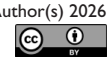
Article

ecsj

Education, Citizenship and Social Justice
1–15


Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/17461979261424477
journals.sagepub.com/home/esj
Sage

Complex belonging, local concern, voice, and agency: Finnish minority ethnic youths' construction of civic identity

Anuleena Kimanen[1], Samaneh Khalili[1], Aleksi Seger[1] and Jenni Alisaari[1]

Abstract

This article develops the concept of civic identity and discusses the implications of a fourfold notion of civic identity and the position of ethnically minoritised youths in civic education. We interviewed 28 ethnically minoritised youths aged 15–19 in Finland and conducted a discursive analysis to determine the kinds of civic identities they had constructed in terms of belonging, concern, voice and agency, and how their minoritised positions played out in them. Constructing local belonging, concern, voice, and agency dominated their discourses in the interviews. Their relationships to 'Finnishness' were uneasy. Constructing local belonging helped them avoid this uneasiness but possibly led to their non-construction of concern, voice or agency for broader issues. Understanding civic identity as consisting of belonging, concern, voice, and agency informs civic education regarding how to foster civic identity for all students on different dimensions.

Keywords

civic identity, belonging, civic education, minority position, ethnically minoritised youth

Introduction

Civic identity, consisting of emotions, beliefs, and obligations, is an important motivator of civic engagement (Hart et al., 2011) and can be regarded as an individual's positioning towards active citizenship (Myers et al., 2015). In contrast to merely obtaining civic knowledge, developing a civic identity is a vital part of civic learning (Allen and Kidd, 2022); however, there has been minimal research on fostering civic identity in civic education (Haduong et al., 2024; Myers et al., 2015).

[1]University of Turku, Finland

Corresponding author:
Anuleena Kimanen, Department of Teacher Education, University of Turku, Assistentinkatu 5, Turku 20500, Finland.
Email: anuleena.kimanen@utu.fi

Ethnic diversity, which is the result of complex processes of migration both past and present, creates an important, identity-related tension in civic education, as it has led to the majoritisation of some ethnicities, and the minoritisation of the others, especially in nation-states (see e.g. Stein, 2022). For instance, Banks (2017) defined failed citizenship as a situation in which certain ethnic, cultural, or religious groups feel excluded in the nation-state and commit to it ambivalently. To reduce failed citizenship, schools should provide transformative civic education and promote multicultural citizenship (Banks, 2017). There is strong empirical evidence of the existence of a 'civic empowerment gap', and minoritised ethnicity is a factor that has been found to decrease the benefits of civic education, resulting in a lack of political representation. While the effects of various aspects of civic education have been examined (Kavadias et al., 2018), strategies to include ethnically minoritised identities have not gained much attention.

This article develops a notion of civic identity through empirical analysis of how Finnish ethnically minoritised youths negotiate their civic identities, aiming to support civic education in addressing minoritised identities. The simplest definitions of civic identity are related to a sense of connexion with others and the responsibility to act for the common good (Kirshner, 2009; Šerek, 2017). With consideration for the definition of full citizenship, civic identity has also been regarded as consisting of membership and participation in society and concern for the rights of its members (Hart et al., 2011). Rubin's (2007) view of civic identity addresses experiences of exclusion or inclusion in society, which affect young people's sense of their relative value within civic institutions. In this study, membership, participation, and concern for society members' rights are adopted as a starting point, but to highlight the significance of the processes of inclusion and exclusion, the concept of 'membership' is broadened to belonging. Furthermore, the scope of 'concern for members' rights' is broadened to include concern for any civic issues. Meanwhile, participation is divided into two aspects: voice (expressing opinions and being heard) and civic action or agency. Here, 'action' refers to doing things for civic causes, while 'agency' implies feeling able to act rather than merely acting. Following Myers et al. (2015), the analysis of this study focuses on the positions constructed in the discourses of the participants.

The research questions guiding this work are as follows:

1. What kinds of civic identities do the interviewed ethnically minoritised youths construct in terms of belonging, concern, voice, and agency?
2. How do their minoritised positions play out in each of these elements of civic identity?

Civic identity as belonging, concern, voice, and agency

According to our conceptualisation, the first element of civic identity, belonging, comprises both a sense of connexion to a social group and the processes of inclusion and exclusion (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016; Yuval-Davis, 2011). As a concept, it is more flexible than, for example, membership or national identity, and is thus especially useful when discussing the civic identities of ethnic minorities. Belonging at the levels of interpersonal relationships and local communities, including school, is often a pathway to belonging at the national level for ethnically minoritised youths (Bruhn and Gonzales, 2023). Moreover, belonging is intrinsically connected to civic action, as it creates obligations among group members, while working for the common good increases one's sense of connexion with others (Šerek, 2017). Feelings of solidarity also contribute to young people's trajectories towards social activism (May et al., 2022).

The second element, concern, indicates an issue that drives civic engagement – that is, something that needs to be changed. Concern illustrates the twofold character of civic identity: it includes both the common good and the promotion of one's own position in society (Kirshner, 2009).

Rubin (2007) found that some privileged youths felt no need for civic engagement, as they believed that society was already functioning well. However, 'aware' privileged youths were concerned about inequality, while non-privileged youths recognised inequality and were either discouraged from or empowered to engage in social activism. In Roy et al.'s (2019) study, exposure to violence and income inequality increased the likelihood of critical action.

