorously maintained throughout the process. As the research topic involved sensitive issues, the thematic interview format provided both the researcher and the interviewee with the flexibility to approach the topic to the extent deemed ethically appropriate. The interview themes also allowed for addressing students with diverse backgrounds and elaborating on certain themes more extensively, which is characteristic of thematic interviews (see Eskola, Läntti & Vastamäki, 2018). This was particularly evident when discussing students' experiences and feelings about physical education at school, as there was a wide range of responses and backgrounds related to this topic.

5.3 Data analysis methods

After collecting the interview data, the material was transcribed into text and prepared in a technically usable format (e.g., Eskola & Suoranta 2014). Each interview was transcribed, which means that the recorded spoken material was written out in full using Microsoft Word. During the transcription process, all identifying information about the interviewees was removed to protect their anonymity. Each interviewed student was given a pseudonym and labelled S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8 and S9. The participants were nine preparatory school students, four male and five female, aged between 9 and 16. They represented seven different countries of origin, reflecting the linguistic and cultural diversity of the group.

Data-driven content analysis was used in the analysis and interpretation of the data, which allows the data to be specified, clarified, and targeted to meet the research task and objectives (see Kiviniemi 2018, 82). The aim is to produce a detailed, precise, clear and consistent description of the research phenomenon based on the material (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009). Although the analysis was described as data-driven, it also included elements of theory-driven categorisation. For example, the categorisation process was informed by previous research, such as the concepts of Jama, Tynjälä, Aarto-Pesonen, Malinen and Hämäläinen (2021), which emphasise the identification of meaningful expressions in the data and their grouping into categories of description. This suggests that the analysis was not entirely data-driven, but rather leaned towards a theory-guided approach, where theoretical insights helped to shape the interpretation of the data.

A phenomenological-hermeneutic approach was also adopted for the study, as it is consistent with the focus on understanding participants' experiences and the meanings they give to the phenomenon. This hybrid approach recognises the importance of both remaining open to what emerges from the data and of drawing on relevant theoretical frameworks to provide structure and depth to the analysis. By clarifying the interaction between data-driven and theory-driven elements, the analysis ensures a balanced and transparent methodological approach in line with the research objectives. The research has taken into account individual-level descriptions. This individualised approach can be seen in the results section, where the individual experiences and feelings of the participants, in this case, the preparatory education students were highlighted.

What makes the research phenomenological is that the texts that are sorted and grouped are similar in content. By looking at the similarities and differences between the code groups, and

by combining the groups, it is possible to create tentative descriptive categories that describe different ways of experiencing the meaning of physical education. These categories will help to identify their differences and also to focus on their similarities where appropriate and possible. The result of the phenomenological-hermeneutic analysis is the structure the researcher finds in the data; more than one structure can be made of the same data depending on the researcher's own understanding (Jama et al. 2021).

The data analysis process involved several key steps to make sure that the participants' experiences were systematically interpreted and categorised. The process is detailed in Table 1 below to provide a clear example of how the analysis progressed from raw data to categorised themes. Although this is a small example of the analysis steps and categorisation, the entire data was analysed in the same way.

The first step was to identify meaningful phrases within the interview responses. Each response was read carefully and phrases or sentences that reflected significant ideas or experiences were highlighted. For example, the phrase "we motivate each other and improve together" was identified as an important expression that described how teamwork promoted social integration among students.

In a second step, the highlighted phrases were coded to capture their core idea. Each code was designed to summarise the meaning of the expression. For example, the phrase 'we motivate each other and improve together' was coded as 'positive feelings in PE' to represent students' enjoyment and sense of cooperation in team activities.

Once the data had been coded, the third step was to group similar codes into categories. Codes with similarities were combined into broader categories that reflected repeated patterns in the data. For example, the codes 'positive feelings in PE' and 'making friends in PE' were combined into the category "social integration through teamwork".

Finally, the categories were expanded into broader themes that were consistent with the research questions and theoretical framework. These themes provided a whole understanding of the participants' experiences. For example, the category 'social integration through teamwork' contributed to the development of the theme 'social integration in PE', which highlights the role of PE in promoting social relationships and a sense of belonging among students.

Table 1: Example of Analysis Process

Meaningful Phrase	Code	Category	Theme	Respondent
"Here we have to go and play with other students so we can hang out and make friends. It's important to meet new people."	Social interaction through PE	Social integration through teamwork	Social integration in PE	S1
"I like team activities like football or tag games because everyone participates and works together."	Team-based activities	Social integration through teamwork	Social integration in PE	S8
"I don't like boys touching me in PE for religious reasons. It makes me very angry and sad."	Discomfort due to physical contact	Cultural challenges in PE	Cultural differences and needs	S9
"Teachers should make sure that boys take boys and girls take girls in tag games. It would be more respectful to my religion."	Cultural sensitivity in activities	Cultural challenges in PE	Cultural differences and needs	S9
"Playing football makes us feel good. Being part of the game is a positive experience."	Positive feelings in sports	Positive experiences in PE	Self-perception	S6, S7
"One day I played football in school, and everyone was shocked at how I played. They said I was amazing and should join a team."	Recognition of skills	Boosting self-confidence	Self-perception	S2

6 Research results

6.1 The role of school physical education in the integration of immigrant students

Physical education (PE) can play a special role in the school environment, providing a space where pupils can engage not only in physical activity but also in meaningful social interaction. For immigrant students, PE can provide a setting in which processes of social integration can take place. What makes PE different from other school subjects is its focus on cooperation, teamwork and shared experiences, which creates opportunities for students to engage with each other across cultural boundaries. In this way, PE can serve as a place for developing friendships, practising social skills and fostering a sense of belonging in a multicultural environment. This chapter explores the role of physical education in supporting the social integration of immigrant pupils, focusing on their experiences of making friends, working in teams, the cultural differences faced by preparatory students and overcoming the challenges that may arise in these processes.

