

analyze how different groups were positioned as vulnerable in media reports on the PISA results and what consequences this positioning has for the students. By using the PISA 2018 results as a reference point, we investigate how the national media discourses differ in Finland and Germany.

A look at both Finland and Germany offers opportunities to compare because the performance of students is rather similar: it is above OECD average but has been declining in recent years. The first PISA survey in 2000 made the Finnish education system globally famous and it has since then been present in the media discourse regarding PISA in the German media. There is also a historical reason for the comparison between Finland and Germany: The first Finnish public school (Fin. 'kansakoulu', Eng. "people's school")<sup>2</sup> – before the school reform in the 1970s – was partly based on the German school system, namely the parallel school system (peda.net, 2023). First grades were aimed at everyone, after which the students continued to a more academic grammar school (Fin. 'oppikoulu') or continued at the public school. After the school reform in the 1970s, the basic education is currently the same for all students in Finland, leaving students with more possibilities compared to the earlier public school system in Finland. Thus, the differences between the Finnish and German school systems create an interesting comparison regarding the PISA 2018 results, as the school systems have been similar in the past but gone into different directions since the 1970s.

In this paper, we focus on how different student groups are presented in the media. The data consists of newspaper articles reporting the PISA results in the two countries. We have chosen newspapers before other kinds of media because they tend to give the most in-depth reporting and undergo the most thorough editorial processes. Compared to TV or radio broadcasts they are more easily available also in the aftermath of events. We analyze reactions in national online and print newspapers, as well as the news website of the National broadcasting companies, in the days following the presentation of the results of PISA 2018 on December 3<sup>rd</sup> 2019. The data is analyzed using discourse analytic methods.

## The contexts of the study: Finland and Germany

In Finland, children start school at the age of seven, later than in many other OECD countries. Most children also attend preschool at the age of six, although it is not mandatory. At the time of the analysis, however, it was mandatory to take basic education. From 2021 onwards, also two years of studies in secondary education have been mandatory in Finland. Basic education includes primary school (classes 1–6) and middle school (classes 7–9). Secondary education typ-

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2 We use the following abbreviations: Fin. = Finnish; Ger. = German; Eng. = English.

ically includes 3 years of full-time studies. There are two options for students: High school focuses more on theoretical subjects and vocational training on learning an occupation. Both prepare for studies in higher education, be it university or university of applied sciences. Finnish primary school teachers are required to have a master's degree in education which includes practice periods in a teacher training school. Subject teachers teach in middle school and secondary school, and they are required to have master's degrees in their major subjects, e.g. mathematics, Finnish, biology, as well as a year-long teacher program, to be qualified to teach their respective subjects in middle school, as well as secondary education.

The German school system is varied, as the responsibility for education rests with the federal states. Here, some general facts are mentioned that make it possible to compare it with the Finnish system. In most states, primary education lasts from year 1 to 4 and children start school when they are six years old. General schooling is mandatory for 9 or 10 years. Several different kinds of secondary schools exist, which results in educational decisions being made at a comparatively early age by parents and/or teachers. The most usual secondary schools are 'Hauptschule', 'Realschule', 'Gymnasium' and 'Gesamtschule'. The 'Hauptschule' (or general school) lasts from year 5 to 9 or 10 and provides students who get lower grades in elementary school with a general education. After finishing school, they can continue with a dual vocational training. The 'Gymnasium' emphasizes academic learning, leads to a general university entrance certificate and lasts from year 5 to 12 or 13. It can only be attended by students with high grades already in elementary school. The 'Realschule' is located between these two and ends after grade 10. From there on students can continue to the final years at Gymnasium, attend a specialized higher secondary school that allows them to enter a university of applied sciences or start a dual vocational training. The 'Gesamtschule' or comprehensive school combines these school types in one way or another and is thus comparable to Finnish schools. Like in Finland, the German primary and secondary school teachers are required to have master's degrees including pedagogical training. Depending on the school type the study programmes' emphasis on subject education or pedagogical education vary.

## A theoretical approach to vulnerability in educational systems

During recent years, vulnerability has gained renewed attention as an academic concept for the analysis of questions of equality (see for example Brown, Ecclestone & Emmel, 2017; Butler, Gambetti & Sabsay, 2016a; Fineman & Grear, 2016). Many scholars have argued for a shift in the understanding and use of the

concept. While it had for a longer time been used to label groups of people who are in need of special attention and protection in certain contexts, newer approaches are trying to broaden the scope of our understanding of vulnerability as a universal human condition (Fineman, 2008; Wallbank & Herring, 2013). One reason for the need for a shift was the paradoxical consequences that followed when certain groups of people were described as vulnerable both in research and by political decision makers (Butler, Gambetti & Sabsay, 2016b, pp. 1–2; Fineman, 2016, p. 16). The categorisation of people with disabilities as vulnerable, has for example rather led to an increase of paternalistic measures to protect them instead of extending their possibilities of participation and thus their societal integration and equality (Clough, 2017, p. 469).

