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Positive stances toward cultural and linguistic diversity in Finnish schools

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This study examined students' (N = 659) and teachers' (N = 74) stances toward linguistic and cultural diversity in Finland after national educational policy reforms. The students' and teachers' stances were positive, and the students felt appreciated at school; however, differences were found based on the gender, age, and first language of the students and between teacher groups. Positive stances toward languages and language use seemed to decrease with age, and older students and students with other L1 than Finnish had a lower sense of belonging. Targeted attention should be paid to further increasing culturally sustaining and linguistically responsive school cultures.

Keywords: culturally sustaining pedagogy, linguistically responsive teaching, teachers, students, educational reform

1 Introduction

Recent reports from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) show that there is often a gap in learning outcomes between students with migration background¹ and their native peers (2019). In addition, in some countries, such as Finland, in general, girls seem to outperform boys in their school success, although there is variation within groups based on e.g.

¹ In this article, we use the term students with migration background to refer to the students who themselves or their both parents have been born abroad. However, we acknowledge that these kind of categorizations are never neutral and without problems, and students with migration backgrounds form a heterogeneous group. Furthermore, there is variation in, e.g. the sense of belonging of the students from different ethnic backgrounds (see e.g. Alisaari & Kilpi-Jakonen, 2022) as well as some issues, e.g. related to educational challenges and sense of belonging that are often similar to the members of this group.

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socioeconomic backgrounds (Leino et al., 2019). Thus, to create opportunities for learning and educational achievement for all students, more information on certain development points is needed. For example, attention should be paid to fostering culturally sustaining and linguistically responsive school cultures to support students' identities, strengthen their sense of belonging, engage them more actively in literacy practices, and enhance learning in general (Baysu et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lucas & Villegas, 2013).

Previous research on teachers' perspectives of linguistic responsiveness has indicated that while teachers generally have positive attitudes toward linguistic diversity, some are prejudiced toward students with migration backgrounds, and many teachers' are still developing the pedagogical skills and knowledge needed to support linguistically diverse students (see e.g., Alisaari & Heikkola, 2020; Alisaari et al., 2019; Iversen, 2019; Lundberg, 2019; Repo, 2020; Rodriguez-Izquierdo et al., 2020; Sullivan, 2016). Little is known about students' views toward linguistic diversity in schools; however, studies focusing on culturally sustaining school cultures have indicated that students' perceptions of their school's climate and their sense of belonging are intertwined with both their well-being and their academic outcomes (Baysu et al., 2016; Celeste et al., 2019; Fredricks et al., 2004; Govorova et al., 2020; Heikamp et al., 2020; Schachner et al., 2019).

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989, Article 29) requires that educational institutions should respect every child's cultural identity, language, and values to enable them to develop their "personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential". This survey-based study investigates students' (N = 659) and teachers' (N = 74) stances toward linguistic and cultural diversity in order to provide information for developing school cultures that can provide students with a strong starting point for further educational opportunities and achievements, which can, in turn, improve their overall quality of life. This topic has been relatively well studied in Finland (Aalto, 2019; Alisaari et al., 2019; Repo, 2020; Harju-Autti & Sinkkonen, 2020); however, the data for these aforementioned studies were gathered slightly before or immediately after the introduction of the significantly changed national educational policy that advocates for valuing linguistic and cultural diversity (Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2014, see in detail section 3). After the grassroots implication of these policies, there remains a gap in understanding teachers' and students' current stances regarding linguistic and cultural diversity, as well as where further development is still needed. This study aims to provide up-to-date information to fill this gap and offer recommendations for the development of the next set of curricular reforms. Additionally, these recommendations can possibly be implemented in other contexts as well. Furthermore, previous studies have indicated that in Finland, different background and intersecting factors, e.g. such as students' gender or language background or teachers' gender, their active years of teaching and their teaching areas, impact students' academic success and well-being and teachers' stances² toward linguistic and cultural diversity (Kauppinen & Marjanen, 2020; Kimanen

² We define *stances* as a combination of knowledge, attitudes and understandings.

et al., 2019; Leino et al. 2019; Vigren, et al., 2022). Thus, the present study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1a. What stances do students from various backgrounds (age, gender and first languages) have toward cultural and linguistic diversity?
- 1b. How do students from various backgrounds (age, gender and first languages) perceive themselves, their sense of belonging, and language learning in culturally and linguistically diverse school communities?
2. What stances do teachers have toward linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogy?

2 Culturally sustaining and linguistically responsive school cultures

The design of this study was prompted by previous studies on how schools' cultures and students' sense of belonging affect students' well-being and academic success. The study is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of culturally sustaining and linguistically responsive pedagogy, which also informed the survey items. These frameworks are presented in the following subsections.

2.1 Culturally sustaining school practices and students' well-being and academic success

As schools become more culturally and linguistically diverse, it is essential that diversity is approached in ways that allow every student to succeed and feel a sense of belonging (Schachner et al., 2019). Here, we focus on those aspects of encountering cultural diversity at school that guided the design of the survey instruments.

Students should be empowered "intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, pp. 16–17), and pluralism should be fostered by enabling students to sustain their own cultural practices while simultaneously developing competence in the majority culture (Paris & Alim, 2014). Ladson-Billings (1994) described this as culturally responsive pedagogy, whereas Paris and Alim (2014) defined this kind of pedagogy as culturally sustaining; critical pedagogy that aims to create classroom settings where all students are considered valuable and feel a sense of belonging. These types of pedagogical interventions seem to have a positive effect on the educational potential of students, in particular those at risk of marginalization (Dee & Penner, 2017).