6.1.1 Cultural differences and needs

The experiences of immigrant students in school physical education (PE) are shaped by various cultural differences and individual needs. The interviews revealed that cultural and religious sensitivities, students' expectations for better accommodation of their cultural identities, and differences in experiences between preparatory and regular classes all play a significant role. For example, cultural differences were evident in areas such as dress codes, gender-segregated activities, and the perception of competition in sports. These findings underline the importance of promoting cultural understanding and integration in PE to ensure that students feel respected, included, and able to participate meaningfully. Presenting this conclusion builds on the preparatory students' responses, which emphasized the need for addressing these issues to support integration

A recurring theme in the interviews was the impact of cultural and religious sensitivities on pupils' participation in physical education. For some students, physical contact during activities caused considerable discomfort for religious reasons. These situations can lead to

frustration and alienation for students, affecting their ability to engage in physical education classes. One pupil expressed this clearly: "I don't like boys touching me in PE for religious reasons. It makes me very angry and sad." (S9)

Another common concern was privacy and modesty, particularly in situations such as showering after PE. Aspects of PE that may seem routine or insignificant to some students can be deeply uncomfortable for others, particularly those from different cultural or religious backgrounds. One student explained: "I don't like to shower after PE. I don't feel comfortable taking my clothes off in front of other people." (S8)

Pupils also made suggestions on how physical education could be better adapted to their cultural needs. Suggestions included the importance of planning activities in a way that respects cultural and religious values. A practical solution was suggested to address concerns about physical contact: "Teachers should make sure that boys take boys and girls take girls in tag games. It would be more respectful to my religion." (S9)

Another suggestion focused on integrating cultural diversity into PE activities to promote acceptance and mutual understanding among pupils. It focused on PE's potential to become a space where cultural identities are celebrated and shared. Including games from different cultural backgrounds not only makes PE more inclusive, but also provides opportunities for pupils to learn about each other's traditions, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual appreciation. One pupil described how this could be achieved: "Teachers could ask what games we played in our home countries and include them in PE." (S8)

The interviews also revealed notable differences in how students in preparatory classes experience PE compared to their home countries. Many students highlighted the flexibility of the Finnish PE system as a positive aspect. This flexibility was seen as a strength of the Finnish system, providing a more personalised and enjoyable experience for immigrant students. One student shared: "In my home country, PE was stricter and we didn't have so many choices. Here we can choose what we want to do, which feels better". (S1)

However, for some students, transitioning from a stricter system to a more flexible one required adjustment. In addition, students noted differences in terms of safety and inclusivity. This comparison shows how the Finnish PE system, with its emphasis on safety and inclusivity, can provide a more welcoming environment for students from different cultural and educational backgrounds. For instance, one student compared their experiences in their

home country and Finland: "In my home country, PE was very fast and sometimes dangerous. Here it is safer and slower." (S4)

The transition from preparatory classes to regular classes was another key aspect discussed in the interviews. While some students initially faced challenges in integrating with regular class pupils, many eventually experienced a sense of inclusion and acceptance. One student described this process: "At first the regular class pupils didn't accept me in PE, but now they like me and I feel included." (S8)

This suggests that while the integration process may be met with challenges at first, PE has the potential to become a space for inclusion and acceptance, bridging the gap between preparatory and regular classes. The findings highlight the importance of cultural awareness and adapted approaches in PE to ensure that all pupils, regardless of their background, can fully engage and benefit from the activities.

6.1.2 Social integration

Physical education could provide a valuable platform for pupils from different cultural and multilingual backgrounds to interact, build friendships and develop essential social skills. According to Jaakkola et al. (2017), PE not only contributes to physical health, but also to the development of social and interpersonal skills, which are essential for the integration process. This chapter explores how PE facilitates the social integration of immigrant students through friendship building, teamwork and cross-cultural interactions.

The interviews revealed that PE is often perceived as a safe space for socialising, providing opportunities to meet classmates from different backgrounds and make friends. This is in line with Horn's (2004) view that structured group activities, such as physical education, can promote positive social interactions by requiring students to cooperate and communicate. For example, one pupil remarked: "Here we have to go and play with other students so we can hang out and make friends. It's important to meet new people." (S1)

Some participants described positive experiences of making friends through sport. This highlights how PE can serve as a platform for initiating social connections. Forsell et al. (2016) argue that fostering a sense of belonging is crucial for successful integration, and the experience shared by participants reflects how PE can contribute to this process by creating

opportunities for interaction and relationship building. For example, one participant said: "My relationship with other pupils is great. I have become friends with some of them. I met them in PE and we talked there" (S4)

In contrast, other participants highlighted the limitations in the depth and sustainability of these relationships. According to Forsell et al. (2016), the development of deeper bonds requires ongoing efforts to foster a sense of belonging. This suggests that while PE facilitates initial connections, it does not guarantee lasting or meaningful relationships. One pupil noted: "I've made friends in PE but not close friends. I've met a girl through PE but we don't talk anymore." (S9). These observations suggest that while PE creates a space for early exchanges and the development of friendships, the depth and continuity of these connections depend on individual circumstances and dynamics.

In addition to fostering friendships, PE was identified as an environment that supports the development of teamwork and communication skills, both of which are crucial to social inclusion. The teamwork aspect of many PE activities encourages pupils to work together towards common goals. For example, the experience of participating in team games was described as such: "When we do team games and competitions, it feels great. We can motivate each other and improve ourselves." (S1)

These findings are consistent with Weiss and Chaumeton's (1992) concept that collaborative activities in sport promote social bonding by creating shared experiences and mutual support. This shows how PE can create an environment where students learn to work together, support each other and develop social skills that contribute to their integration into the school community. Similarly, another pupil highlighted how team-based activities, such as football, encouraged collective participation and mutual support: "I like team activities like football or tag games because everyone participates and works together." (S8)

The findings highlight the complexity of using PE as a tool for social integration. On the one hand, PE provides structured opportunities for teamwork, friendship building and communication, which are essential for developing a feeling of belonging. On the other hand, as noted by Naukkarinen and Tiermas (2019), the diversity of students' backgrounds and individual needs highlights the importance of tailored approaches to maximise PE's integrative potential. Providing culturally sensitive activities and addressing individual challenges is crucial to ensuring positive outcomes for all students.