Sitter (2016) has described a similar paradox for the context of the German PISA survey. In her dissertation she analyzed different kinds of reactions to the PISA surveys 2000 and 2009 and found out that children with an immigrant background are recurrently constructed as others, as “foreign children”. Thereby, the responsibility for inequality in education is relocated from structural conditions in the educational system and in society towards linguistic competencies (or in this view: incompetencies) of children and their families. Without using the term, Sitter points to the dilemma of constructing certain groups as vulnerable, which for example Fineman discusses for other contexts:

This [dilemma] is that in naming the migration background within educational policy efforts – including this study – one is always exposed to the danger of falling prey to deficit-focused perspectives and patterns of interpretation and classification, even though the aim is to design offers and support that should open up successful educational biographies for all children and ‘especially’ migrant children. Whichever way you look at it, the term “children with a migration background” always draws attention to a special target group and suggests a special need for action. (Sitter, 2016, p. 324)<sup>3</sup>

According to newer approaches in vulnerability studies, these paradoxes arise when certain individuals are constructed as in need of help and others – by contrast – re-established as independent and capable. Fineman and Grear (2016, p. 2) and Diduck (2013, p. 101), for example, criticize the idea of a liberal, self-sufficient, independent subject that forms the basis of our understanding of

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3 All quotes from German have been translated by H. A., all quotes from Finnish by L. M. H. “Dieses [Dilemma] besteht darin, dass man mit der Benennung des Migrationshintergrunds innerhalb bildungspolitischer Bemühungen – einschließlich dieser Studie – stets der Gefahr ausgeliefert ist, defizitkonzentrierten Blickweisen und Deutungs- sowie Klassifikationsmustern zu verfallen; und das, obwohl es doch darum geht, Angebote und Förderungen zu gestalten, die allen Kindern und ‘insbesondere’ Migrantenkindern erfolgreiche Bildungsbiografien eröffnen sollen. Wie man es auch drehen und wenden mag, der Begriff “Kinder mit Migrationshintergrund” lenkt den Blick stets auf eine besondere Zielgruppe und suggeriert speziellen Handlungsbedarf.” (Translation: H. A.)

society as an equal playing field, especially from a legal perspective. They argue that this presupposes an ideal as a standard that does not actually exist because all humans are vulnerable. Vulnerability is universal, whereas the resilience human beings develop because of assets varies. Examining lists of possibly vulnerable groups shows that there are “few people who do not fall into one category or another” (Herring, 2018, p. 29).

Few studies in the area of vulnerability research have so far focused on the educational system. Some studies mention educational contexts among other areas or concentrate on young people or people with disabilities at schools. Fineman, for example, mentions education in passing in her chapter *Equality, Autonomy, and the Vulnerable Subject in Law and Politics* from 2016. While she mainly describes the US-American context, her findings seem generalizable. Like other areas of society, she views the educational system as a just, fair and equal system. Thus, discrimination is not interpreted as a failure of the system, but as a correctable exception. The focus lies on certain groups formed by individuals with certain identity characteristics (Fineman, 2016, pp. 15–16). Fineman also describes the educational system as an asset-conferring institution, which contributes to the accumulation of human capital or ‘capabilities’ (2016, p. 23). A failure of the educational system will therefore affect a person’s future prospects in life: “Someone who misses out on education typically will have fewer options and opportunities in the workplace, which will make for a more precarious retirement and fewer savings.” (2016, p. 23).

Because of the long term effects a failure of the educational system will have, failure in it should be avoided so as to equip individuals with assets they will need throughout their lives. Our study is part of an effort to investigate where discrimination might occur when the educational system of a society is under scrutiny. Looking at the example of the public representation of national educational systems in the media reporting on the internationally comparative PISA survey, we want to find out who is represented as vulnerable in the context of educational systems and what effects this might have.

## Data and methodology

For this purpose, we compared two national contexts and analyzed the media reporting following the latest publication of a PISA survey in Finland and Germany. Our data consists of the media coverage in the days following the presentation of the results of PISA 2018 on December 3<sup>rd</sup> 2019. We included reactions in national quality newspapers (online or print) with a wide circulation and the news websites of a national broadcasting company. In Germany we have used articles from *ZEIT*, *FAZ*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* as well as *tagesschau.de*.

*tagesschau.de* is the website of the main news program of the joint organization of Germany's regional public-service broadcasters and has been included because it is comparable to the website of the Finnish national broadcasting company YLE, which functions as an important provider of news in Finland. In Finland, we focus on examples from *Turun Sanomat*, *Helsingin Sanomat*, *YLE Uutiset*, *Education and Culture Ministry News* and *Huvfudstadsbladet*.

For analyzing the data, we used qualitative content analysis and combined it with discourse analytic methods. First, we searched for articles related to the PISA 2018 results in the news outlets listed above. Second, we read through the articles for content and listed the topics discussed. Third, we discussed similarities and differences in the Finnish and German media reports. Finally, we adapted approaches from Critical Discourse Analysis (Boréus & Seiler Brylla, 2018) and Discourse Linguistics (Spitzmüller & Warnke, 2010) to analyze the language of the media reports. To find out how the media reports about the PISA survey constructed certain groups of people as vulnerable in the educational context, we focused on the lexical level and especially on appellations and categorizations of individuals and groups (Boréus & Seiler Brylla, 2018, pp. 320–321; Spitzmüller & Warnke, 2010, pp. 141–142) which we analyzed comparatively. We then studied how these groups were described and whether and how agency was attributed to them in the material, for example through the use of active or passive voice. Our approach is critical in the sense that we want to raise awareness for how the choice of words in the media reports has (intended or unintended) social consequences which should be reflected by journalists.<sup>4</sup>