A strong sense of belonging can positively influence students' well-being and learning outcomes (Govorova et al., 2020; Heikamp, et al., 2020; Schachner et al., 2019). When students feel they belong to their school community, they may be more motivated to learn (Fredricks et al., 2004). Furthermore, classrooms that have high emotional, instructional and organisational quality support students' engagement (Virtanen et al., 2015). Thus, a positive school climate is related to better academic outcomes, especially for immigrant and minoritized young people (Schachner et al., 2019). Importantly, students also suffer less from bullying when they feel that they belong and are accepted members in their school (Govorova et al., 2020), as well as when the school has a positive diversity climate, meaning that the school promotes positive intergroup contacts and inclusion as

well as embraces students' diverse backgrounds as a resource (Heikamp et al., 2020).

In a culturally sustaining school culture, everyone is accepted and diverse backgrounds are acknowledged and valued. However, this should not lead to color-blindness or education as an assimilative praxis, but culturally sustaining school critically observes and dismantles prejudices and power structures that exist in our society and in school. This means acknowledging that students' lives are affected by intersecting factors, and therefore, the societal hierarchies that schooling may reproduce need to be recognized, understood, and negotiated (Anya, 2021; Jennings & Lynn, 2005). Furthermore, it promotes positive relationships among diverse students and teachers, which is crucial in supporting students' academic outcomes and well-being (Heikamp et al., 2020). Indeed, research has found that positive interaction and relationship with teachers can affect the well-being and sense of belonging of students with migration background in particular (Heikamp et al., 2020). Moreover, when all students regardless of their backgrounds perceive that everyone is treated equally at school, students with migration background, especially adolescents over 15 years old, may perform better academically due to better engagement (Baysu et al., 2016). Thus, it is important to implement pedagogies that reduce identity threat for minorities by supporting identity-safe environments and fair treatment for all students (see also Baysu et al., 2016; Heikamp et al., 2020).

Conversely, when students' identities are devalued or rejected at school, they may become academically disengaged (Baysu et al., 2011). Thus, perceived discrimination at school may negatively affect minoritized students' success (Baysu et al., 2016); minoritized students who experience teacher discrimination may not perceive that they belong at their school, which may decrease their academic engagement (Heikamp et al., 2020). Fortunately, culturally responsive approaches that support perceived equality and inclusion as well as cultural pluralism have been found to be beneficial for all students in diverse schools (Schachner et al., 2019).

2.2 Linguistically responsive school culture

Language plays an important role in interactions and socialization into the linguistic and cultural behaviors of different communities (de Jong, 2011). Linguistically responsive pedagogy aims to recognize this essential role of language in learning, interaction, identity development, and socialization (Lucas & Villegas, 2013; see also EDUFI, 2014). In this subsection, we focus on those aspects of the linguistically responsive teaching framework that guided the survey instruments.

Linguistically responsive teachers are aware of the interrelatedness of language, culture, and identity (Cummins, 2001), and they acknowledge that students' sense of belonging might depend on the power issues and language hierarchies associated with speaking certain languages (de Jong & Harper, 2011). Thus, advocating for the equality of all languages and dialects and viewing these as valuable resources in learning is essential. Indeed, many studies have indicated that nurturing students' first languages has a significant effect on their ability to

learn other languages and subjects, as well as on their later success in the labor market (see e.g., Agirdag, 2014; Agirdag & Vanlaar, 2018; Ganuza & Hedman, 2018; Glick & White, 2003).

A linguistically responsive teacher should advocate for better educational opportunities for students with migration background (Lucas & Villegas, 2013), as these students face many educational disadvantages, such as lower academic outcomes, a higher risk of leaving school early (OECD, 2015), and, especially in Finland, fewer educational opportunities compared to their majority peers (Borgna, 2017; Kalalahti et al., 2019; Malin & Kilpi-Jakonen, 2020). Moreover, these disadvantages remain even when controlling for socioeconomic factors and parents' cultural capital (Heath & Cheung, 2007; Heath et al., 2008). Thus, teachers' advocacy for students with migration background is needed both pedagogically and for better interpersonal and structural opportunities (Gray et al., 2018).

For linguistically responsive teachers, also pedagogical skills and knowledge of students' backgrounds, such as their first languages or linguistic competences, are essential (Lucas & Villegas, 2013). This relates to teachers' abilities to recognize the challenges the language of instruction may cause learners (Cummins, 2001; Gibbons, 2014; Lucas & Villegas, 2013) and subsequently scaffold instruction so learners can perform academic tasks at cognitive and language levels they could not complete alone (Gibbons, 2014; Villegas et al., 2018). For instance, teachers can use genre-based pedagogy to enhance students' genre awareness as well as their academic literacy in learning different subjects (Rose & Martin, 2012; Yi Lo & Jeong, 2018). Further, students' attitudes towards linguistic and cultural diversity can be affected by language-aware policies or methods (see Sierens et al., 2018, for a meta-analysis). In this study, we consider linguistically responsive pedagogy as an approach that aims at creating an emotionally safe school culture where all students value languages, language learning and linguistic diversity, are aware of the role that language plays in academic success, and feel comfortable using different languages (see also Cummins, 2001, in press; Duarte, 2019; Gorter & Elocena, 2020). To conclude, in this study, we state that linguistically responsive pedagogy is mediated, for instance, through taking into account the principles of language learning, explicitly scaffolding academic language development and considering multilingualism as a resource.

3 Context of the study

This study was conducted in Finland, a Northern European country with 5.5 million inhabitants. Finland is officially a bilingual country with two national languages, Finnish and Swedish; about 5% speak Swedish as their first language (Official Statistics of Finland, 2020). In addition, Sami is an official language in Finland's northern municipalities, while Romani, Karelian, and both Finnish and Finnish-Swedish Sign Language are nationally recognized minority languages. Moreover, migration has further diversified the languages spoken in Finland: Russian, Arabic, Estonian, and Somali are among the most spoken new languages in Finland (Statistics Finland, 2021). In Finland, all groups have a constitutional right to maintain and develop their own languages, but in practice, not all languages are viewed as having equal status or value for learning (Alisaari et al., 2019).