Despite these positive outcomes, challenges to social integration were also reported. PE can be both a facilitator of social interaction and a space where language barriers or cultural misunderstandings prevent deeper connections. As one participant explained: "Some pupils talk to me and are my friends, but we don't talk to others. Sometimes people treat me badly, but PE has helped me learn Finnish by listening to others." (S2)

At the same time, other students described more successful experiences, highlighting the potential of PE to build meaningful relationships. This suggests that while PE offers opportunities for social integration, individual factors such as language skills and cultural adaptation play a crucial role in shaping how students experience and benefit from these opportunities. For example, one pupil shared: "I have made a Finnish friend through PE. It has helped me to talk to others more." (S3)

These results show the diversity of immigrant pupils' experiences of forming connections with others through PE. The interviews revealed how PE promotes social integration through friendship building, teamwork and relationships with classmates, highlighting its importance in supporting the integration process of immigrant pupils. While many find PE to be an accepting environment that makes friendships and language learning easier, others find it difficult to manage social interactions. This difference highlights the importance of taking individual needs and personal circumstances into account in order to make PE an effective tool for social integration.

6.2 The influence of physical activity on preparatory students' self-perception

This section explores how students reflected on the relationship between physical activity and their self-perceptions. The interviews included descriptions of experiences associated with feelings of enjoyment, ability and recognition, as well as accounts of challenges that shaped their sense of participation and belonging. The students described situations in which physical activity boosted their confidence or made them feel visible among their peers. At the same time, some noted experiences of exclusion, discomfort or difficulty in certain activities or social settings. These perspectives shed light on the different ways in which students related to physical activity and how it might intersect with broader experiences of self-image, motivation and social interaction.

6.2.1 Positive experiences and feelings

A consistent theme in the interviews was the sense of achievement and enjoyment that students gained from participating in PE activities. Moments of success, whether through personal achievement or team effort in competitive team sports, were often highlighted as meaningful experiences. One such moment involved the recognition of football skills, which acknowledged abilities and provided pride and motivation: "One day I played football in school, and everyone was shocked at how I played. They said I was amazing and should join a team." (S2)

Team sports were also described as a source of enjoyment and a way of developing a sense of belonging and purpose. Participation in football, for example, was highlighted as a rewarding and positive experience. This sentiment was shared by both S6 and S7, who expressed similar views: "Playing football makes us feel good. Being part of the game is a positive experience".

In addition, engaging in more playful games was seen as a way of enjoying PE in an accessible and fun way. A special activity, such as playing elephant ball with a big ball, was described as both entertaining and including: "Playing elephant ball with a big ball where even the teachers participated—it was so much fun." (S8). These examples show that successful experiences in PE, whether individual achievements or group activities, play an important role in promoting students engagement and enjoyment.

Physical activity in PE was also seen as contributing to self-esteem and confidence. Participation in these activities provided opportunities for personal growth, skills development and social interaction. The overall benefits of PE were highlighted in reflecting on its impact on mental and physical wellbeing: "It makes me happy when I can play with my friends or go to the gym, workout, or lift things. It's good for my mind and body." (S1). This shows how PE not only improves physical health, but also supports emotional well-being and self-esteem.

Excitement and hope were also key to the positive experiences described by participants. Football was mentioned as an activity that created excitement and positivity: "Every time there is football in PE, I feel excited all day and it makes my day." (S4)

Similarly, playful games such as hide and seek were associated with feelings of confidence and safety in a supportive environment: "It's fun, especially when I play with friends." (S5)

Motivation, which is closely linked to positive experiences in PE, was another key theme. Many students identified the social aspect of PE as an important motivator. The presence of friends and shared experiences in PE activities boosted pupils' confidence and created a sense of purpose. Playing with friends and doing activities together provided courage and friendship, as shown by this answer: "Having fun with friends while doing PE, like the time we got mad at each other during a badminton match. It was funny." (S3)

Personal interests and previous experiences also influenced students engagement in physical activity, in addition to social factors. Early exposure to sports, such as football, was identified as a key factor in developing a long-term involvement in physical activity: "I like football. I started playing with my brother when I was six." (S9)

Feelings of success, recognition of effort and skills, and a supportive PE environment were collectively described as key factors in increasing students' motivation and self-esteem. Positive feedback, such as praise for football skills, was seen not only as inspiring but also as encouraging pupils to seek further opportunities in sport: "I felt inspired after being praised for my football skills, which encouraged me to pursue further opportunities in sport." (S2)

6.2.2 Challenges and negative experiences

Physical education (PE) offers many opportunities for positive experiences, but it can also present various challenges and negative experiences for students. These challenges, as highlighted in the interviews, come from physical limitations, cultural differences, and experiences of being excluded.

Physical limitations and the nature of specific activities were frequently mentioned as barriers to participation in physical education. These limitations can lead to feelings of frustration or discouragement, especially when students are unable to participate fully or in the same way as their classmates. Health-related issues, such as asthma or breathing difficulties, were commonly cited as factors that restricted participation in certain activities. For example, one student explained: "I have minor asthma, and when I do too much, my asthma attacks me." (S3)

Similarly, another student shared their difficulty with endurance activities: "I don't like running long distances because of breathing difficulties." (S9). These examples underline the

importance of considering students' physical health and capabilities when planning PE activities to ensure that all students can participate comfortably and safely.

Unfamiliar activities also presented significant barriers, particularly for students with limited previous experience of certain sports or exercises. This shows how PE activities that are unfamiliar to pupils can cause additional stress or feelings of incapacity, therefore it's crucial to give these students support and instructions for them to participate effectively. The difficulty of certain activities, such as skiing, was described as a challenge: "Skiing is very difficult for me. The first time was really difficult." (S2)

Other challenges, such as group dynamics, also came to the attention of the participants. For example, difficulties in finding a partner for exercises were identified as a source of awkwardness or feeling excluded. For some pupils, the challenge of making connections with other classmates during group activities led to feelings of being left out: "I had difficulties finding someone to partner with during exercises." (S5)

These experiences suggest that organizing in physical education, such as pairing students or ensuring group activity participation, plays a crucial role in shaping how students perceive and participate in the classes.