The third element, voice, refers to expressing ideas to influence changes (Rinnooy Kan et al., 2024: 2). The importance of voice is illustrated by the fact that volunteering may not enhance civic identity if it is not accompanied by having a voice in activities. However, school democracy may foster civic identity even without participation in specific activities (Šerek, 2017). Discourse on voice often highlights the voices of marginalised and underrepresented groups (McLeod, 2011: 179–180), which is also one of the goals of this study.

Finally, agency is related to the active part of participation. It includes doing things for and with others – that is, civic action. Civic action is often divided into community volunteering and political action (e.g. Ballard, 2014). However, ethnically minoritised youths' civic participation should be understood in a way that pays attention to a variety of forms of community involvement, crossing the border between private and public and including actions like building community spirit and staying out of trouble (Couton and Gaudet, 2008; Wray-Lake and Abrams, 2020). Civic agency, in turn, has been defined as capacity and motivation to civic action (Dahlgren et al., 2006; Khalili et al., 2024). Here, we address motivation more in terms of concern but define agency in terms of positioning as capable of civic action.

As can be seen above, the four elements are tightly interconnected. Belonging and civic concern create obligation and motivation for civic action. Civic action, in turn, increases one's sense of belonging, especially when accompanied by voice. In contrast, a lack of voice or belonging (i.e. a sense of exclusion) may impede civic action or agency.

Civic engagement, education, and ethnically minoritised groups in Finland

Ethnically minoritised groups in Finland are relatively small. Traditional minorities include, for example, the Roma and the Sámi (Saukkonen, 2012). However, in the last three decades, immigration to Finland has increased considerably; indeed, the current growth in the overall population is based solely on immigration (Official Statistics of Finland, 2026). People with foreign backgrounds comprise 11.1% of the current population (Official Statistics of Finland, 2025) and primarily reside in urban areas. In this study, all experiences of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic minoritisation were of interest; however, the interviews, which were conducted in one socially disadvantaged neighbourhood, included mostly migrant-background youths, as well as one person from a marginalised traditional Finnish minority.

Experiences of inclusion, exclusion, and discrimination among minoritised groups in Finland vary depending on ethnic and migration background. Roma communities have long faced structural barriers to education and employment (Weiste-Paakkanen et al., 2018). Feelings of exclusion are common among migrant-background youth, often linked to racism and discrimination (Saarinen and Zacheus, 2019; Zacheus et al., 2019). Individuals of African descent report disproportionately high levels of racist harassment and violence, with rates exceeding those in most other EU countries (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024). Sense of school belonging also varies: first-generation immigrants from Russia and Estonia report weaker attachment, while Somali-background students show stronger belonging (Alisaari and Kilpi-Jakonen, 2022). Additionally, migrants often perceive ethnic groups as differing in their capacity to integrate and their perceived closeness to 'Finnishness' (Bontenbal, 2023).

Kurdish-background youths report stronger connections to their local city and region than to either Finland or Kurdistan, although Kurdistan is associated with family heritage and Finland with future aspirations (Toivanen, 2014). Despite language skills and academic success, many migrant-background youths see themselves as outsiders in Finland (Saarinen and Zacheus, 2019). Studies show they often identify as 'foreigners', perceiving the label 'Finnish' as exclusive (Haikkola, 2011; Luoma and Peltola, 2024), and may downplay racism's impact (Zacheus et al., 2019).

Concerning civic engagement, Finnish young people (aged 14), overall, have scored below average on interest in politics, participation in diverse forms of active citizenship and school democracy in international comparisons (Schulz et al., 2018). In a national survey, one-third of young people below 20 reported having tried to influence societal issues relevant to them (Myllyniemi and Kiilakoski, 2019). Immigration-background youths were less interested in politics than average. For immigration-background girls, the interest was higher when they had lived longer in Finland, but there was no similar connexion for boys (Myllyniemi and Kiilakoski, 2019). However, Suni and Mietola (2023) have suggested that the belief that ethnically minoritised youths are neither interested nor skilled enough to engage in politics creates a major barrier to their participation. In the municipal elections 2021, only 17.4% of foreign-background youths aged 18–24 who were entitled to vote actually did so, compared to the average of 35.4% (Official Statistics of Finland (OSF), 2021). Finnish civic education textbooks seem to construct a fairly restricted representation of active citizenship and portray the West as superior to the rest of the world, which fails to foster the civic identities of all young people (Mikander, 2023; Satokangas and Mikander, 2023).

Research procedures

The participants of this study primarily resided in one ethnically diverse, economically disadvantaged neighbourhood in one of the 10 biggest cities in Finland. Recruited participants included young people who spent time at the local youth centre and at after-school sports clubs, as well as student council members and peer instructors in an upper secondary school. Some participants were recruited through local contacts.

During the researchers' initial in-field visits, potential participants were informed about the aims of the study. Participation was voluntary, and a written consent form was signed by each participant. Being over 15 years of age, the participants were able to decide whether to participate in the study, but information about the study was sent to the parents through the interviewees below 18 and by spreading information in the neighbourhood generally. The participants were told that they could leave any questions unanswered and pause or stop the interview. The interviewers recognised the possibility that certain topics could cause distress in the interviewees; thus, they sometimes reminded the interviewees that they had a right not to answer a question during the interviews or provided the interviewees an opportunity to reflect on the interview experience afterwards.