As already mentioned, there is a significant gap between the learning outcomes of native Finnish students and first- and second-generation migrant students, as well as between boys and girls (Leino et al., 2019). However, the core curriculum for basic education in Finland provides a structure for implementing culturally sustaining and linguistically responsive teaching (Alisaari, 2020; EDUFI, 2014). For example, the curriculum requires every teacher to acknowledge the role of language in learning and identity construction and advocates for using students' entire linguistic repertoire as a resource for learning (EDUFI, 2014). Furthermore, according to the curriculum, teachers are expected to pay attention to the linguistic demands embedded in learning tasks and subject-specific literacy skills to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to succeed, no matter what their linguistic or cultural backgrounds may be. In sum, the curriculum aligns with the theoretical understandings of this study.

In Finland, recent studies, conducted either slightly before or just after the curriculum reform, have shown that teachers have different stances toward culturally and linguistically diverse learners: Some have found that teachers have a positive stance toward multilingual students (Alisaari et al., 2021), while in others some teachers were willing to advocate for better opportunities for their learners, but others demonstrated prejudices (Alisaari et al., 2019; Repo, 2020). Further studies have observed teachers demonstrating an "us and them" attitude in terms of cultural and linguistic practices (Tarnanen & Palviainen, 2018). Globally, comparable studies have indicated a similar variation in teachers', including those in pre-service, attitudes about culturally and linguistically diverse learners (de Abreu & Hale, 2014; Iversen, 2019; Lundberg, 2019; Rodriguez-Izquierdo et al., 2020; Sullivan, 2016).

Previous studies have also indicated that Finnish teachers have varying levels of knowledge regarding how language learning influences the learning of other subjects, and they often do not have the knowledge or materials to implement linguistically responsive pedagogy (Alisaari & Heikkola, 2020; Alisaari et al., 2019; Harju-Autti & Sinkkonen, 2020; Heikkola et al., 2022; Repo, 2020). Moreover, many Finnish teachers' beliefs seem to reflect monolingual ideologies, even when they are aware that they should be practicing multilingual pedagogies (Alisaari et al., 2019; Harju-Autti & Sinkkonen, 2020; Repo, 2020; Tarnanen & Palviainen, 2018); similar results have been found in other countries (Iversen, 2019; Lundberg, 2019; Rodriguez-Izquierdo et al., 2020; Sullivan, 2016).

There are only a few studies available concerning students' perceptions of Finnish school culture. According to the School Health Promotion Studies 2017 Finland (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2018), migration background has an impact on both the feeling of belonging and the likelihood of being bullied or being discriminated against. In 2017, 8.6% of the native Finnish students said they did not feel they belonged to their school community, compared to 21.3% of the students with migration background. A similar tendency was observed regarding bullying and discrimination, with 4.5% of the Finnish students and 19.4% of the students with migration background reported being bullied at least once per week, and 23.6% and 44.9%, respectively, having experienced discrimination. Similar results have been reported worldwide. For example, Maynard and colleagues (2016) examined the prevalence and correlations of

bullying victimization among young migrants in the United States (N = 12,098). Their findings indicated that young migrants were more likely to be victims of bullying than native-born young people. Furthermore, young migrants who experienced bullying were more likely to report interpersonal, socio-emotional, health, and even substance abuse problems. Because issues related to migration background are major factors related to students' sense of belonging and safety in schools (Zacheus, 2019), effective solutions, such as culturally sustaining pedagogy, need to be implemented.

4 Methods

4.1 Survey, participants and data collection

The data for the present study were collected via two surveys (one for teachers and one for students) between the fall of 2019 and the spring of 2020 in primary (grades 3–6) and secondary (grades 7–9) schools with linguistic diversity in Southern Finland. The study was committed to complying with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation and the research ethics principles of the University of Turku. The surveys were conducted anonymously; only the most necessary identification data were collected. The research permit was gained at municipal, school and guardian levels. Initially, 11 schools were asked to participate in the study; of these, nine were interested and available, while two declined due to time constraints. The school principals shared the information about the study with the teachers, then the researcher was given the contact information of the teachers who were interested in participating with their student groups. The teachers sent an electronic note prepared by the researcher to the students' guardians, who either agreed or refused to permit their child to be included in the study. Only five guardians did not give permission for their child to participate. Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents could discontinue filling out the questionnaire if they wished.

The survey items were designed based on the theoretical framework of culturally sustaining and linguistically responsive pedagogies (see the theory section of this article) in order to examine teachers' and students' stances toward linguistic and cultural diversity and students' experiences within their school's culture. For instance, stances towards linguistically responsive pedagogy were considered along three aspects: language learning, everyday language vs. academic language, and multilingualism. Culturally responsive pedagogy was reflected, for example, from the perspectives of sense of belonging and school atmosphere. All survey items were Likert scale statements (20 for students, 15 for teachers). In the student survey, five items explored students' stances toward cultural and linguistic diversity, seven items their self-appreciation and perceptions of school culture, and eight items their language awareness. The 15 items in the teacher survey explored the teachers' stances toward culturally sustaining and linguistically responsive pedagogy in an intertwined manner. The survey items for both surveys are presented in full in the results section (see Tables 3, 4, and 5). The student survey was piloted with 56 nine-year-old students and 28 thirteen-year-old-students, and the teacher survey was piloted with three teachers; the only modification made based on the pilot results was the addition

of a step to the Likert scale (“neither agree nor disagree”) in order to give the students and teachers more options.