Cultural differences were another major source of challenge for students. Issues relating to religious beliefs and practices were particularly noticeable. This highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity and awareness among PE teachers, as certain activities or exchanges may conflict with students' personal or religious values. In such cases, students may feel uncomfortable participating fully or may even avoid participation entirely. For example, physical contact in mixed-sex activities was identified as a problem: "I also dislike when boys touch me in PE because of religious reasons." (S9)

Privacy and modesty also appeared as cultural considerations that affected students' experiences of PE. A strong dislike of shared showers was cited as a barrier to participation: "I don't like going to the shower after PE." (S8)

Lack of familiarity with certain games or activities was also mentioned as a potential challenge. Although not specifically linked to cultural factors, not liking certain games, such as "Who's afraid of the octopus", may reflect differences in preferences or previous experience with certain activities: "I didn't like that game." (S8)

Conflict and social tensions during group activities were also noted. For example, disagreements and injuries during games negatively influenced students' experiences: "I've had arguments with a student and got hurt during a game of tag." (S7)

Similarly, physical confrontations—whether intentional or accidental—were described as contributing to feelings of discomfort or insecurity: "Once, while playing football, someone hit me with their elbow on my nose." (S6)

These incidents demonstrate the potential for social tensions and misunderstandings to take place in PE, which can have a negative impact on pupils' overall sense of safety and enjoyment.

The challenges and negative experiences described by participants show how PE can be associated with both the strengthening and weakening of self-esteem. These findings highlight the importance of a carefully planned and integrative approach to PE, where linguistic, cultural and personal challenges are recognised and addressed. By fostering an environment where students feel supported and able to participate, it may be possible to increase positive experiences and reduce risks to self-esteem.

6.3 The role of physical education in the integration process

Based on the interviews, the physical education can play an important role in the integration process of immigrant students by providing opportunities to develop social and cultural skills, improve language skills and promote cultural understanding. The interviews highlight how PE serves as a space for interaction, learning and adaptation, helping students to find their way in their new school environment and to build relationships with their classmates. This chapter explores students' perspectives on how both PE and the teacher teaching it contribute to their integration journey.

6.3.1 The role of sport and teacher in integration

PE provides a valuable space for pupils to interact with their peers, make friends and develop important social and cultural skills. The interviews revealed how PE promotes integration by creating opportunities for immigrant students to connect with others and feel a sense of

belonging within the school community. Participants' accounts suggested that PE could play a role in supporting immigrant students to build relationships with their classmates, which they perceived as important for their integration process. Building relationships and promoting acceptance through PE were themes highlighted in the interviews: "PE helps us to meet new people and make friends. It's important for integrating into the school." (S1)

In addition to promoting social relationships, PE also allows for the development of skills that go beyond sport. Language learning was frequently mentioned as a benefit of participating in PE, as the lessons provide a natural and engaging environment for practising communication. One pupil noted how PE had contributed to language development: "Through PE I've become better at Finnish and English by talking to other students." (S4)

This shows how PE offers an informal and active space for language learning, allowing students to improve their communication skills while participating in team activities and games. Similarly, listening to classmates during games was identified as an effective way of learning Finnish: "I've been learning Finnish by listening to what students say during games in PE." (S3)

PE also introduces students to a wide range of sports and activities that reflect the cultural diversity of their new environment. This involvement helps to broaden students' experiences and helps them to adapt to their new cultural environment. It also demonstrates how PE can act as a bridge between cultures, offering students the opportunity to engage in new activities that broaden their understanding of their new country and surroundings, while maintaining their interest in sport. For example, one student compared his PE experience in his home country with that in Finland: "In my home country, we only played football, but here there are many different sports. It's interesting to learn new things." (S2)

Teachers play a role in supporting integration through sport by providing both practical and emotional support to immigrant students. Their role goes beyond teaching physical skills, as they also act as communicators, dealing with cultural differences and promoting diversity. Students described how teachers support them during PE lessons by encouraging skill development and helping them to overcome cultural challenges. This shows how teachers can help students to participate more actively by connecting and providing them with different opportunities where they can develop their skills and build social networks. For example, one pupil explained how their teacher encouraged her to take part in extra-curricular sporting activities: "Teachers support me by giving advice about football and encouraging me to find a

team." (S2). This shows how teachers can help students to participate more actively by connecting and providing them to different opportunities where they can develop their skills and build social networks.

Cultural sensitivity was another key aspect of the role of teachers in physical education. Teachers were seen as key to addressing cultural issues and ensuring that the needs of immigrant students were respected. One pupil described how their teacher helped to resolve a cultural issue: "My teacher helps solve cultural problems, like making sure boys don't touch me during games." (S9)

The analysis of the interview data revealed that both physical education (PE) and teachers have a role in supporting the integration of immigrant students into the school community. PE provides a space for social interaction, language learning and exposure to new cultural practices, while teachers act as facilitators, guiding students through these experiences, responding to their needs and promoting integration. By promoting both skills development and cultural awareness, teachers and PE together create a supportive environment that helps immigrant pupils integrate into the school community.

6.4 Future wishes and development proposals

This section describes students' individual wishes and suggestions for PE as expressed during the interviews. The aim is to present the variety of perspectives shared by the participants on how PE could be adapted or developed. The views reflect different experiences and preferences, and some pupils expressed concrete ideas about the content, structure or atmosphere of PE. These reflections are presented as part of the participants' own interpretations of what felt engaging, familiar, challenging or lacking in their everyday school life. In presenting these perspectives, the aim is to provide an account of how students perceive their role in physical education and how they relate to the activities offered.