The research team comprised three members, one with an ethnically minoritised background and two with ethnically majoritised backgrounds. The interviewers informed prospective participants that they were seeking to recruit and interview youths who spoke languages other than Finnish in their homes. Compared to referring to a migration background or minoritised position, linguistic diversity was considered by the researchers to be the least othering way of approaching ethnically minoritised groups, although it was clear that the approach would exclude ethnically minoritised young people with endangered heritage languages, such as Sami youths. The interviews were not exclusive; however, only interviewees whose heritage language implied an ethnically minoritised background – equating to 28 youths aged 15–19 years – have been included in this study. Seventeen interviews were conducted in Finnish, four in English, and four in Farsi.

Based on the preferences of the participants and on each situation, individual, pair, and group interviews were conducted. Pair interviews may reduce the power imbalance between the interviewer and a young participant and provide interviewees opportunities to build on each other's responses (Eder and Fingerson, 2001). Most of the participants ($n=20$) identified as male, seven identified as female, and one did not want to define their gender.

A rough map of the city was made available to assist the interviews (see Abebe et al., 2009). With the help of the map, participants were asked about the places where they met other young people and where they felt they belonged. To allow them to self-define their civic engagement, they were asked where they acted for the common good by helping others or influencing others' opinions, and where they felt they had an influence on certain matters. Finally, they were asked about their dreams for their neighbourhood, for Finland, and for themselves.

The second round of interviews comprised eight young people and focussed on life-course histories. The questions delved deeper into the participants' experiences of acting for the common good, having perseverance, being encouraged or discouraged, and facing racism. Due to the limited number of participants in the second round of interviews, which is unlikely to be explained by a single factor, these discussions are primarily used in this study as discourses defining belonging, concern, voice, and agency rather than as the basis for a life-course analysis.

The data were analysed via a combination of qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis. The transcribed and anonymised interviews were read and coded by the first author using NVivo software. Mentions of belonging, concern, voice, and agency – the latter including both the experience of acting for the common good and a sense of the ability to change something – were identified and labelled with data-driven interpretations of the forms and contexts of each main category. In the Results section, selected excerpts illustrating the most frequent forms and contexts are discussed in a discourse-analytic manner, with the aim of establishing what kinds of subject positions the participants constructed for themselves as civic actors. In discourse analysis, 'subject position' refers to the responsibilities or opportunities attached to certain roles in social contexts and defined in discourse (Fairclough, 1992). Hence, the interview data should not be read as a direct testimony of what the participants did or felt but as negotiations of positions related to certain contexts (such as neighbourhoods or schools) and shaped by the interview situation – that is, with a researcher hailing from outside of the participant's neighbourhood and in many cases representing a majoritised ethnicity.

In the following interview excerpts, participants' gender identification is provided. Participants' backgrounds are classified as follows: Finnish traditional minority, European (not Finnish), African (all were from Sub-Saharan regions), Middle Eastern, or Asian (excluding Middle Eastern). To ensure anonymity, more specific ethnic identifications have been concealed.

Results

Complicated belonging

The interviews addressed belonging through questions about self-identified ethnicity and the places where the participants felt they were part of the community. Local communities, such as schools, leisure activities, and neighbourhood peer groups, were mentioned often.

> I myself like [the neighbourhood] because the people here are from different countries, and there are various cultures here. (Interview 15, female, Middle Eastern background)

> Well, in principle, I've grown up in [the neighbourhood], so it has always been the place where there has been [a sports pitch], [where I have a sense of belonging], so I've just grown into it basically. (Interview 5, male, Middle Eastern background)

> Yeah, I think I do [have a sense of belonging to the religious community]. I feel like there are a lot of people there who understand me in a way, and I feel like there are more people there who are like me, so I feel more comfortable there. (Interview 7, female, Asian background)

In these examples, belonging was constructed as having something in common, for instance, a shared history (Interview 5) and being alike and hence being understood (Interview 7). In Interview 15, the participant referred to people being from different countries; thus, non-Finnishness was constructed as a shared feature, reflecting the power relationships that minoritise non-Finnish ethnicities.

The relationship with Finnishness, however, was more complicated. Some participants reported their ethnic identity as both Finnish and ethnically minoritised or were undecided about how to describe it:

> No, I'm like 100% [of African nationality]. But then again, we live in Finland. So, you know. (Interview 19, male, African background)

Here, the interviewee constructed himself as a pure member of an African nationality but struggled to articulate how living in Finland or 'Finnishness' played a role in his belonging. This implies a lack of suitable discourses, such as those involving the concepts of hybrid identity and civic identity.

In contrast, the participant from a traditional Finnish ethnic minority reported an unproblematic Finnish identity, possibly reflecting the stigmatisation or ongoing identity negotiations of immigrants in the neighbourhood. Three immigrant-background interviewees referred to themselves as Finns on certain occasions; two had 'Finnish' friends at school, while the other was part of a sports team with mostly 'Finnish' teammates. The latter defined herself as a Finn in comparison to friends with her same background due to, for instance, her accent. Thus, 'Finnishness' seemed to be something that close relationships with the ethnically majoritised youths could create, but features of 'Finnishness' could also mark a barrier to one's ethnic community.

The most frequent discourse by far was referring to Finns as 'them', a practice constructing those engaged in such discourse as non-Finns:

> [W]hen I was in primary school in [our neighbourhood] school, there were only two Finns in our class. (Interview 13, male, African background)

> Sometimes, when we're out, we encounter Finns who have never lived with foreigners [or have lived] somewhere in [the neighbourhood] where there aren't that many foreigners. (Interview 30, second round, male, European background)

The latter of these interviewees also labelled himself as a foreigner, which is not necessarily a completely excluded position (Haikkola, 2011): In the excerpt, 'Finns' are constructed as having to get used to foreigners; consequently, a right to exist is constructed for 'foreigners'.