After the pilot, a total of 659 students (ages 9–15; grades 3–9; 299 males, 360 females) participated in the study, 25.2% ($n = 133$) of whom spoke languages other than Finnish (LOTF) as their first language (see Table 1). In addition, 74 teachers from the same schools participated in the research (20 males, 54 females; mean (M) age 40.4, standard deviation (SD) 9.9), all of whom were native Finnish speakers (NFL) (Table 2). The schools were chosen due to the high concentration of students with migration backgrounds in their surrounding areas and their multicultural and multilingual diversity. All of the students with migration background had lived at least one whole school year in Finland.

While gathering the data from the students, a researcher and a teacher were both present in the classroom. The questionnaire was designed to be student friendly by using emojis representing *fully disagree* (1), *partly disagree* (2), *neither agree nor disagree* (3), *partly agree* (4), and *fully agree* (5). Furthermore, even though all data collection was conducted in Finnish, the questions were created with developing language proficiency in mind: when formulating questions, abstract idiomatic expressions and complex sentence structures were avoided and sentences formulated to be as clear and accessible to the participants as possible. Additionally, before the survey was distributed, the researcher explained with examples how to answer the items. The same example statements were presented to each group of student participants, and all participants indicated understanding that they were to circle one emoji per statement to represent their opinion. In the teacher survey, the Likert scale options were the same as for students (without the emojis).

Both surveys, the coding, and the analysis were conducted in Finnish. The results were translated into English by the authors. In addition to the actual survey items, demographic data about the students and teachers was also collected. Students were asked for their a) grade, b) gender (girl, boy or other), and c) first languages. Teachers’ background information included a) gender (female, male, other), b) age, c) active years of teaching, and d) teaching area (class teacher for grades 1–6 or subject teacher for grades 7–9).

4.2 Data analysis

Before the data analysis, 20 survey forms were removed from the study based on incomplete responses or negligence errors, such as two answers for one question or missing answers. Both teachers (2) and students (18) had negligence errors in their questionnaires. Altogether, 667 students participated in the study, eight who described their gender as “other”. These students’ responses were removed from the analysis due to statistical reasons; however, the frequencies of their responses were examined manually, and they were found to be in line with those of the other respondents with no deviations. In the final analysis, the number of student participants was 659. Table 1 presents the distribution of the student participants based on age, gender, and first language.

Table 1. Student Participants

Age	Girls (N)	Boys (N)	Total (N)	First language Finnish, NFL (N)	First language other than Finnish, LOTF (N)
9	29	16	45	39	6
10	63	40	103	76	27
11	71	69	140	114	26
12	89	81	170	125	45
13	59	44	103	85	18
14	42	35	77	66	11
15	7	14	21	21	0
Total	360	299	659	526	133

All the teacher participants were native Finnish speakers. The teacher participants and the subjects they taught are reported in Table 2. Most of the subject teachers were language teachers, which might have had an effect on their awareness related to linguistically responsive teaching.

Table 2. Teacher Participants

	N	Age (M)	Age (SD)	Years of teaching experience (M)	Years of teaching experience (SD)
Class teachers					
(grades1–6)	44	38.1	10.3	12.0	10.3
Female class teachers	31	38.6	10.6	11.7	10.6
Male class teachers	13	41	9.9	16	10.2
Subject teachers					
(grades 7–9)	30	42.0	9.0	14.6	9.0
Female subject teachers *	24	41.8	9.7	15	8.9
Male subject teachers **	6	42.8	4.1	12.8	8.2
Total	74	40.4	10.0	13.6	10

* art (2), natural sciences (7), home economics (1), languages (15), history (1), religion and life stance education (3), PE and health education (2)

**natural sciences (3), crafts (1), history (1), student counseling (1)

The sample reflects the general age distribution of teachers in Finland. With regard to gender, 77% of classroom teachers in Finland are women, while 23% are men (Honkala & Komppa, 2020); however, in this study, the proportion of male class teachers was 42%. The subject teachers represented the following subjects: arts and crafts, home economics, natural sciences, languages (Finnish, German,

English, Swedish, French), religion and worldview education, student counseling, physical education, and health education.

We examined whether responses differed between the different student (gender, first language) and teacher groups (gender, teaching area). As a background factor, we asked students about their first language instead of whether they had an immigrant background. We acknowledge it can be problematic to categorize students based on these determinants; however, we argue that it is relevant for exploring possible development points related to school culture. Furthermore, as previous studies have indicated, in Finland there are significant differences in female and male teachers' stances on diversity (see e.g., Kimanen et al., 2019), as well as among different teaching areas (Vigren et al., 2022), thus there was a need to further examine this issue.

All the responses were analyzed with IBM SPSS 27. In the students' responses, the group main effect was determined by the multivariate general linear model (statements 1–10 / 11–20) as dependent variables; gender, age, and first language as co-variables). Age groups were examined, and each class formed one age group, resulting in seven different groups based on age. Finally, analyses of variance (one-way ANOVAs) were conducted (statements 1–10 / 11–20) as dependent variables; gender, age, and first language as factors).

When analyzing the teachers' responses, the group main effect for gender and class teacher/subject teacher was determined by the multivariate general linear model (statements 1–15 as dependent variables; gender, age, active years of teaching, and class teacher/subject teacher as co-variables). Furthermore, one-way ANOVAs were calculated (statements 1–15 as dependent variables; gender, age, active years of teaching, and class teacher/subject teacher as factors). Due to strict privacy issues, the survey forms did not reveal which student groups belonged to which teacher. Thus, we were not able to draw connections between students and teachers.

5 Results and discussion

This section presents the main findings of this study, beginning with those related to students' stances toward cultural diversity, their perceptions of themselves, and their sense of belonging, then proceeding to students' stances toward languages and language learning and their awareness of language. Finally, we interpret how the teachers' stances may be reflected in their responses.