6.4.1 Students' wishes for physical education

Students' perspectives on physical education (PE) provide insights into how physical education can be improved to meet their needs and preferences better. Based on the interviews, students expressed various wishes related to increasing the range of sports and activities, making PE more meaningful and increasing enjoyment through different forms of physical activity. This section explores students' wishes for a greater variety of sports, their suggestions for making PE more meaningful and their ideas for increasing engagement and enjoyment.

A common theme throughout the interviews was the desire for a more varied range of sports and activities to meet different interests and abilities. Many students expressed a preference for moving beyond the traditional focus on football and basketball. These views show the importance of diversity in physical education to ensure that students with different preferences and abilities feel engaged and included in the class. For example, one student suggested the introduction of other sports: "I would like to see more badminton classes instead of always playing football or basketball." (S3)

Others suggested activities that focused on fitness and competition, such as running or bodyweight exercises: "I would like to do more competitions and activities like running or bodyweight exercises." (S1)

Some students expressed a desire to focus on specific sports that they were passionate about. For example, S6 and S7 mentioned their preferences for basketball and football, with S7 stating: "I want more football in PE." (S7)

This reflects students' passion for their favourite sports and the importance of providing opportunities to develop skills in activities they enjoy. Schools should consider creating pathways for students to pursue sports beyond the classroom, such as through interschool competitions or partnerships with local sports clubs, to help them further develop their skills and confidence. Similarly, some students expressed an interest in competitive opportunities: "I would like to play football competitively for another school or club." (S2)

Another way to make PE more meaningful is to increase the amount or duration of physical activity. S5 expressed a desire for more regular PE lessons: "I would like to have PE every day, not just twice a week." (S5). Such suggestions may not be most practical, they still show students interest for physical activity and the importance on having enough time to

participate. Similarly, there were suggestions that were in favour of having PE more regularly: "I'd like PE to be all day, with football and tag games." (S8)

For some pupils, meaningful PE also meant maintaining current structures and plans that they already found effective. This perspective suggests that for some students the existing approach to PE already meets their expectations and provide a positive experience: "I wouldn't change anything. The teachers already have good plans. (S4)

To make PE more enjoyable, students pointed out the importance of fun and engaging activities. This is in line with the idea that including cheerful and playful activities can encourage participation and promote positive attitudes towards physical activity. Introducing playful games alongside traditional sports was suggested as a way to add variety and excitement: "Including games like tag would make PE more fun." (S8)

Competitions were also a popular suggestion for increasing enjoyment. Competitions can create exciting environment, promoting teamwork, skill development, and social interaction while motivating students to challenge themselves. The motivational aspect of friendly rivalry was emphasized: "I would like more competitions." (S1)

Students highlighted the importance of making PE more meaningful by ensuring that activities are relevant to their interests, involving them in decision-making processes and offering flexibility within lessons. Allowing pupils to have a say in the choice of activities was seen as increasing their sense of involvement and making PE more relevant to their preferences and needs. In addition, recognising the physical and mental demands of PE, participants emphasised the value of including breaks and maintaining a balanced pace to help maintain energy and motivation throughout the lesson: 'PE should include student votes on activities and provide more breaks." (S9)

The interviews revealed that pupils value the diversity, involvement and enjoyment of physical education. By introducing a wider range of activities, involving students in decision making, increasing opportunities for competitive sports, and creating a fun and balanced environment, schools can make PE more meaningful and engaging for all students.

6.4.2 Development of physical education

This chapter builds on the ideas shared by students in the previous section to explore specific suggestions for improving PE. These suggestions aim to make PE more accessible, inclusive

and culturally diverse, while improving the overall student experience. The section begins with general recommendations for making PE more appealing and engaging for all students, followed by ideas for promoting multicultural understanding and developing the content and structure of PE.

One of the key ideas for improving PE was to make it more interesting and motivating for all pupils. Competitions were seen as a way to create excitement while encouraging teamwork, cooperation and skill development. By creating a sense of friendly rivalry, competitions can create a positive and motivating environment that inspires students to actively participate and challenge themselves. Adding more competitions and activities was suggested as a way to increase engagement and participation: "Teachers should motivate students by organising interesting competitions." (S1)

Beyond competing, students pointed to the importance of structured and well-planned PE lessons. This shows the value of balancing structure with flexibility, so that PE can be both organised and adaptable to meet the different needs and preferences of students. Thoughtful planning was seen as essential to ensure that PE meets the needs of a diverse group of pupils: "Teachers should continue to plan PE well. They already have good ideas." (S4)

Providing opportunities for skills development outside of school was also highlighted as a way of increasing the role of physical education. Such opportunities would allow pupils to pursue their interests, develop advanced skills and build confidence in their abilities, while encouraging participation in physical activity throughout later life. Students suggested that schools could support links between students and local sports clubs or provide after-school programmes: "Schools should help students to join sports teams outside of school to continue learning and improving." (S2)

PE was also identified as a valuable platform for promoting multicultural understanding by bringing together pupils from different backgrounds in a supportive environment.

Incorporating games and activities from different cultures was seen as an effective way of promoting mutual understanding and respect: "Teachers could dedicate a day to different cultures by introducing games or sports from other countries." (S3)

This suggestion highlights how physical education can create opportunities for cultural exchange by allowing students to learn about and appreciate the traditions and physical activities of their classmates. This approach provides an opportunity for students to share their cultural backgrounds, as well as strengthening their sense of belonging. Similarly, the

integration of culturally diverse games into the curriculum was suggested as a means of promoting integration: "Including games from different cultures would help students understand each other better." (S8)

Practical suggestions for improving the content and structure of PE were also shared, with a focus on increasing enjoyment and engagement. Allowing students to vote on activities or to have input into the types of games and sports included in PE could help making sure that the curriculum reflects their interests and preferences, leading to higher levels of engagement and enjoyment. A repeated theme was the need for more student involvement in the design of activities: "More breaks, positive feedback and activities chosen by students would make PE better for everyone." (S9)

The importance of positive feedback in PE was also noted as a critical factor in improving students experiences. The supportive and encouraging atmosphere gives opportunities to pupils to feel valued and motivated to participate, which makes Physical education more enjoyable and integrative experience for all. Positive encouragement from teachers was seen as a way of boosting confidence and motivation: "Positive feedback from teachers can make students feel more motivated and confident, whereas negative feedback can discourage participation." (S9)

In general, the interviews highlighted the need for schools to continuously develop PE by making it more engaging, culturally appropriate and responsive to pupils' needs. By including competition, integrating culturally diverse activities, providing opportunities to develop skills outside of school and encouraging a positive and supportive environment, PE can become a more meaningful and enjoyable experience for all pupils.