Inclusion and exclusion from the category of 'Finns' was discussed by one interviewee:

> Some of our teachers refer to us as Finns in school. I remember discussing Finnishness with a friend in one class, and then our teacher told us that we were also Finns because we were born in Finland and had Finnish citizenship. So, we're Finnish. However, not all teachers and people think the same way. (Interview 22, second round, female, Middle Eastern)

The intervention of a teacher who defines Finnishness in a way that resists ethnic minoritisation was constructed as an exception. Such exceptionality implies the dominance of discourses that exclude the ethnically minoritised youths from Finnishness.

The participants' minoritised positions clearly played a part in their sense of belonging. They constructed distinctions between themselves and the 'Finns' as well as tight emotional connections to their minoritised ethnic and religious communities (see also Khalili et al., 2024; Kimanen et al., 2025). Closeness and significance of the shared experiences were also the elements of which belonging to the local community were constructed. However, the significance of local identity was probably also due to the fact that it was not questioned from outside, similar to Finnishness, the mainstream national identity.

Specific local and abstract societal concerns – Or no concern

Concern was addressed via questions about the things the participants wanted to have an influence over and their dreams for the future. A fairly common answer was that nothing should be changed:

> [N]othing should be changed here, at least from my point of view. So, if everything [here] is the same in ten years, everything will be all right. Everything will be okay. (Interview 6, female, African background)

According to Rubin (2007), not finding anything to change is often a privileged experience, as it may be difficult to acknowledge societal problems from a privileged position. This begs the question of why the interviewees in the current study, who were non-privileged in terms of residential area and ethnic background, occasionally adopted this position. First, socioeconomic injustice may have been more prevalent in the context of Rubin's (2007) study than in the neighbourhood in which the current study took place. Second, an unconcerned position may allow one to symbolically oppose injustices while avoiding practical engagement with them. Third, the power relation between the white interviewees and the ethnically minoritised youths may have created a situation in which some participants avoided voicing direct criticism. Indeed, in Bontenbal's (2023) research, migrants constructed changing the Finnish society as disadvantageous and something that 'good migrants' would not do.

Nevertheless, local concerns were discussed at some point in almost all the interviews. Often, the specific topic was the targeted disadvantaged suburb's negative reputation, which was asked about specifically in the interview questions. The poor conditions of houses, restlessness, and outdated sports facilities were other local issues of concern very similarly to the study by Peltola et al. (2023):

> I wish we had fewer alcoholics in [the neighbourhood]. (Interview 22, female, Middle Eastern background)

> Many young people come to [the local sports hall] because they want to participate in sports but do not have the financial means to do so. Although it's a good option, I believe the facilities are outdated, and I'd like to make some changes if possible. For example, if there's only one bicycle available, people will have to wait a long time for their turn. (Interview 16, female, Middle Eastern background)

The connexion between the macro-level economy and local realities was recognised in Interview 16; the participant mentioned that public sports services provided social justice, but scarcity diminished equity. In the voicing of such concerns, an ethnically minoritised position was not constructed as an issue.

One of the local concerns was racism. There were contrasting discourses on it: some narrated cases of it in the local community or school, but some constructed it either as an issue that mainly belonged elsewhere, even outside Finland. Racism was also diminished in other ways:

> Well, I wouldn't quite say racism because in my view, racism is a really big word. (Interviewee 34, second round, male, Middle Eastern background)

Racism was also denied the status of a concern:

> I don't mind if people mock me. It's my body, and I like it. (Interview 16, female, Middle Eastern background)

Zacheus et al. (2019) reported similar accounts in their study. In the present study, the same participants expressed critical accounts of racism and fought it in some instances and used diminishing discourses in others. The participants seemed to resist the impact of racism on their behaviour by constructing themselves as both aware of and not affected by racism. Visible markers of ethnicity came up frequently. Although four (Black) African background participants diminished racism, two did not. Besides, two other background participants who did not diminish racism, gave examples about racism targeting Black individuals.

In less than half of the interviews the young people also found some concerns for the broader society, such as the economy, security, and peace:

> For Finland, I want no war to happen in it. I want Finland to have peace. I also want the economy to remain good and the inflation not to hit the people too hard. (Interview 17, male, Finnish traditional minority)

Compared to the local concerns, the concerns for the broader society were big concepts, only occasionally illustrated by personal examples. However, the concerns for peace and about price inflation (both mentioned in two interviews) convey that the biggest news of the year 2022, the war in Ukraine and the consequent economic challenges, had reached these young people. Socioeconomic disadvantages and personal or family experiences of war were also reflected in these concerns.

The wishes for the local context were specific and frequent, and the broader society was primarily discussed as an enabler of a good and secure life. The minoritised position primarily manifested as concerns about discrimination and racism. Structural injustices were only occasionally constructed, so the discourses of local concern and no concern provided the youths with positions that were not too affected by structures.

Voice in everyday contexts

Having a voice was discussed when we asked the participants to mention and possibly describe contexts in which they were able to exert an influence on something, such as choosing or deciding something or getting their opinions heard. In 15 interviews the young people mentioned school as a place where they had a voice.