5.1 Students' stances toward cultural diversity, perceptions of themselves, and sense of belonging

For clarity, the results are reported for the whole group first, then they are disaggregated by age, gender, and language. When looking at the students' stances toward cultural diversity, perceptions of themselves, and sense of belonging, overall, students' perceptions reflected the current theoretical understanding of a culturally sustaining school culture (see Table 3): on the Likert scale (1–5, with 1 being the most negative), the students consistently gave answers

of 4 and above. It should be noted that statements 8 and 9 were reversed statements, so the optimal answer was closer to 1 than 5; in these statements, the means were 2 and 1.5, respectively. The reasons for such positive responses cannot be deduced due to the non-recurrent data collection. The data were gathered at schools with relatively diverse student populations, and it may be that experiences with diversity positively affected the students' stances. Previous studies have shown some contradictory results related to the relationship between schools' diverse student populations and sense of belonging. For example, a high proportion of students with ethnic minority backgrounds at school have been found to be connected with lower sense of belonging as well as lower educational outcomes in some studies (Rjosk et al., 2017; Veerman & Dronkers, 2016), whereas in some studies, higher proportion of students with migration backgrounds have been positively associated with math scores for students from Turkish and Moroccan origin (Peetsma et al., 2006). However, further studies are needed in Finland to compare these results with those from schools with less diverse populations in order to examine the effect experiences with diversity (or other factors) may have on students' responses.

Table 3. The Means, Standard Deviations, and Significance Levels of Individual Statements Concerning Students' (N = 659) Perceptions of Culturally Responsive School Culture

	M	SD	significance level for gender*	significance level for age*	significance level for first language*
1. I can be the way I want to be at school.	4.4	0.82			F(1,658) = 5.92, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.03$ LOTFs (M = 4.3, SD = 1.0) vs. NFLs (M = 4.5, SD = 0.8)
2. Other students think that I'm OK to deal with.	4.1	0.80			F(1,658) = 5.92, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.03$ LOTFs (M = 4.4, SD = 0.8) vs. NFLs (M = 4.2, SD = 0.7)
3. I have skills in many things.	4.1	0.84			
4. I think I'm OK.	4.3	0.78			

5. We have a good group spirit at school.	4.1	0.91			F(1,658) = 5.49, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.03$ LOTFs (M = 4.2, SD = 0.8) vs. NFLs (M = 4.0, SD = 1.0)
6. I feel I'm part of our class.	4.5	0.80		F(1,658) = 2.94, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.07$ 9-year-olds (M = 4.7, SD = 0.7) vs. 15-year-olds (M = 4.2, SD 1.3)	F(1,658) = 4.27, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.02$ LOTFs (M = 4.3, SD = 0.8) vs. NFLs (M = 4.5, SD = 0.8)
7. There's no bullying in our class.	4.0	1.05			
8. I get irritated by different speaking styles (accent, grammar mistakes). (R)	2.0	1.20	F(1,658) = 16.66, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.04$ boys (M = 2.1, SD = 1.3) vs. girls (M = 1.8, SD = 1.0)		
9. I get irritated by other people's different looks. (R)	1.5	0.90			
10. I think everyone should have the right to be the way they want to be.	4.7	0.68			

R = Reversed item

*Reported, if significant

Likert Scale 1-5, with 1 being the most negative and 5 the most positive

Overall, the students acknowledged the value of individual and cultural diversity and considered themselves as valuable and accepted members of their schools (see Table 4). According to students' answers, it seemed there was no significant bullying in the classrooms, which contradicts previous studies (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2018; Zacheus, 2019). Thus, it seems that a higher sense of belonging might prevent bullying, as has also been shown by Govorova and colleagues (2020). However, it might also be that the students in our study have not told about bullying, if they have been afraid that the teachers might see the results of the survey and start some procedures on bullying. This has been shown to happen especially with students in vulnerable positions in earlier research conducted in Finland (Huilla & Juvonen, 2020). Importantly, most of the

participants in our study believed that everyone should have the right to be the way they want to be. These results reflect the ideas that culturally sustaining pedagogy (Cummins, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994) promote: Everyone is valuable and should be treated equally, regardless of their background. Thus, it might also be that the results indicating that there were no significant bullying at school, would be accurate.

However, when looking at the results more closely, statistically significant differences were found for the impact of gender, age, and first language for all covariates. Male students were more irritated by different ways of speaking than females. Previous dialectical studies have shown that men are more attached to regional spoken languages than women, and that using a certain dialect or accent can be connected to a feeling of belonging to a certain group of people (Mantila, 2004). Thus, even though the effect size of our result is relatively small, it indicates that there are students who would benefit from explicit discussions about diversity and variations in accents.

The students' ages also had a significant effect on their sense of belonging. In all age groups (9–15), the answers were positive, and the means for different age groups were rather high. However, answers became gradually less positive as age increased, with the lowest scores given by the 15-year-old students. Furthermore, most of the native Finnish speakers (NFL) felt they could be the way they wanted at school and had a stronger sense of belonging than the students that spoke languages other than Finnish (LOTF). Interestingly, the LOTF students had more self-appreciation and rated their school atmosphere higher than the NFL students. There might be a connection between the positively experienced school atmosphere and high motivation level of the students with migration background (see e.g., Räisänen & Kivirauma, 2011); however, this connection could not be examined with our data and would require further study.

5.2 Students' stances toward languages and language learning and their language awareness and perceptions of multilingualism

The students' answers related to their stances toward languages and language learning and their language awareness and perceptions of multilingualism were mainly between 3 (neither agree nor disagree) and 4 (partly agree; see Table 4), thus, they had relatively positive stances toward languages and language learning, and they were somewhat aware of the differences between academic and everyday language, and language genres. Students' positive stances may be due to the current core curriculum, which requires that positive attitudes toward languages are reinforced among students, having been implemented appropriately. Furthermore, the diverse school environments might have positively impacted students' stances. Still, more research is needed to affirm these claims. However, the students were relatively hesitant to rate whether or not they would consider themselves multilingual, which contradicts the current theoretical and curricular understandings of multilingualism (Aronin & Singleton, 2019; EDUFI, 2014).