## Vulnerable groups according to the media reporting

Our analysis of the media reporting in Germany and Finland shows both similarities and differences in the construction of certain students or student groups as vulnerable. In Germany, students with an immigrant background (Ger. “die Einwandererkinder”, “die Migrantenkinder”, “die Migrantenschüler”, “die Zuwandererkinder”, “Kinder mit Migrationshintergrund” etc.), socio-economically disadvantaged students (Ger. “die Arbeiterkinder”, “Kinder aus sozial schwachen Familien”, “die sozial schwächsten Schülerinnen und Schüler” etc.), as well as boys (Ger. “die Jungen”) are put forward as vulnerable in one way or the other. In Finland, students with an immigrant background are not specified in any of the articles investigated, and schools are often what is compared (Fin. “suomalaiskoulut”, Finnish schools; “lähikoulu”, neighborhood school). Socio-

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<sup>4</sup> It thus includes aspects of text and discourse internal, ideological and prospective critique (Seiler Brylla, Westberg & Wojahn, 2018, p. 18).

economic status is also referred to in neutral terms (Fin. “perhetausta”, family background; “vanhempien sosioekonomisen tausta”, parent’s socio-economic background; “alin sosioekonomisen neljännes”, lowest socio-economic quartile). In the Finnish media coverage, boys (Fin. “pojat”) are presented as a vulnerable group.

### Students with an immigrant background

When contrasted with both the Finnish reporting as well as with the presentation of results in the official PISA materials, it is especially obvious that the immigrant background of students is addressed in almost all German articles. Sometimes it is the main focus of the article, sometimes it is mentioned in passing. “PISA’s foreign children” (Sitter, 2016) still dominates the German narrative on the results of the survey. Students with an immigrant background are constructed as a clearly identifiable group. Some examples include:

- (1) [...] the current Pisa results show that above all young people whose parents were both born abroad usually perform considerably worse than children of German origin. (*SZ Online*, 04. 12. 2019)<sup>5</sup>
- (2) In Germany, many students with a migrant background belong to the disadvantaged. (*ZEIT Online*, 03. 12. 2019a)<sup>6</sup>
- (3) Those who cannot read properly at the age of 15 – more than half of the new migrants – will not find a qualified profession and will find it difficult to find happiness in life. (*ZEIT Online*, 04. 12. 2019a)<sup>7</sup>

While all three examples contribute to the construction of students with an immigrant background as a separate group, the journalists used a variety of different labels for these children, “young people whose parents were both born abroad”, “students with a migrant background” and “the new migrants”. Further labels from the material include “children with different roots”<sup>8</sup> (*ZEIT Online*, 03. 12. 2019a), “migrant children”<sup>9</sup> (*ZEIT Online*, 04. 12. 2019a) “migrant students”, “immigrant children”, “Ali and Samira”<sup>10</sup> (*ZEIT Online*, 03. 12. 2019b), to

5 “[...] die aktuellen Pisa-Ergebnisse zeigen, dass vor allem Jugendliche, deren beide Eltern im Ausland geboren wurden, meist erheblich schlechtere Leistungen als Kinder deutscher Herkunft erbringen.”

6 “Zu den Benachteiligten gehören in Deutschland viele Schülerinnen und Schüler mit Migrationshintergrund.”

7 “Wer mit 15 nicht richtig lesen kann – bei den neuen Einwanderern ist das mehr als die Hälfte –, der findet keinen qualifizierten Beruf und nur schwer sein Lebensglück.”

8 “Kinder mit anderen Wurzeln”.

9 “Einwandererkinder”.

10 “Zuwandererkinder”, “Migrantenschüler”, “Ali und Samira”.

differentiate within the group, even more similar labels are used – partly interchangeably: “refugees”, “migrant families”, “adolescents with a Turkish background”, “children of migrants who completed their schooling in Germany, the so-called second generation”<sup>11</sup> (*ZEIT Online*, 03.12.2019b). The variation of labels seems to express a discomfort in naming this group explicitly. In contrast, the PISA survey itself consistently refers to them as “adolescents with migrant background”<sup>12</sup>.

The examples also show how students with an immigrant background are singled out as vulnerable, although this word, which is only now in reports on COVID becoming more usual in the German context, is not used. They “usually perform considerably worse”, “belong to the disadvantaged”. The author of quote (3) goes so far as to predict that they will have problems on the job market and will not find happiness. In presenting them as vulnerable, the articles use negative vocabulary to describe the students and their actions. Thus, the above-mentioned dilemma is overtly present in the German media coverage when it comes to the question of immigrant background: The articles alternate between presenting these students as vulnerable or problematic often in one and the same article. In an interview with *ZEIT Online*, Kristina Reiss, national project manager for PISA, professor of didactics of mathematics, sets the tone for the interpretation of PISA 2018, drawing a link between comparatively or allegedly weak PISA results and the proportion of students with an immigrant background in German schools. Reacting to her colleague, Olaf Köller, who raises the concern that student performance is once again declining after having risen since the first survey in 2000, she says:

- (4) I don't see this so negatively. In 2000, German 15-year-olds were below the OECD average in reading, mathematics and science, now they are above the average in all areas for the second time. If you take into account that the proportion of pupils with an immigrant background has grown significantly, from 22 percent in 2000 to 36 percent now, then the result can be considered a success.<sup>13</sup> (*ZEIT Online*, 03.12.2019b)

The implicature of the last sentence is that a growing proportion of students with an immigrant background leads to a decline in overall performance. The same

11 “Flüchtlinge”, “Zuwandererfamilien”, “türkischstämmige Jugendliche”, “Kinder von Migranten, die ihre Schullaufbahn in Deutschland absolviert haben, die sogenannte zweite Generation”.