> You can have an influence on anything if you want to. Our teacher told us, for instance, that if there's anything we think should be changed, we have to tell the student council about it. (Interview 4, male, European background)

> In school, we have an influence when we do tasks, such as on whether we'll go to the corridor or somewhere else to do our tasks. So, our opinion always kind of influences the teacher's decision. (Interview 8, male, European background)

Having a voice in school seemed to refer to both classroom practices and ground rules, and student council members also mentioned diverse events. Similar examples concerning leisure activities

were also mentioned, but they were much fewer. The interviewed student council members also constructed school as a site of well-functioning democratic practices: initiatives were also received from pupils, beyond the student council, and teachers took them seriously even if the suggested changes were not always carried out. The strength of the discourse of a democratic school environment is noteworthy because Finnish young people, on average, have a low sense of having a voice in school (Schulz et al., 2018). However, when asked about having a voice in school, most vocational school students stated that they did not have a voice there.

The young interviewees mentioned different forms of having a voice. Some of them were part of the student council or other working groups in their schools, and some described how they could promote their ideas through their peers or through adults. Outside school, the participants mainly constructed themselves no voice:

> In the football field and shopping centres, I can't influence anything, but in school, I feel I can have a role. For example, in the football field, we can decide about our teams, when we want to play, but we can't decide to change the field or do something for the facilities. (Interview 15, female, Middle Eastern background)

Here, a boundary of influence is drawn between interactions among peers and public spaces apart from school. Public spaces were mentioned by two other interviewees as spaces where the participants did not have a voice.

In contrast, some interviewees said that they could have an influence on whatever they wanted to have an influence on, without mentioning any specific contexts:

> I can have an influence on pretty much anything I want to have an influence on, but apart from that there's nothing on which I'd like to have an influence. (Interview 17, male, Finnish traditional minority)

> Well, if I have an opinion about an issue, people usually listen. It has never occurred to me that nobody will listen to my opinion. (Interview 13, male, African background)

The discourse of a self-evident voice constructed a powerful position for the young interviewees by defining any context beyond their influence as uninteresting. This can be interpreted partly similarly to the discourse of 'no concern' (see above).

Otherwise, having a voice was limited to local contexts, such as the school and leisure activities. No minoritised position was constructed in these accounts; the voice was not limited by majority prejudices or peer community power structures. Here, the neighbourhood's high diversity level might have contributed to a situation in which such power imbalances were not visible or recognised (see also Kimanen et al., 2025).

Civic agency in everyday and peer contexts

Experiences of civic action were discussed when participants were asked about the contexts in which they worked for the common good, such as helping others or trying to make positive changes. Agency was addressed via follow-up questions asking how matters related to the participants' concerns could be improved upon. Both instances were interpreted as positioning as capable of civic action. Many participants found it difficult to answer these questions. However, 18 of the interviews included relevant mentions. The most frequent contexts of action were school, informal and formal leisure activities, and religious communities.

Forms of civic action mentioned by the participants varied. In the study of Wray-Lake and Abrams (2020), ethnically minoritised youths living in a violence-ridden, disadvantaged

neighbourhood defined staying out of trouble as a form of civic engagement. In the current study, some participants responded similarly. Indeed, the civic dimension is sometimes hard to define:

> Well, we help each other, I guess, such as in tests [in school], and if somebody is in trouble in a social situation, then we usually help out in whatever way we can. (Interview 7, male, Asian background)

> But here in [the neighbourhood], what usually works is that I help somebody, and then, at some point, I need help, so I get help, and it doesn't even have to be from anybody really close to me, such as my [friend]. (Interview 17, male, Finnish traditional minority)

> [Young people can contribute to a peaceful future for the neighbourhood] so we won't fight or argue with each other pointlessly. So everybody will be fine with everybody. (Interviewee 8, male, European background)

> How can I explain [how to influence a decision, decide or choose something]? [Laughter] [–] Let's say I have a dream job. In Finland, you can get along fine if you have a good job. For instance, people have to study or work to succeed. [–] You have to pay taxes. Get along fine. And yeah, you have to save. (Interview 19, male, African background)

The mention of helping peers prepare for tests (Interview 7) seems to represent everyday mutual support instead of civic action, as the help provided was not premised on, for instance, the significance of education for ethnically minoritised youths. Helping one's peers in social situations is more oriented towards the well-being of the community; indeed, mutual helping was described as an important obligation in the local youth community (Interview 17). In addition, avoiding unnecessary quarrelling was mentioned as an act for a peaceful future (Interview 8), thus constructing a bridge between individual behaviour and the living conditions of the community. The participant in Interview 19 reacted to the researcher's operationalisation of voice (see above) by describing how the attainment of personal goals has a societal dimension. According to his discourse, a minoritised person in Finland needs to contribute to society by achieving economic independence and paying taxes to gain an esteemed position in society (the discourse of 'advantageous migrant' in Finland more thoroughly discussed by Bontenbal, 2023).

The most frequently mentioned (in 11 interviews) form of civic action was fostering community spirit. Interviewees who were volunteer peer instructors, school student council members, and peer athletic instructors described the events they arranged. They usually described these proceedings as fun, but they also constructed wider social implications for the activities, such as helping peers to make friends and fostering a sense of belonging. Other forms of action that were mentioned by more than one interviewee included donating and raising money, participating in school elections, and instructing children's groups in religious communities.