Table 4. The Means, Standard Deviations, and Significance Levels of Individual Statements Concerning Students' (N = 659) Stances Toward Languages and Language Learning and Their Language Awareness and Perceptions of Multilingualism

	M	SD	significance level for gender*	significance level for age*	significance level for home language*
11. I find languages interesting.	4.1	0.93			F(1,658) = 10.18, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.02$ LOTFs (M = 4.4, SD = 0.8) vs. NFLs (M = 4.0, SD = 1.0)
12. I think it is fun to play with language (riddles, word games, code languages, pantomimes).	3.8	1.06	F(1,658) = 10.28, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.02$ boys (M = 3.7, SD = 1.1) vs. girls (M = 4.0, SD = 1.0)	F(1,658) = 49.21, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.08$ 9-year-olds (M = 4.3, SD = 0.8) vs. 15-year-olds (M = 2.9, SD = 1.0)	F(1,658) = 10.28, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.02$ LOTFs (M = 4.1, SD = 1.0) vs. NFLs (M = 3.7, SD = 1.0)
13. I find it nice that when learning languages you can speak the languages in real life situations.	4.0	1.03	F(1,658) = 10.46, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.01$ boys (M = 3.8, SD = 1.1) vs. girls (M = 4.1, SD = 1.0)	F(1,658) = 12.61, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.03$ 9-year-olds (M = 4.3, SD = 1.0) vs. 15-year-olds (M = 3.6, SD = 1.2)	F(1,658) = 10.47, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.01$ LOTFs (M = 4.3, SD = 1.0) vs. NFLs (M = 3.9, SD = 1.0)
14. The language in my study books differs from the language I use with my friends.	3.7	1.22		F(1,658) = 6.52, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.57$ 9-year-olds (M = 3.5, SD = 1.4) vs. 15-year-olds (M = 4.4, SD = 0.9)	
15. It is easy to find important information in study books.	3.9	0.85			
16. I know how the languages of ads, chats, TV shows, and textbooks, for example, differ from one another.	4.1	0.91		F(1,658) = 16.67, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.04$ 9-year-olds (M = 3.7, SD = 1.0) vs. 15-year-olds (M = 4.2, SD = 1.0)	

17. In my opinion, multilingualism means that one has excellent commands of all the languages he/she uses.	2.8	1.13	F(1,658) = 8.59, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.01$ boys (M = 3.0, SD = 1.0) vs. girls (M = 2.7, SD = 1.2)	F(1,658) = 18.53, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.05$ 9-year-olds (M = 3.0, SD = 1.1) vs. 15-year-olds (M = 2.5, SD = 1.0)	F(1,658) = 17.61, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.03$ LOTFs (M = 2.7, SD = 1.1) vs. NFLs (M = 3.2, SD = 1.2)
18. I'm multilingual.	3.3	1.20	F(1,658) = 7.94, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.01$ boys (M = 3.5, SD = 1.1) vs. girls (M = 3.2, SD = 1.3)	F(1,658) = 16.78, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.02$ 9-year-olds (M = 3.0, SD = 1.0) vs. 15-year-olds (M = 3.8, SD = 1.3)	F(1,658) = 54.16, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.08$ LOTFs (M = 4.0, SD=1.1) vs. NFLs (M=3.2, SD = 1.2)
19. All languages are equal.	4.4	0.94	F(1,658) = 19.53, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.03$ boys (M = 4.3, SD = 1.0) vs. girls (M = 4.6, SD = 0.8)	F(1,658) = 15.66, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.03$ 9-year-olds (M = 4.6, SD = 0.8) vs. 15-year-olds (M = 3.9, SD = 1.4)	
20. I hear several different languages at my school.	3.4	1.23		F(1,658) = 16.48, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.05$ 9-year-olds (M = 2.7, SD = 1,2) vs. 15-year-olds (M = 3.6, SD = 1.1)	F(1,658) = 13.63, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.02$ LOTFs (M = 3.8, SD = 1.3) vs. NFLs (M = 3.3, SD = 1.2)

R = Reversed item

* Reported, if significant

Likert Scale 1-5, with 1 being the most negative and 5 the most positive

When examining the effects of age, gender, and first language on students' language-related responses, statistically significant differences were found for all co-variates. The less positive stances the boys, older students, and NFL students displayed toward playing with and using languages somewhat echo previous studies that have shown that girls seem to have better innate verbal abilities (Geary, 2010) and more motivation toward language learning (Bećirović, 2017) than boys. Moreover, previous studies have also shown that students lose their motivation for language learning as they age (Bećirović, 2017).

Furthermore, students' multiliteracy skills and their awareness of language genres were found to be stronger for older students than younger ones. This may simply indicate that experience leads to expertise; students who have read more textbooks are able to develop the language awareness needed to differentiate between academic and everyday language. Previous studies have shown that genre-based pedagogy effectively enhances students' genre awareness as well as their academic literacy (Rose & Martin, 2012; Yi Lo & Jeong, 2018). Indeed, according to the Finnish core curriculum for basic education (EDUFI, 2014), genre awareness is an essential part of learning different subjects at school; thus, based

on these results, the aims of the core curriculum seem to be realized, at least from the students' perspectives.