12 “Jugendliche mit Zuwanderungshintergrund”.

13 “Ich sehe das nicht so negativ. Im Jahr 2000 lagen die deutschen 15-Jährigen im Lesen, in der Mathematik und in den Naturwissenschaften unter dem OECD-Durchschnitt, jetzt liegen sie zum wiederholten Mal in allen Bereichen über dem Durchschnitt. Wenn man bedenkt, dass der Anteil der Schüler mit Zuwanderungshintergrund deutlich gewachsen ist, von 22 Prozent im Jahr 2000 auf nun 36 Prozent, dann ist das Ergebnis als Erfolg zu werten.”

implicature is also present in an article in the daily paper SZ. Also here, Reiss is quoted:

- (5) Three times above average, that is a remarkable achievement, Reiss says. Especially when one takes into account how school classes have changed during recent years. For example because of many refugees who came to Germany since 2015, among them many children. 36 percent of the 15-year-olds in the most recent PISA sample have an immigrant background, i. e. at least one parent from abroad. In 2009, the figure was still 26 percent. And unlike countries such as Australia or Canada, which largely choose their immigrants, Germany has to integrate many low-skilled newcomers – even in the classrooms. “Under these circumstances”, Reiss says, “schools have done a good job.”<sup>14</sup>

When compared with the actual survey results, this is surprising. Neither students with an immigrant background nor the immigrant background are presented as the problem. In Vol. 2 of the survey results the authors write:

Long-standing research finds that the most reliable predictor of a child’s future success at school – and, in many cases, of access to well-paid and high-status occupations – is his or her family. Children from low-income and low-educated families usually face many barriers to learning. (OECD, 2019e, p. 50)

Also, the summary in the country note on Germany, mentions that the score point difference between students with and without an immigrant background shrinks from 63 to 17 when the students’ and the schools’ socio-economic profile are accounted for (OECD, 2019a, p. 6). All of this suggests that the main cause for lower performance lies in the unequal distribution of societal resources both when it comes to people as well as when it comes to schools. That immigrant background in itself does not account for lower performance also becomes clear from the fact that many students belong to the top group: 16% of students with an immigrant background in Germany (and 17% in OECD average) perform very well, as they reach the top quarter in their reading skills (OECD, 2019a, p. 7).

Why is immigrant background dominating the media reporting and the German debates on the PISA survey? One reason, we argue, is tradition. Its relevance for school success has for a long time been seen as a matter of fact in Germany (Sitter, 2016). This is of course connected to the fact also mentioned by

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14 “Dreimal über dem Schnitt, das sei eine beachtliche Leistung, sagt Reiss. Vor allem wenn man bedenke, wie sich die Schulklassen in den letzten Jahren verändert hätten. Zum Beispiel durch viele Flüchtlinge, die seit 2015 nach Deutschland kamen, unter ihnen viele Kinder. 36 Prozent der 15-Jährigen in der jüngsten Pisa-Stichprobe haben einen Migrationshintergrund, also mindestens einen Elternteil aus dem Ausland. 2009 waren es noch 26 Prozent gewesen. Und anders als etwa Australien oder Kanada, die sich ihre Zuwanderer weitgehend aussuchen, muss Deutschland viele gering qualifizierte Neuankömmlinge integrieren – auch in den Klassenzimmern. ‘Unter diesen Umständen’, sagt Reiss, ‘haben die Schulen gute Arbeit geleistet.’”

Reiss in quote (5) that compared to other OECD countries, Germany's immigrant population on average has a lower educational level and a lower socio-economic status. Because of their overlap, the significance of these categorizations is not kept separately in the media reports. A second reason for the popularity of the category in the articles might be that it is much easier to distinguish and grasp than socio-economic background. Migrant background is a variable that is easier to measure than socio-economic background as the definitions in the survey show. While the survey uses three longer definitions to come to the distinction of three groups of students in the area of socio-economic background (OECD, 2019e, pp. 52–55), the definition of migrant background is explained in one sentence as “students whose mother and father were born in a country/economy other than that where the student sat the PISA test” (OECD, 2019e, p. 179).

One factor that has been put forward as a difference between students with and without an immigrant background that might explain differences in school success is the students' home language (OECD, 2019e, p. 184). The differentiation that the migrant background only indirectly (and even in that case not necessarily) influences student performance because the home language in many migrant families is not the same as the educational language is not mentioned in the media reporting. Instead, in the German articles, the home language of students not being German is discussed as problematic:

- (6) One piece of information in the new study is particularly worrying: the young people concerned speak German less often at home today than they did in 2009; this has a clear impact on their performance. (*ZEIT Online*, 04.12.2019b)<sup>15</sup>

Actually, there is new research that suggests that the idea that a different home language will have a negative influence on school performance is too simple (Schnoor, 2019). For example, educational researcher Gogolin says, “the educational proximity of the linguistic input that children receive is relevant – regardless of the language in which it is given.” (2019, p. 87). She also points out that in Germany, language skills are often equated with German skills (2019, p. 77). There are many studies pointing to the fact that a strong first language supports the learning of the language of instruction, as well as all learning (Cummins, 2001; Agirdag & Vanlaar, 2018).