In some instances, the interviewees constructed themselves as having no agency:

> You can do basically nothing about it [elderly people's racism]. (Interview 34, male, Middle Eastern background)

> I don't really know what young people could do [to change the neighbourhood's reputation]. (Interview 6, female, African background)

In these accounts, particularly young age is constructed as limiting agency. Racist behaviour and bad reputation of the neighbourhood were topics mentioned by more than one interviewee as matters beyond the participants' agency. However, in the interview 34 (second round), the participant

also mentioned that he did correct racist speech he encountered while working, and so did an African background participant in interview 35 (second round). The contradictory status of racism in the participants' civic identity is thus illustrated both here and among the concerns.

In contrast, agency in certain matters was constructed to other actors, such as the city administration or state government:

> The government [can have new houses built in the neighbourhood]. In my view, if the government says something, people listen. (Interviewee 18, gender undefined, Middle Eastern background)

> Probably limiting alcohol use and stating how or when alcohol will be sold [will help change the reputation of the neighbourhood]. (Interviewee 9, female, Asian background)

In both accounts, the agency is constructed as distant from the participants themselves. Additionally, the positive change is attributed to obeying the laws and authorities which may reflect the discourse of 'advantageous migrant'.

The interviewed ethnically minoritised youths constructed themselves as agents in their peer networks and closest communities, such as their schools or religious communities, or in their leisure activities. By contrast, they defined racism and issues in the neighbourhood mainly as being beyond their agency. Occasionally, they also made some explicit or implicit bridges to wider society by pointing out how larger changes begin from individual behaviour and interactions in one's closest networks. By limiting their agency to matters within their closest circles, the young interviewees also constructed a limited responsibility to act, implying that, the responsibility to act in wider issues belonged to the authorities. On the other hand, the local forms of agency were available to them as ethnically minoritised youths living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood. Formal civic participation beyond one's school or hobbies is not very common among Finnish young people in general (Myllyniemi and Kiilakoski, 2019; Schulz et al., 2018), and there may be obstacles to participation for ethnically minoritised ethnic youths who have complicated relationships with the 'Finns' (see the 'Belonging' section).

Conclusion and discussion – Addressing belonging, concern, voice, and agency of minoritised youth

In terms of belonging, the participants constructed identities situated between inclusion and exclusion. Their ethnic self-definitions varied, but they frequently positioned themselves as foreigners living in Finland – distinct from 'Finns' but not without a right to be in Finland, which is similar to the findings of Haikkola (2011). Local communities (the school and neighbourhood) were important to the participants, which is in line with Bruhn and Gonzales's (2023) conception of ethnically minoritised youths' community belonging, as well as the findings of Toivanen (2014). Local identity provided a position that was not questioned from the outside, as Finnishness could have been. Thus, having a strong local identity may help ethnically minoritised youths gain some control over their position in society, wherein they are often marginalised.

For the participants, matters of concern, voice, and agency were primarily at a local level. They cited mostly local issues as needing to be changed, claimed to have a voice among their peers and at school (with certain exceptions), and positioned themselves as actors at school, during leisure activities, and among their peers. Broader societal issues were also mentioned and sometimes presented as having local consequences. Similarly, individual behaviour was linked to community well-being, especially with regard to school events. Admittedly, these are the lowest-threshold forms of civic engagement for all young people. Unlike in research from the

United States (e.g. May et al., 2022; Roy et al., 2019; Rubin, 2007), positions as activists or criticisers of the social structures were seldom constructed. The context was obviously different, and the power relation between the two ethnically majoritised interviewers and the ethnically minoritised interviewees may have further toned-down criticism. Furthermore, structural oppression may have been resisted at a symbolical level through positioning oneself as unaffected by its impact (see Zacheus et al., 2019).

Statistics show less political engagement among ethnically minoritised youths (Myllyniemi and Kiilakoski, 2019; Official Statistics of Finland (OSF), 2021), so the notion of civic identity as comprising belonging, concern, voice, and agency may at least partly explain this gap. If young people do not have a sense of belonging to the broader society, they are not likely to find broader societal issues relevant (concern) but instead construct them as beyond their voice and agency. Our results show how the ethnically minoritised youths constructed local belonging, concern, voice, and agency. As these elements of civic identity are introduced in this article, there is not yet enough existing research on them in the whole youth population so it is difficult to judge whether they are minority strategies or rather dependent on their age. Distinct minority-related aspects include, however, racism as a concern and target of agency, complicated belonging and the ideal of 'advantageous migrant' (e.g. Bontenbal, 2023).

As a limitation of this study, it can be noted that the participants represented socially active youths who were engaged in hobbies and school democracy, so the degree of agency and belonging, although moderate in the data, was likely above average. The participants were predominantly male. However, the female participants were sufficiently represented, especially given that no clear differences were detected between genders.

The theoretical implications of this study are twofold. First, understanding civic identity as consisting of belonging, concern, voice, and agency provides a tool for a holistic approach to civic education. If civic identity is defined as a sense of connexion and a responsibility to act for the common good (Kirshner, 2009; Šerek, 2017), it follows that belonging is not merely a matter of identification but also a sense of empathy or responsibility towards other members of the community. Responsibility and solidarity are also at play in terms of concern. Although learning to recognise issues that affect one's own life is a good starting point in civic education, its broader goals require widening pupils' moral circles. This entails understanding how a system or a society that seems to be working well for some of members may be discriminating against others. Future research could pay more attention to the moral dimension of civic identity and possibly redirect the notion of concern towards, for instance, caring about civic issues (see also Haduong et al., 2024).