7 Discussion

This study aimed to explore how physical education (PE) supports the self-perception and integration of preparatory education students. The findings are in line with previous literature that highlights the importance of PE in developing social skills, increasing cultural understanding and strengthening self-esteem (e.g. Horn 2008; Agergaard 2015). This discussion section compares the theoretical background presented earlier with the findings of the study, showing how they support, add to or challenge existing research. Three key aspects stand out: the role of PE in developing social skills and promoting integration, the improvement of self-perception and self-esteem through PE, and the cultural challenges and needs in the context of PE.

7.1 Review of key findings and comparison with previous research results

This chapter presents an interpretative synthesis of the main findings in the light of the theoretical framework and previous research. In line with the principles of qualitative inquiry, the aim is not only to summarise the findings, but also to reflect on their significance in relation to wider debates in physical education and multicultural education. The focus is on understanding how preparatory pupils experience physical education in the context of social interaction, identity formation and cultural diversity.

The review is divided into three thematic subsections. The first sub-section explores the role of physical education in developing social skills and promoting inclusion, highlighting the ways in which interpersonal interaction and team activities support students' sense of belonging. The second sub-section focuses on self-perception and self-esteem, drawing links between students' subjective experiences and theories of competence motivation and feedback. The third sub-section looks at cultural challenges and needs, examining how students navigate cultural norms, religious values and institutional practices within the PE context. Each subsection engages in a dialogue with the existing literature, identifying areas of convergence and divergence and suggesting implications for research and practice. The chapter concludes with an overall reflection on the potential of PE as a site for social inclusion and personal development.

7.1.1 The role of PE in Developing Social Skills and Promoting Integration

The results suggest that physical education can play an important role in supporting the development of social skills and promoting the integration of students from different backgrounds. This is in line with Jaakkola et al. (2017), who argue that PE promotes personal development and a sense of community. In this study, students such as S1 and S4 highlighted how PE provided opportunities to meet new people and build friendships, contributing to their sense of belonging within the school. These findings support Carter-Thuillier et al.'s (2018) argument that PE can serve as a tool for integration by encouraging interaction between students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Relationships between people have been identified as central to the integration process, particularly for immigrant students (Carter-Thuillier et al., 2018). This was reflected in the findings of the study, where students repeatedly emphasised the value of teamwork and collaboration in physical education activities. For example, S8 noted that team-based games such as football or tag developed a sense of togetherness and mutual support. These experiences are closely related to the concept of social integration as a two-way process in which both immigrant and host culture participants engage in meaningful interactions (Flensner, Korp & Lindgren 2020).

However, while the findings confirm the theoretical foundations, they also provide a more detailed perspective. For example, some students noted challenges in making deeper connections, even within the inclusive environment of PE. S9 shared that although friendships were formed, they were not always sustained. This highlights that while PE creates opportunities for social contact, the depth and sustainability of these relationships depend on other factors, such as cultural understanding and language barriers. This finding suggests that PE alone may not fully address the complexities of integration, but it can act as an important starting point.

7.1.2 Development of self-perception and self-esteem through physical education

The second major finding relates to the positive impact of PE on students' self-perception and self-esteem. This is consistent with competence motivation theory (Harter 1981), which argues that perceived competence is a key driver of motivation and self-confidence. Students in this study described feeling stronger, more capable and happier as a result of participating

in PE. For example, S2 highlighted how receiving recognition for their football skills boosted their confidence and motivation. Similarly, S8 shared how taking part in fun activities such as 'elephant ball' created a supportive and enjoyable environment that boosted their self-esteem.

The theoretical framework presented in this study, particularly the work of Horn (2008), emphasises the link between physical activity and positive self-esteem. This was reflected in the findings where pupils reported that PE provided a space to develop their skills, receive positive feedback and experience a sense of achievement. For example, S1 noted that PE contributed to both her physical and mental wellbeing, illustrating the holistic benefits of physical activity.

These findings are also consistent with the wider literature on the role of feedback in shaping students' self-perceptions (Weiss & Chaumeton 1992). Positive feedback from teachers and classmates was a common theme in the interviews, with students commenting on how encouragement and recognition of their efforts made them feel valued. This supports the idea that PE can act as a platform for building not only physical skills, but also emotional capacity and self-confidence.

However, the findings also highlighted some challenges to achieving these positive outcomes. For example, pupils with physical limitations or unfamiliarity with certain sports, such as S3 and S9, expressed feelings of frustration or discouragement. These findings suggest that while PE has significant potential to develop self-esteem, it must be carefully designed to ensure diversity and accessibility for all pupils. This supports the need for personalised instruction and individualised support, as highlighted in the theoretical discussion of culturally responsive teaching (Banks 2016).

7.1.3 Cultural challenges and needs in physical education

One of the most significant achievements of this study is the focus on cultural challenges and needs in the context of physical education. The findings suggest that cultural and religious factors may influence students' experiences and participation in physical education. For example, S9 expressed discomfort with physical contact during mixed-gender activities due to religious beliefs, while S8 highlighted their discomfort with using shared showers. These findings are consistent with Caldeborg's (2022) research, which highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity in PE to ensure that all pupils feel respected and included.

The theoretical background of the study highlighted the need for educators to address the specific cultural needs of immigrant students (Carter-Thuillier et al. 2018). This was reflected in the students' suggestions for improving physical education, such as separating boys and girls during certain activities and including games from their home countries. These recommendations show the value of culturally integrative practices in creating a supportive environment for immigrant students.