In the Finnish media coverage, the migrant background is not mentioned at all. This is interesting, as there is a large gap in reading performance between non-immigrant and immigrant students (-74, OECD average -25, OECD Finland 2019), which would thus warrant a discussion in the media. The reasons for the

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15 “Eine Information in der neuen Studie ist besonders besorgniserregend: Die betroffenen Jugendlichen sprechen heute zu Hause seltener deutsch, als dies noch 2009 der Fall war; das wirkt sich deutlich auf ihre Leistungen aus.”

absence of discussion may be due to the fact that immigration is a fairly new phenomenon in Finland. The first larger groups of immigrants arrived in the 1990s, and the world-wide immigration in 2015 also reached Finland (Statistics Finland, 2022). Another reason for not including coverage on the students with an immigrant background in the immediate reactions to the PISA 2018 results may be that in Finland, especially within the school system, labeling different groups is generally frowned upon. Some Finnish school teachers (Alisaari et al., 2022) often report not wanting to emphasize the immigrant background of their students in order not to single them out. However, in the more in-depth coverage of the PISA results 2018 weeks after the publication of the results, the students with migrant background were discussed (e. g. SU, 2019). However, the PISA 2018 results regarding the immigrant background students' weaker reading performance have awakened school researchers in Finland, and the next PISA study in 2022 will focus especially on immigrant background students, by the request of the Ministry of Education and Culture (OKM, 2022).

In conclusion, in the German media coverage there is a strong focus on problematizing the weaker performance of the students with an immigrant background, although the performance in this group is comparatively little problematized in the PISA 2018 results. On the contrary, in Finland, the students with an immigrant background are not covered in the immediate reactions, although this would be warranted based on the PISA results.

### Socio-economically disadvantaged students

Compared to the immigrant background, the socio-economic background of students plays a much more subtle role in the media reporting in the German context. As indicated above, this is surprising as the PISA survey itself stresses the family's low-income and low-educational level as the most important obstacle for students (OECD 2019e, p. 50). The authors describe socio-economic status as "a broad concept that aims to reflect the financial, social, cultural and human-capital resources available to students" (OECD, 2019, p. 52) and use a specific and complex index to measure it. The PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) is "a composite measure that combines into a single score the financial, social, cultural and human-capital resources available to students" (OECD, 2019, p. 52). Both students as well as schools are classified according to this index into socio-economically advantaged (the top 25% in their respective country), having average socio-economic status (the middle 50%) and as socio-economically disadvantaged (the bottom 25%) (OECD, 2019e, p. 55).

In Germany, this factor is especially strong, as the following figure from the summarizing country note on Germany shows. The score point difference in

reading performance between advantaged and disadvantaged students is not only larger than all other measured differences, but it has increased by nine score points since 2009 and the gap is also clearly wider than the OECD average (OECD, 2019a, p. 1).

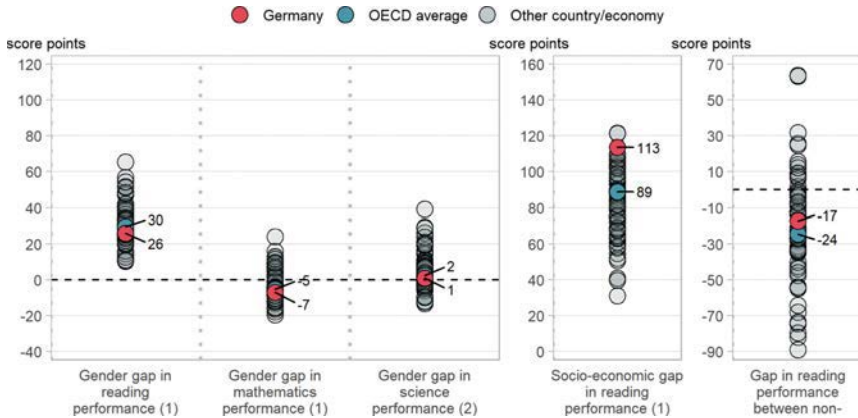


Figure 1: Differences in performance and expectations related to personal characteristics (OECD, 2019a, p. 4). “Note: Only countries and economies with available data are shown. (1) Girls’ minus boys’ performance; (2) Advantaged minus disadvantaged students’ performance; (3) Immigrants’ minus non-immigrants’ performance in reading; after accounting for students’ and schools’ socio-economic profile. Source: OECD, PISA 2018 Database, Tables II.B1.2.3, II.B1.7.1, II.B1.7.3, II.B1.7.5, II.B1.9.3.”

Only one fourth of the German articles mention the socio-economic background of students as a specific problematic result of the survey and thus emphasize socio-economically disadvantaged students (more or less explicitly) as a vulnerable group. Some examples include:

- (7) Children from socially deprived families perform significantly worse [in reading] than children who come from affluent households where education is valued. (*ZEIT Online*, 03. 12. 2019a)<sup>16</sup>
- (8) The current Pisa survey once again showed that there is a particularly strong connection between social background and success at school in Germany. (*SZ Online*, 03. 12. 2019a)<sup>17</sup>

Whether the phrase “social background” used for example in (8) refers to and is understood by readers as the socio-economic background as defined by PISA remains unclear. In several articles, socio-economic background and immigrant

16 “Kinder aus sozial schwachen Familien schneiden hier deutlich schlechter ab als Kinder, die aus einem wohlhabenden Haushalt kommen, in dem auf Bildung Wert gelegt wird.”