Second, as the concepts of civic agency, action, and voice have already been elaborated in some studies (e.g. Wray-Lake and Abrams, 2020), there may be a further need to define civic belonging and civic concern (or civic care). As a concept, civic belonging could provide an alternative to the complexities inherent in ideas of ethnic and national identification. Moreover, following the discussions on civic agency and voice, the notion of civic concern could lead to discussions of how civic targets of concern or care, opinion, and action can be distinguished from other targets. However, as the findings of the current study confirmed, what is needed in this regard is a continuum rather than a clear-cut division.

Distinguishing belonging, concern, voice, and agency can inform civic education and eventually impact the civic participation of ethnically – and possibly socioeconomically and otherwise – minoritised youths. Belonging is the foundation of civic identity, so it should not be bypassed in civic education; however, it can and must be fostered on other diverse occasions as well. This underlines the need to be candid about the inclusive notion of nationality. Moreover, sensitivity is needed to foster a sense of belonging to both diverse ethnic communities and mainstream society.

Furthermore, all youths need a critical awareness of the structures that connect the local and societal levels, as well as those that maintain discrimination and exclusion. Such awareness may expand everyday concerns into societal issues that require agency and the voicing of opinions. In addition, it may enable ethnically minoritised youths to fight against systemic power dynamics and gain access to more central societal positions. In other words, civic education needs to foster awareness of the minoritised voices that are often silenced. In terms of agency, ethnically minoritised youths may feel that they must address their difficulties with no help other than from informal networks. Civic education must overcome this barrier and convince ethnically minoritised youths that in addition to individual effort, collective civic engagement can amend their positions. A deficit approach – treating minoritised youths as less capable of collective action (Suni and Mietola, 2023) – can be avoided when these measures are conducted as whole class activities.

ORCID iDs

Anuleena Kimanen https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0049-826X
Samaneh Khalili https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2099-7392
Jenni Alisaari https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4096-1888

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by Urban Research Programme of Turku.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Abebe T, Ennew J, Bangyai R et al. (2009) *The Right to Be Properly Researched: Ten Manuals for Scientific Research With Children*. Black on White Publications, Norwegian Center for Child Research and World Vision International.

Alisaari J and Kilpi-Jakonen E (2022) Kuuluvuuden tunne ja poissaolot maahanmuuttotaustaisilla oppilailla [The sense of belonging and school absence in immigration-background students]. *Psykologia* 3: 184–203.

Allen D and Kidd D (2022) Civic learning for the 21st century: Disentangling the "thin" and "thick" elements of civic identity to support civic education. In: Curren R (ed.) *Handbook of Philosophy of Education*. Routledge, pp.27–41.

Ballard PJ (2014) What motivates youth civic involvement? *Journal of Adolescent Research* 29(4): 439–463.

Banks JA (2017) Failed citizenship and transformative civic education. *Educational Researcher* 46(7): 366–377.

Bontenbal I (2023) The good, the bad and the advantageous: Migrants' attitudes towards other migrants. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 94: 101802.

Bruhn S and Gonzales RG (2023) Geographies of belonging: Migrant youth and relational, community, and national opportunities for inclusion. *Social Science* 12(3): 167.

Couton P and Gaudet S (2008) Rethinking social participation: The case of immigrants in Canada. *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 9(1): 21–44.

Dahlgren P et al. (2006) Civic participation and practices: Beyond 'deliberative democracy'. In: Carpentier N (ed.) *Researching Media, Democracy and Participation*. Tartu University Press, pp.23–33.

European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2024) *Being black in the EU – Experiences of people of African descent*. Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2811/4285140

Eder D and Fingerson L (2001) Interviewing children and adolescents. In: Gubrium F and Holstein JA (eds) *Handbook of Interview Research*. Sage Publications, pp.181–202.

Fairclough N (1992) *Discourse and Social Change*. Polity Press.

Haduong P, Jeffries J, Pao A et al. (2024) Who am I and what do I care about? Supporting civic identity development in civic education. *Education Citizenship and Social Justice* 19: 185–201.

Haikkola L (2011) Transnational and local negotiations of identity: Experiences from second-generation young people in Finland. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 1(3): 156–165.

Hart D, Richardson C and Wilkenfeld B (2011) Civic identity. In: Schwartz SJ, Luyckx K and Vignoles VL (eds) *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*. Springer, pp.771–787.

Kavadias D, Nohemi Jocabeth EV and Hemmerechts K (2018) Inequality, civic education and intended future civic engagement: An examination of research in Western democracies. In: Peterson A, Stahl G and Soong H (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Citizenship and Education*. Springer International Publishing, pp.583–597.

Khalili S, Kimanen A and Seger A (2024) The role of religion in ethnic minority youth's civic agency: Theoretical considerations and a case study from Finland. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*. 1–15. Epub ahead of print 23 September 2024. DOI: 10.1080/13617672.2024.2404764.

Kimanen A, Tigert J, Alisaari J et al. (2025) 'Culture' in Finnish migrant-background youth's discourses constructing togetherness and distance. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. 1–15. Epub ahead of print 21 June 2025. DOI: 10.1080/01434632.2025.2521430.

Kirshner B (2009) 'Power in numbers': Youth organizing as a context for exploring civic identity. *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 19(3): 414–440.

Lähdesmäki T, Saresma T, Hiltunen K et al. (2016) Fluidity and flexibility of "belonging": Uses of the concept in contemporary research. *Acta Sociologica* 59(3): 233–247.