Logically, the older participants felt they were more multilingual than the younger ones, possibly because they had studied more foreign languages than the younger students, and they had spent more years studying those languages. Moreover, the boys perceived themselves as more multilingual than the girls, which might be related to experience with for example playing video games in English (see e.g., Jensen, 2017; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2014). Interestingly, according to a recent study, students who self-identify as multilingual have better educational attainment in all subjects (Fisher et al., 2020). Thus, it is important to develop all students' multilingual identities at school by means of, for example, multilingual identity-based pedagogical interventions (see e.g., Forbes et al., 2021).

Although all age groups found all languages interesting with an average of over 4 in each group, the younger students felt much more strongly than the older ones that all languages are equal. It could be that younger students do not perceive the power relations connected to language, or that older students encounter situations wherein language hierarchies are present more often (see e.g., Lucas & Villegas, 2013). Interestingly, the older students reported hearing fewer languages at school than the younger ones, while the LOTF students heard more languages at school. This might be related to the students' peer groups; in previous research, teachers have reported students with migration background spending most of their time with others of the same ethnicity (Alisaari et al., 2022).

5.3 Teachers' stances toward culturally sustaining and linguistically responsive pedagogy

When looking at the teachers' stances toward culturally sustaining and linguistically responsive pedagogy, the teachers' responses reflected the principles of linguistically responsive and culturally sustaining teaching (see Table 5). For example, almost all teacher respondents believed that the goal of teaching should be to help all students succeed equally, regardless of their first language, and they all wanted to work toward a future where culturally diverse individuals can have equally academic professions. These stances are in line with the principles of culturally sustaining and linguistically responsive pedagogies (Cummins, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lucas & Villegas, 2013) with regard to promoting equal educational opportunities to all students.

Although the teachers of this study did not consider themselves to be language teachers within their own subjects, which is a requirement of the Finnish national core curriculum (EDUFI, 2014) and one of the core principles of linguistically responsive pedagogy (Lucas & Villegas, 2013), they reported knowing the basic language features of the subjects they were teaching and having a fairly strong understanding of what kinds of exercises can contribute to language learning, indicating that their pedagogy might be linguistically responsive (Lucas & Villegas, 2011, 2013) and aligned with the requirements of the curriculum (EDUFI, 2014).

However, the teachers reported not having enough knowledge of their students' backgrounds which aligns with previous studies conducted in Finland (Alisaari & Heikkola, 2020; Harju-Autti & Sinkkonen, 2020; Repo, 2020). In addition, the teachers reported not having the necessary materials for implementing linguistically responsive pedagogy, which also resonates with previous studies (Aalto et al., 2009; Satokangas, 2020).

Table 5. The Means, Standard Deviations, and Significance Levels of Individual Statements (1-15) of the Teacher's Responses (N = 74)

	M	SD	significance level for gender*	significance level for class teacher / subject teacher*
1. I am familiar with the concepts of linguistically responsive pedagogy and language awareness.	3.5	1.14	$F(1,73) = 10.69, p < 0.05, d = 0.12$ males (M = 2.8, SD = 1.3) vs. females (M = 3.8, SD = 0.9)	
2. There is enough material available for teaching linguistically responsive pedagogy. (R)	2.9	0.80		
3. Some languages are more important than others.	3.0	1.33	$F(1,73) = 5.72, p < 0.05, d = 0.08$ males (M = 3.7, SD = 1.2) vs. females (M = 2.9, SD = 1.3)	
4. I plan my teaching so that I take into account the language and cultural background of my students.	4.0	0.80		
5. I don't think it is necessary for all students to become familiar with languages and cultures other than what is taught at school. (R)	1.9	1.20		
6. My students can speak languages other than Finnish in my lessons.	4.0	1.13		
7. The goal of teaching should be that all the students can succeed, regardless of their first language.	4.7	0.70		
8. I want to work towards a future where culturally diverse individuals can have equally academic professions.	4.5	0.83		

9. I don't have enough knowledge of what languages my students speak with their families or how long they have been in Finland.	2.8	1.40		F(1,73) = 16.27, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.16$ class teachers (M = 2.3, SD = 1.3) vs. subject teachers (M = 3.4, SD = 1.2)
10. I know what level of the Finnish language my students have achieved.	4.1	0.89		F(1,73) = 6.23, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.10$ class teachers (M = 4.4, SD = 0.7) vs. subject teachers (M = 3.8, SD = 1.3)
11. I consider myself a language teacher.	3.3	1.44	F(1,73) = 4.04, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.06$ males (M = 2.7, SD = 1.4 vs. females (M = 3.5, SD = 1.4)	
12. I know the typical language features of the subject I am teaching.	4.1	0.94		
13. I know what kind of exercises can contribute to language learning.	3.9	0.98		
14. I know concrete practices to help me modify the learning materials and language of teaching so that every student can understand the content.	3.6	1.00	F(1,73) = 5.74, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.05$ males (M = 3.5, SD = 1.0) vs. females (M = 4.0, SD = 0.9)	
15. I teach learning strategies and multiliteracies (ability to understand text, image, moving image, sound, symbols, etc.), among other activities.	4.4	0.80		

R = Reversed item

* Reported, if significant

Likert Scale: 1 = fully disagree, 2 = partly disagree, 3= not disagree nor agree, 4= partly agree, 5= fully agree

The significant differences between the different teacher groups' responses were based on gender and whether they were class or subject teachers ($p < 0.05$ for both co-variates). According to their answers, the female teachers seemed to agree with the principles of linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogy more often than males, and they considered themselves to be language teachers within their subjects more often than males. Further, female teachers appear to take more responsibility on the language learning for their students, as also suggested previously (Vigren et al., 2022).

Subject teachers' answers reflected that they had less background knowledge about their LOTF students than the class teachers, and they reported having less knowledge about their students' Finnish language levels than the class teachers. This is logical since subject teachers usually teach several different groups on a weekly basis and therefore only see their students for 1–4 classes a week whereas the class teachers are mainly responsible for all the study hours of one class of students. The results are also in line with the findings of previous studies (Harju-Autti & Sinkkonen, 2020; Kimanen et al., 2019; Vigren et al., 2022).