17 “Deutlich wurde im aktuellen Pisa-Test erneut, dass es in Deutschland einen besonders starken Zusammenhang zwischen sozialer Herkunft und Erfolg in der Schule gibt.”

background are not kept separate or are even used interchangeably, as this example shows:

- (9) [...] the current Pisa results show that above all young people whose parents were both born abroad usually perform considerably worse than children of German origin. It should not be the case that educational success depends on the social background of the pupils [...], criticized Ilka Hoffmann, GEW board member for schools. (*SZ Online*, 04. 12. 2019)<sup>18</sup>

In Finland, the socio-economic gap in reading performance is smaller than the OECD average but is still large (OECD 89, Finland 79) (Figure 2). The differences in reading performance were larger than ever in the 2018 study, which was often emphasized in the Finnish media coverage. In the media coverage, it was often underlined that the regional variation was the smallest of the participating countries, although the results on average were higher in the capital region. See the examples below:

- (10) In Finland, the difference between the highest and lowest socio-economic quartile in reading performance was 79 points. Computationally this corresponds to up to two years of studying at school. The result is due to the fact that the results of the lowest socio-economic quartile have worsened from 2009 to 2018. The highest quartile's results have remained the same. (*YLE Online*, 3. 12. 2019)<sup>19</sup>
- (11) The equality between students is cracking also in other ways in addition to between genders, although the differences between schools are still the smallest in the participating countries. – – There were also no significant changes in regional variation. Although the results on average were better in the capital region compared to the rest of the country, these differences are substantially smaller than in the last PISA study. Also the variation in performance varies more greatly in the capital region compared to the rest of the country. – – The differences in reading performance in Finland are now bigger than ever before. (*HS*, 4. 12. 2019a)<sup>20</sup>

18 “[...] die aktuellen Pisa-Ergebnisse zeigen, dass vor allem Jugendliche, deren beide Eltern im Ausland geboren wurden, meist erheblich schlechtere Leistungen als Kinder deutscher Herkunft erbringen. Es dürfe nicht sein, dass der Bildungserfolg von der sozialen Herkunft der Schülerinnen und Schüler abhängt, kritisierte Ilka Hoffmann, GEW-Vorstandsmitglied für den Bereich Schule.”

19 “Suomessa ylimmän ja alimman sosioekonomisen neljänneksen keskimääräinen ero lukutaidon pisteissä oli 79 pistettä. Laskennallisesti tämä vastaa jopa kahden kouluvuoden opintoja. Tulos johtuu siitä, että alimman sosioekonomisen neljänneksen tulokset ovat huonontuneet vuodesta 2009 vuoteen 2018. Ylimmän neljänneksen tulokset ovat pysyneet ennallaan.”

20 “OPPILAIDEN tasa-arvo rakoilee muutenkin kuin sukupuolten välillä, vaikka koulujen välinen ero lukutaidossa oli Suomessa yhä osallistujamaiden pienin. Myöskään alueellisessa vaihtelussa ei ollut Suomessa merkittäviä muutoksia. Tosin pääkaupunkiseudun oppilaiden keskimääräiset tulokset olivat yhä parempia kuin muualla maassa, mutta nämä erot ovat olennaisesti pienempiä kuin edellisellä Pisa-kierroksella. Myös osaamisen vaihtelu oli pää-

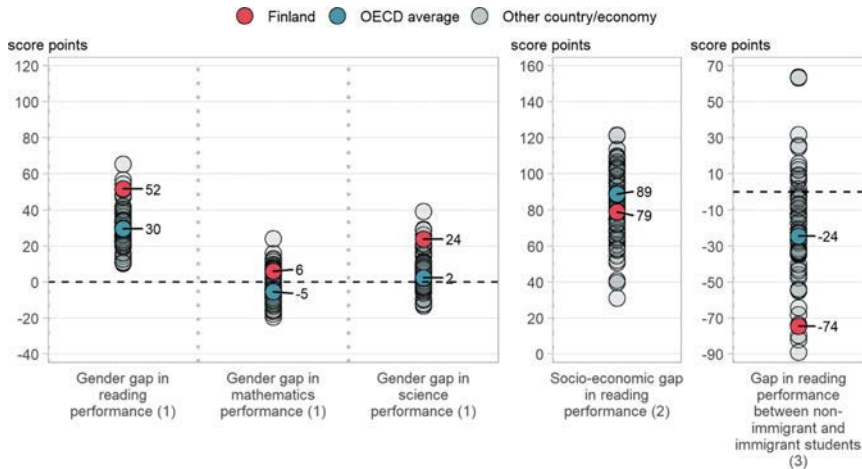


Figure 2: Differences in performance and expectations related to personal characteristics (OECD, 2019b, p. 4). “Note: Only countries and economies with available data are shown. (1) Girls’ minus boys’ performance; (2) Advantaged minus disadvantaged students’ performance; (3) Immigrants’ minus non-immigrants’ performance in reading; after accounting for students’ and schools’ socio-economic profile. Source: OECD, PISA 2018 Database, Tables II.B1.2.3, II.B1.7.1, II.B1.9.3.”