The findings also highlight the conflict between cultural integration and cultural protection. While students appreciated the opportunity to learn new sports and activities in Finland, they also expressed a desire to see their own cultural traditions reflected in the curriculum. This is consistent with the multicultural education perspective (Banks 2016), which advocates for a curriculum that balances the introduction of diverse cultural perspectives with the promotion of shared values and mutual understanding.

However, the findings also suggest that cultural challenges are not easily addressed through structural change alone. For example, while separating boys and girls in certain activities may address immediate concerns, it may not fully engage students in the broader process of cultural understanding and integration. This points to the need for ongoing dialogue and collaboration between pupils, teachers and parents to address these complex issues effectively.

Overall, the results of this study are in line with the themes identified in the theoretical framework. The findings suggest that physical education can play an important role in developing social skills, increasing self-awareness and helping to overcome cultural challenges. However, the study also extends existing research by providing specific insights into the lived experiences of preparatory students in the Finnish education system. This includes their views on possible practical changes to make PE more accessible and culturally respectful.

The theoretical framework emphasised the potential for PE to be a positive tool for integration, self-development and cultural exchange. The findings of this study support this view, but also highlight the need for a sensitive approach that takes into account the different needs and experiences of immigrant students. For example, while physical education can promote integration and self-confidence, its full potential can only be realised if cultural and individual differences are actively recognised and addressed.

In conclusion, this study contributes to our understanding of how PE can support the integration and self-perception of immigrant pupils. By comparing the theoretical background with the findings, it becomes clear that PE is not only a physical activity but also a social and cultural space where meaningful interactions, personal growth and mutual understanding can take place. This points to the importance of designing PE programmes that are inclusive, culturally sensitive and adaptable to the needs of all students.

7.2 Strengths, limitations and ethical considerations

This study was carried out with a focus on ethical considerations to guarantee credible, valid and respectful research practices. As the research focused on students in preparatory education, including minors from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, careful attention was paid throughout the research process to address challenges related to trust, sensitivity and methodological consistency.

A qualitative research approach was chosen to allow for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions, with care taken to build the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. The phenomenological-hermeneutic approach allowed for the interpretation and description of participants' experiences without imposing prejudices or assumptions. This approach ensured that the participants' voices were central to the findings, focusing on their personal experiences of PE and its impact on their self-perception and integration.

Data were collected using semi-structured thematic interviews, carefully designed to encourage open and honest responses while maintaining consistency across participants. The interview framework was developed based on the theoretical background and research questions to match the objectives of the study. This structure allowed flexibility to go deeper into individual experiences, which helped to enrich the data and increase trustworthiness. Reflexivity requires the researcher to be on guard, constantly anticipating ways in which research methods and ethics may be compromised (Galletta & Cross 2013). This alertness was evident in the transcription process, which was carried out with care, with all interviews transcribed verbatim to protect the integrity of participants' responses. Anonymity was

ensured by assigning pseudonyms (e.g. S1, S2) to each participant and removing identifying information. Similarly, the data analysis process was approached reflexively, with a data-driven content analysis method ensuring that findings emerged directly from the data itself, rather than being shaped by the researcher's pre-existing knowledge or biases.

Despite careful attention to the methods, certain limitations should be acknowledged.

Participants represented a range of ages, including primary school children, whose age and development may have affected their ability to reflect on and express their experiences in depth. In addition, differences in language skills may have affected how clearly participants were able to articulate their thoughts during the interviews. The relatively small size of the participants further limits the scope of the findings. It is important to note that participants' accounts reflect their individual perceptions and experiences at the time of the interviews, rather than objective or generalisable truths. These limitations have been carefully considered in the analysis and the findings are presented as interpretations of the views expressed by the participants within the context of this study.

Given the involvement of minors and the sensitive nature of the research topic, the study followed the ethical guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK 2019). Informed consent was an important consideration. For participants under the age of 15, their parents or legal guardians provided written informed consent. Their consent was sufficient for participants aged 15 and over, although parents or guardians were also informed about the study. Both participants and guardians were given clear and detailed information about the purpose, methods and aims of the research to make sure they understood the process and their rights. Participation was completely voluntary and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were protected throughout the research process. All identifying information was removed during transcription, and pseudonyms were used in the final report to protect participants' identities. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely on a password-protected device accessible only to the researcher. In accordance with ethical guidelines, data will be retained for a limited period of time and securely deleted once the study has been completed and the results reported.

Cultural sensitivity was an important consideration in the study. Interview questions were carefully worded to acknowledge and respect participants' cultural and religious values, particularly in relation to their experiences of physical education. For example, culturally

sensitive issues such as physical touch, privacy and modesty were addressed in a way that encouraged open discussion without causing discomfort. In line with ethical research practice, researchers are encouraged to familiarise themselves with the community being studied, including its culture and history, to minimise potential harm and ensure respectful engagement (TENK 2019). This approach was reflected in the research process, where reflexivity played a crucial role in minimising researcher bias and ensuring that participants' perspectives were authentically represented. The researcher critically reflected on their own position and how it might influence the data collection and analysis processes, prioritising the voices and experiences of the participants.

Particular attention was paid to the safety and well-being of the child participants. All interviews were conducted in familiar and safe environments, such as their schools, to make participants feel comfortable. The interview format allowed participants to share their experiences at their own pace and comfort. The researcher ensured that the interviews were age appropriate and culturally respectful, creating an environment where participants felt supported and valued.

Although the study successfully followed ethical protocols, certain challenges were identified. Language barriers may have limited the ability of some participants to fully articulate their thoughts, potentially affecting the depth of the data. In addition, cultural differences may have influenced how certain questions were interpreted or answered. These challenges were addressed by using simple and clear language during the interviews and by paying close attention to non-verbal cues to provide additional context. To overcome language challenges, school counsellors who spoke the students first language supported the interviews. This helped the participants to express their views as effectively as possible. The counsellors, who were bound by professional ethics, were trusted to remain neutral and not to influence the pupils' answers with their own prejudices or opinions. Prior to the interviews, the researcher reviewed the interview framework and ethical considerations with the counsellors, and explained the importance of allowing the students to respond freely and authentically. The counsellors also agreed to interpret the students' responses in a confidential and unbiased manner. In doing so, the researcher aimed to ensure the participants' right to preserve and develop their own language and culture in an ethically sensitive manner (TENK 2019). In addition, the researcher's experience of working with preparatory education students helped to

create a comfortable and supportive environment that facilitated meaningful and open interactions with the participants.