Luoma T and Peltola M (2024) Pupils' right to inclusion in an urban Finnish lower secondary school: A Bernsteinian analysis of pupils' social relations. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 45(5): 723–741.

May S, Seider S, El-Amin A et al. (2022) Black and Latinx adolescents' developing commitment to antiracist activism over four years of high school. *Journal of Research on Adolescents* 32: 1020–1041.

McLeod J (2011) Student voice and the politics of listening in higher education. *Critical Studies in Education* 52(2): 179–189.

Mikander P (2023) Racism in Finnish school textbooks: Developments and discussions. In: Thrupp M, Seppänen P, Kauko J et al. (eds) *Finland's Famous Education System: Unvarnished Insights Into Finnish Schooling*. Springer, pp.289–302.

Myers JP, McBride CE and Anderson M (2015) Beyond knowledge and skills: Discursive construction of civic identity in the world history classroom. *Curriculum Inquiry* 45(2): 198–218.

Myllyniemi S and Kiilakoski T (2019) Tilasto-osio. In: Pekkarinen E and Myllyniemi S (eds) *Vaikutusvaltaa Euroopan reunalla: Nuorisobarometri 2018 [Power in the border of Europe: Youth barometer 2018]*. Valtion nuorisoneuvosto, pp.10–112.

Official Statistics of Finland (OSF) (2021) Municipal elections [e-publication]. ISSN=2323-1114. Background analysis of candidates and elected persons 2021, 1. Persons who voted in Municipal elections 2021.Helsinki: Statistics Finland [referred: 11.3.2025]. Available at: http://stat.fi/til/kvaa/2021/05/kvaa_2021_05_2021-07-13_kat_001_en.html (accessed 12 February 2024).

Official Statistics of Finland (2025) Population structure. Table 11ra. Key figures on population by region, 1990–2024. Available at: https://pxdata.stat.fi/PxWeb/pxweb/en/StatFin/StatFin__vaerak/statfin_vaerak_pxt_11ra.px/ (accessed 12 February 2026).

Official Statistics of Finland (2026) Preliminary population statistics [online publication]. Reference period: 2025, December. Helsinki: Statistics Finland. Available at: https://stat.fi/en/publication/cmetoz3xilibu07uefnhma1vn (accessed 12 February 2026).

Peltola M, Huilla H, Luoma T, et al. (2023) Everyday life in schools in disadvantaged areas. In: Thrupp M, Seppänen P, Kauko J, et al. (eds) *Finland's Famous Education System: Unvarnished Insights into Finnish Schooling*. Springer, pp.211–225.

Rinnooy Kan WF, Munniksma A, Volman M et al. (2024) Practicing voice: Student voice experiences, democratic school culture and students' attitudes towards voice. *Research Papers in Education* 39(4): 560–580.

Roy AL, Raver CC, Masucci MD et al. (2019) 'If they focus on giving us a chance in life we can actually do something in this world': Poverty, inequality, and youths' critical consciousness. *Developmental Psychology* 55(3): 550–561.

Rubin BC (2007) 'There's still not justice': Youth civic identity development amid distinct school and community contexts. *Teachers College Record* 109(2): 449–481.

Saarinen M and Zacheus T (2019) "En mä oo samanlainen". Maahanmuuttotaustaisten nuorten kokemuksia ulkopuolisuudesta" ["I'm not the same." Immigration-background youth's experiences on exclusion.]. In: Jahnukainen M, Kalalahti M and Kivirauma J (eds) *Oma paikka haussa: Maahanmuuttotaustaiset nuoret ja koulutus*. Gaudeamus, pp.170–199.

Satokangas H and Mikander P (2023) From a welcoming rhetoric to a narrowing one: Constructing citizen agency in Finnish Social Studies textbooks. *Nordidactica* 13(3): 85–108.

Saukkonen P (2012) Suomi: Euroopan multikulturalistisin maa? [Finland: The most multiculturalist country in the world?]. *Oikeus* 41(2): 226–243.

Schulz W, Ainley J, Fraillon J et al. (2018) *Becoming Citizens in a Changing World. IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2016 International Report*. Springer.

Šerek J (2017) What's the matter with civil society? The declining effect of civic involvement on civic identity among Czech adolescents. *Youth & Society* 49(7): 879–901.

Stein B (2022) Minoritizing processes and power relations between volunteers and immigrant participants—An example from Norway. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 12(1): 21–37.

Suni A and Mietola R (2023) Dear colleagues, I ask you to act like adults': Minority youth and their political participation. *Journal of Youth Studies* 26(2): 213–228.

Toivanen M (2014) *Negotiating home and belonging: Young Kurds in Finland*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Turku, Turku. Available at: https://www.utupub.fi/handle/10024/98544 (accessed 12 December 2023).

Weiste-Paakkanen A, Lämsä R and Kuusio H (2018) *Suomen romaniväestön osallisuus ja hyvinvointi. Romanien hyvinvointitutkimus Roosan perustulokset 2017-2018* [Participation and well-being of the Roma population in Finland 2017-2018]. Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos. Available at: http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-343-246-8 (accessed 12 February 2024).

Wray-Lake L and Abrams LS (2020) Pathways to civic engagement among urban youth of color. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development* 85(2): 7–154.

Yuval-Davis N (2011) *The Politics of Belonging. Intersectional Contestations*. Sage.

Zacheus T, Kalalahti M, Varjo J et al. (2019) Discrimination, harassment and racism in Finnish lower secondary schools. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 9(1): 81–98.