Very rarely in the Finnish news coverage the socio-economic status of the students’ parents is mentioned explicitly, as in the following example:

- (12) Equality is also cracking in that reading performance in Finland is even more connected to the parents’ socio-economic background, that is their education, occupation and wealth. (*HS*, 4. 12. 2019b)<sup>21</sup>

In the news coverage, it seems that the difference between students based on their background is often presented as an issue of ‘equality’ (Fin. ‘tasa-arvo’) (see the examples above). This is very relevant for the Finnish education system, as the current system introduced in the 1970s is based on the values of equality. It has been shown that the current education system has decreased how much parents’ income was passed on to children, meaning that the current education increased equality (Pekkarinen, Uusitalo & Kerr, 2009). The PISA 2018 results now show an opposite trend, which has raised concerns in the media, public, schools and among researchers alike.

kaupunkiseudulla suurempaa kuin muussa maassa. – Yksittäisten oppilaiden väliset lukutaitoerot olivat nyt Suomessa suuremmat kuin kertaakaan aiemmin.”

21 “TASA-ARVO rakoilee myös niin, että lukutaito on Suomessakin entistä enemmän yhteydessä vanhempien sosioekonomiseen taustaan eli koulutukseen, ammattiin ja varallisuuteen.”

In the Finnish news media, the word ‘background’ (Fin. ‘tausta’) is used extensively. The word can be used to refer to a person’s (Kielitoimiston sanakirja, 2022) social background, cultural background and home background (see examples 13 and 14). Thus, even though the Finnish media does not explicitly emphasize the performance of students with an immigrant background when reporting the PISA 2018 results, by using the word background, it may be alluding to it also when reporting results depending on the students’ socio-economic background.

- (13) Nowadays the students’ background strongly predicts their academic success in Finland, which is highly worrisome for equality and the stability of the society, says the chief of development Jaakko Salo. (*YLE Online*, 4.12.2019)<sup>22</sup>
- (14) It has long been believed that the strength of the Finnish basic education is that it guarantees everyone equal possibilities regardless of their background. Now it seems that the effect of background is getting stronger also in Finland. (*YLE Online*, 4.12.2019)<sup>23</sup>

Although socio-economic background is the most important variable which influences students’ performance according to the PISA study in both countries, it is not treated extensively and comprehensively in the media coverage.

## Boys

Also boys are mentioned as a vulnerable group in the German media coverage in about one fourth of the articles. There is one article with a special focus on boys whose performance in reading is significantly lower than girls’ performance in Germany with 26 score points. While their performance in natural sciences is on the same level as girls’ and 7 score points higher than girls’ in mathematics, the performance of boys in these two latter areas has declined since 2015. The fact that is emphasized in the article is that more boys than girls belong to the group of low-performing students (*SZ Online*, 03.12.2019b). “We must look after the boys” (*SZ Online*, 03.12.2019b)<sup>24</sup> Kristina Reiss is quoted, but there are no measures suggested how this could be done. Boys thus get attention as a new vulnerable group although compared to Finland their performance is very good

22 “Nykyisin myös Suomessa oppilaiden tausta ennustaa vahvasti heidän koulumenestystään, mikä on erittäin huolestuttavaa tasa-arvon ja yhteiskunnan vakauden kannalta, sanoo OAJ:n kehittämisspäällikkö Jaakko Salo.”

23 “Suomalaisen peruskoulun vahvuutena on pitkään pidetty sitä, että se takaa kaikille tasa-vertaiset mahdollisuudet taustasta huolimatta. Nyt taustan vaikutus lukutaitoon näyttää voimistuvan meilläkin.”

24 “Wir müssen auf die Jungen aufpassen”.

(in reading, it is 26 score points lower than girls' in Germany and 52 score points lower in Finland).

In the Finnish news coverage of the PISA 2018 results, most emphasis was placed on the growing differences between boys and girls. Special focus lies in reading performance, where girls outperformed boys with 52 score points (OECD average 30 score points). Girls also outperformed boys in mathematics (6 score points, OECD average 5 score points) and in science (24 score points, OECD average 2 score points) (OECD, 2019). Many of the Finnish newspaper articles refer to the actual PISA 2018 results, as well as the Minister of Education Li Andersson's comments on the results, when discussing the differences between boys and girls, see the examples below:

- (15) Also, the difference in performance between girls and boys has shot up the most in the OECD countries. The deterioration of boys' results was strongly related to a reduction in reading as a hobby and a reduced interest in reading. (*Ministry of Education and Culture News*, 4. 12. 2019)<sup>25</sup>
- (16) In particular, the differences between genders and the socio-economic background are stressed here, minister of education worries. (*YLE Online*, 3. 12. 2019)<sup>26</sup>
- (17) Two-thirds of boys read only if they have to. (*YLE Online English*, 3. 12. 2019)

Most often, the focus in the Finnish news coverage is on the poor performance of boys (see examples above), but there are also some mentions of girls doing well (see examples below). Here, especially in the Swedish speaking news coverage, it is emphasized that especially girls with Swedish as their first language do very well in mathematics in the PISA 2018 study.

- (18) Finnish girls were listed second best in science when compared to students in other OECD countries. (*YLE Online English*, 6. 12. 2019)
- (19) Finnish girls' reading skills outpaced boys' more than in any other country in the survey of educational proficiency. (*YLE Online English*, 3. 12. 2019)
- (20) [...] the Finland Swedish girls are in a class of their own in mathematics. (*HBL*, 3. 12. 2019)<sup>27</sup>

To summarize, in both the German and Finnish media coverage, boys are discussed as a vulnerable group.

25 "Myös tyttöjen ja poikien osaamiserot ovat venähtäneet OECD-maiden suurimmiksi. Poikien tulosten heikkeneminen liittyi voimakkaasti vähentyneeseen lukuharrastukseen, sekä kiinnostukseen lukemista kohtaan."