The study's commitment to reliability and ethical standards ensured that the findings were credible, trustworthy and respectful of participants' rights and experiences. By using qualitative methods, maintaining anonymity and confidentiality, and addressing cultural sensitivities, the research maintained high ethical standards. Although limitations such as the small sample size and language barriers were acknowledged, these challenges were overcome through careful research design and reflexive practices. The study provides valuable insights into the role of physical education in shaping self-perceptions and supporting the integration of preparatory education students and makes a meaningful contribution to academic understanding and practical application in multicultural educational settings.

7.3 Suggestions for future studies

Although this study provides valuable insights into the role of physical education in supporting the self-perception and integration of preparatory students, it also has limitations that suggest opportunities for further research. The small sample size and the collection of data from a single geographical area provide insights specific to the context studied, but do not aim to generalise the findings to other schools or student populations. In addition, while the qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of students' experiences, it leaves open the question of how these findings could be quantified and extended to larger target groups. Based on these limitations, several directions for future research are suggested.

Future studies should expand the sample by including a larger and more diverse group of students from different schools and regions. This would allow researchers to examine how cultural and regional differences influence the role of PE and provide a broader understanding of its impact in different settings. Focusing on older students, such as those in secondary or upper secondary education, could also show how the importance and experiences of PE evolve as students grow and their needs change.

Secondly, long-term studies could provide deeper information on how the impact of PE on self-perception and integration develops over time. For example, following the experiences of preparatory pupils over a number of years could help to determine whether the social skills

and self-confidence gained through PE have long-term benefits - or whether potentially negative experiences, such as feelings of exclusion or inadequacy in a competitive environment, may also have lasting effects on pupils' self-esteem and sense of belonging.

Exploring teachers' perspectives would provide valuable information about the practical implementation of physical education and how cultural needs are addressed in practice.

Analysing teachers' experiences and the challenges they face could improve understanding of the resources and training needed to meet the demands of multicultural education. This could include exploring how teachers perceive both the opportunities and risks of physical education in promoting integration, and how they adapt their teaching to meet the diverse needs of pupils and avoid unintentional exclusion.

Future research could benefit from combining qualitative and quantitative methods. For example, measuring students' self-esteem, sense of belonging or social skills before and after preparatory education or PE interventions would provide numerical data to better evaluate and compare the impact of PE on a larger scale. Such an approach could also allow researchers to identify both positive and negative trends and to examine the conditions under which PE supports or potentially hinders students' well-being and integration.

Based on these observations, a promising direction for future research would be the development and evaluation of culturally responsive PE programmes. In multicultural classrooms, participation could be increased by designing activities that respect students' cultural and religious values, for example by adjusting group composition or incorporating games familiar to different cultural backgrounds. Future research could explore not only the potential of such approaches to increase engagement and intercultural understanding, but also the possible challenges or unintended consequences that they may entail. A fuller understanding of the multiple and sometimes contradictory effects of physical education could provide valuable recommendations for schools, teachers and policy-makers seeking to make physical education a more integrative and supportive experience for all pupils.

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Appendices

LIITE 1: TUTKIMUSLUPALOMAKE Tutkimuslupa

oppilaan nimi

luokka

Lapsemme tuottamia teoksia ja/tai kuvia tai videoita, joissa hän on osana muuta ryhmää saa käyttää kehittämis- ja tutkimushankkeen tarkoituksiin. Lapsemme voi osallistua kehittämis- ja tutkimustarkoituksessa tehtäviin pienimuotoisiin haastatteluihin. Kaikki tiedot ovat luottamuksellisia.

- Tässä yhteydessä ei ole oppilaiden nimiä.

MAHDOLLISET KIELLOT (X)

___ Emme anna lupaa lapsemme osallistumiselle pienimuotoisiin haastatteluihin, kyselyihin tai videokuvauksiin kehittämis- ja tutkimushankkeessa. Turku ____. ____. ____. ____.

Huoltajan allekirjoitus ja nimen selvennys

Huoltajan allekirjoitus ja nimen selvennys

LIITE 2: TEEMAHAASTATTELUIDEN RUNKO

Perustiedot:

Sukupuoli:

Ikä:

Koululiikuntaan liittyvät kokemukset sekä tuntemukset:

- Miten kuvailit suhdettasi koululiikuntaan?
- Millaisia tunteita sinulla on koululiikuntaa kohtaan?
- Voisitko kertoa jonkin positiivisen kokemuksen koululiikunnasta?
- Onko sinulla ollut vaikeuksia tai haasteita koululiikunnan aikana? Voisitko kertoa niistä?
- Miten koet oman osallistumisesi koululiikuntaan?
- Mitkä asiat motivoivat sinua osallistumaan koululiikuntaan?
- Millä tavoin koululiikunta vaikuttaa sinuun?
- Miten kulttuurisi vaikuttaa suhteeseesi koululiikuntaan?
- Onko sinulla tunne, että VALMOssa olevien liikuntakokemus eroaa peruskoulun oppilaiden kokemuksesta?
- Huomioidaanko koululiikunnassa sinun kulttuurillisia tarpeita?

Tulevaisuuden Toiveet:

- Millaista koululiikuntaa toivoisit tulevaisuudessa?
- Onko sinulla ideoita siitä, miten koululiikunta voisi olla parempi kaikille oppilaille?
- Jos saisit muuttaa jotain koululiikunnassa, mitä se olisi?
- Millaiset asiat voisivat tehdä koululiikunnasta mielekkäämpää sinulle?
- Millä tavoin opettaja pystyisi huomioimaan sinun koululiikuntakokemukseesi liittyvät asiat