6 Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that the students who participated in the research experienced their school's atmosphere positively, and their stances toward cultural and linguistic diversity corresponded to the culturally sustaining and linguistically responsive theoretical understandings. Moreover, the teachers' responses supported the principles of these understandings. In general, our findings are more positive than those of previous studies that have been conducted in Finland concerning both students (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2018) and teachers (Alisaari et al., 2019; Harju-Autti & Sinkkonen, 2020; Repo, 2020; Tarnanen & Palviainen, 2018). This may indicate that the effects of linguistically and culturally responsible pedagogy, which has been required by the national core curriculum (EDUFI, 2014) since 2016, are already reflected in these results, or it might be due to the effort that has been put into teachers' professional development in Finland, especially in the particular area where the study was conducted (see Vaarala et al., 2021). However, as this was not an observation study, it might be that teachers' responses might have been affected by the phrasing of the questions in the survey in the way that they were so called socially correct answers. Additionally, the presence of the researcher in the classrooms might have affected to some of the respondents' (both teachers' and students') answers leading them to answer in a more "acceptable" way, although survey as a research method provides more anonymity to respondents compared for example with interview studies. Furthermore, since previous studies have shown some discrepancy between teachers' beliefs and practices (Borg, 2006), with this study, we are not able to conclude that also teachers' practices would support linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogy. Nevertheless, further research with larger sets of participants from broader geographical areas should be conducted to affirm the claims of this article, though the number of student participants of this study was relatively high (almost 700).

However, although stances toward cultural and linguistic diversity seemed to be positive, significant differences emerged when different background factors were examined, indicating that a culturally sustaining school culture does not manifest in everyone. For example, our results indicated a lower sense of belonging for LOTF students which is partly in line with previous studies that have shown that a notably higher percentage of students with migration background did not feel they belonged to their school community compared with their native peers (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2018). It must be noted that we included students' first languages rather than possible migration background as a factor; nevertheless, we can cautiously interpret these two groups as being relatively similar. However, in our study, the responses of the

LOTF students regarding their sense of belonging in Finnish schools were more positive than those given by students with migration background in previous studies (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2018). Additionally, since we did not explicitly ask questions related to ethnicity or socio-economic background, some aspects related to these issues might have stayed uncovered within this study and they should be better investigated in future studies.

Our results indicated that older students had a lower sense of belonging than younger ones. Previous studies have shown that a strong sense of belonging positively influences students' well-being and learning outcomes (Celeste et al., 2019; Govorova et al., 2020; Heikamp et al., 2020; Schachner et al., 2019), motivates them to learn (Fredricks et al., 2004), and engages them in learning (Virtanen et al., 2015) and particularly in literacy practices (Cummins, 2001). Especially for older students, perceived equal treatment at school seems to be of utmost importance in relation to how their sense of belonging affects their academic performance (Baysu et al., 2016). Thus, even a slightly decreased sense of belonging should be taken seriously, and further studies where, for example, data is gathered by means of interviewing different student groups are needed to examine what factors may be causing a lack of sense of unbelonging and how to prevent a decreased sense of belonging. Further, the boys seemed to be less interested in language use and have more negative attitudes toward people who spoke differently than the girls. These findings suggest that even more work on equality and language issues should be practiced at schools; by making a positive atmosphere a reality for every student, all students could feel a sense of belonging, which could positively affect every student's wellbeing and learning outcomes (Heikamp et al., 2020). Further, providing more knowledge to all students about the value of languages and language learning would positively impact students (Forbes et al., 2021), as conscious acts that support language equality could create a more equitable society.

Positive stances toward languages and language use seem to decrease with age. In Finland, the tendency to choose foreign languages other than English as elective classes has decreased, and the amount of language studies in general has diminished due to both students' choices and the languages available for them to choose from (Kyckling et al., 2019; Vaarala et al., 2021). Thus, pedagogical solutions that could create interest in languages, as well as policy-level and pedagogical actions that could increase both curiosity about and motivation to study languages, should be considered. Although many Finnish educational policies are already progressive, there is still a great need for linguistically responsive pedagogy in which language awareness is invoked and the value of all languages and multilingualism is reinforced.

Furthermore, it was clearly shown in this study that females had more positive attitudes about languages. Based on our experiences as teacher educators, less than one percent of the participants in professional learning sessions for in-service teachers are male. Additionally, it seemed that subject teachers in Finland were not adequately trained in culturally sustaining and linguistically responsive pedagogy. Further research should be done to investigate how all teachers could be motivated to develop their pedagogical orientations with relation to linguistically responsive and culturally sustaining teaching. As our study was not

able to cover the actual pedagogical implications, more observations are needed to deepen our understanding of this subject.

Based on this study, some recommendations for developing culturally sustaining and linguistically responsive school cultures can be made. First, reforming educational policies at the administrative level appears to be a prerequisite for authentic changes; in Finland, changes in educational policies seem to have affected both students and teachers with regard to their stances toward cultural and linguistic diversity and their sense of being accepted and valued. Second, administrative policy change is not necessarily enough, and actualization of policies might require professional development for teachers. In the past few years, there has been large-scale professional development in the schools where the data were gathered, which might be one of the reasons behind the highly positive results. However, more targeted training and professional development are still needed, especially for subject teachers, to ensure that every teacher commits to a culturally sustaining and linguistically responsive school culture. Third, there are still groups of students needing special attention to ensure that every student experiences belonging to their schools' community and has a positive stance toward diversity. To conclude, when there is a will for educational changes, there is a great possibility to advance pedagogical practices to create more equitable educational opportunities and school cultures for everyone.

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