26 "Erityisesti tässä painottuvat sukupuolten väliset ja sosioekonomisen taustan vaikutuksen erot, opetusministeri Li Andersson murehti."

27 "de finlandssvenska flickorna är i en klass för sig i matte"

## Conclusions and implications

After comparing the national reporting in these two contexts, we can conclude that what is put forward in the media when it comes to vulnerable groups is not consistent with what the respective survey presented as the main results – neither in the full reports nor in the summaries or country notes. Within the OECD, both Finland’s and Germany’s immigrant population has a comparatively low education level and thus immigrant background often overlaps with a low socio-economic background. The PISA results in reading performance for the groups of students with an immigrant and a low socio-economic background are in both countries clearly below average, in Finland they are alarming. However, although the PISA survey points to socio-economic background as the most important factor influencing student performance, immigrant background is discussed as the main educational problem according to PISA in the German media, almost completely overriding the challenge that the socio-economic background of students and schools poses. In the Finnish media, the immigrant background is not mentioned at all, although compared to Germany this factor does play a significant role.

Discursive traditions related to how education and schools are discussed in these two national contexts dominate what the media reports while the actual results and the scientifically grounded explanations for the results in the actual PISA publications are hardly communicated. In Germany, there is a long tradition also in pedagogical discourse of equating the speaking of languages other than standard German with deficits (Müller, 2022, pp. 90–91). In Finland, as shown above, equality – especially with respect to socio-economic background – is an idea that has dominated pedagogical debate and reform.

Possibly, a reluctance to label certain groups is a reason for immigrant background not being made explicit in the Finnish reporting. This may be due to the fact that since the introduction of basic education for all students and also within the current core curriculum (EDUFI, 2014), there has been a strong emphasis on equality, meaning that all students should have the same educational possibilities. However, in Finland, this has resulted in teachers not wanting to single out students with different backgrounds, even when differentiation would be useful for the student. Unfortunately, this can lead to ignoring the different needs and vulnerabilities students may have, which can actually lead to the education system failing many students and making the school unequal for them.<sup>28</sup>

A similar reluctance to label groups might also be responsible for the fact that the socio-economic background is hardly illuminated in the German media.

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28 In some ways this can be compared to what has been described as color-blind racism in the US-American context (Bonilla-Silva, 2003).

This reluctance may not be unfounded as the above discussed core dilemma presented in vulnerability theory, i. e., pointing out individuals as vulnerable, shows. Pointing out certain individuals and groups as vulnerable can have the effect of increasing paternalistic measures directed at them instead of enabling participation. Nevertheless, in our view reluctance needs to be put aside to allow for differentiated reports on problems and challenges in the school system and how they relate to wider circumstances in society.

If the media take up the PISA survey as a topic, they have a responsibility to report its main findings to the general public as most newspaper readers will not read the original publications. Furthermore, depending on the genre the media can and should take a critical stance to the survey – after having reported its main results. What our analysis shows for this round of reports in both Germany and Finland is that the recurring PISA survey was presented as some kind of international competition of educational systems through the use of metaphors like ‘competition’ (Fin. ‘kilpailu’) or phrases like “Can Germany keep up?” (Ger. “Kann Deutschland mithalten?”). In the case of some articles in the German media, students with an immigrant background were then constructed as the problem of the educational system and blamed for overall lower comparative performance of German students in this international competition.

Instead of letting this happen and thus making individuals who possibly are vulnerable even more vulnerable by blaming them, journalists should reflect on their responsibility and consider how they label groups, individuals and name problems. The authors of the original PISA publications have found many ways of doing this without a victimization of individuals. Although students are categorized into different groups for statistical purposes, the main language of the PISA publications stresses students’ individuality and capabilities, for example through headlines like “What students know and can do in reading” or “Where all students can succeed”.

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## **“I’m not that Chinese” – (Co-)constructing National Identity in Interaction with a Third Culture Individual**

### **Introduction**

Processes of globalization have resulted in the increased mobility of goods, services, and people across the world (Appadurai, 1996), and as a result, “globalization is not only a descriptor of an era, but also the dominant logic of many people’s lives” (Moore & Barker, 2012, p. 553). This includes third culture individuals, commonly defined as “a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture” (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, p. 13; Moore & Barker, 2012). Previous research on such individuals has shown that the development of their sense of identity is often a difficult process (Fail et al., 2004; Gilbert, 2008; Moore & Barker, 2012; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009), including the development of their sense of national identity, as they mostly grow up in a country other than their “passport country” (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). However, there is limited qualitative research on the experiences and sense making processes of third culture individuals as told from their own perspectives (Purnell & Hoban, 2014).

In this contribution, I illustrate the construction of the sense of (national) identity of a third culture individual in the form of a case study on Laura (pseudonym), a married mother of one who was born in Hong Kong in the 1960s and raised in Alberta, Canada. On the basis of a semi-structured interview that I conducted with Laura as part of a broader research project, I examine how Laura makes sense of and constructs her identity from a micro-level discourse analytical perspective. More specifically, I focus on the national identity categories ‘Chinese’ and ‘Canadian’ to examine how and when they are used, which characteristics are ascribed to them, and how she positions herself in relation to them throughout the interview. In doing so, I aim to highlight how these national identity categories are co-constructed within the interactional context of the research interview and how these processes of categorization function as manifestations of vulnerability (Fineman, 2008; Fineman, 2010) in interaction,