

ARTICLE

## **Resisting Oppression Creatively: Counter-stories as Expressions of Resistance among Religious Minorities in Finnish schools**

**Milena Parland and Nora Repo-Saeed**

### **Abstract**

Pessimism regarding our ability to address problems such as the exclusion of, or hatred towards, minorities persists in today's world. This article explores tangible methods to counteract this pessimism, particularly in educational settings where children are involved. We present a case study from Finland that examines the role of religious minorities in Finnish schools and their strategies for resisting social pressure and overcoming experiences of exclusion. Our study draws on material from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with nine teachers who provide Religious Education (RE) to students belonging to religious minorities aged 7 to 18. It focuses on their narratives concerning instruction, creativity, artistic endeavors, resistance to marginalization and, in some cases, oppression, within the confines of the school milieu. These accounts are scrutinized through the lens of Critical Race Theory. In the analytical sections, we investigate the visibility of religious minorities in public schools, the incorporation of religious celebrations in the school milieu, and the burgeoning determination to assert one's rights as a member of a religious minority. We conclude that this kind of counter-storytelling and artistic events organized by the minorities themselves have fostered a collective sense of achievement, meaningfulness, and inclusion within the schools.

### Keywords

religious minorities, Critical Race Theory, counter-storytelling, Finland, public schools

This article investigates approaches that appear to enhance respectful coexistence. We explore the day-to-day experiences of religious minorities in Finnish schools through the prism of counter-storytelling, a method derived from Critical Race Theory. Our inquiry seeks to determinate whether artistic and creative activities can positively impact the daily experiences of religious minorities in Finnish schools.

In Europe, racism and racist policies build on a long and influential historical legacy that colors contemporary history of science, literature, popular culture, societal norms and attitudes, everyday thinking, and political practices.<sup>1</sup> The era of Crusades in the Middle Ages contributed to Europe's construction of stereotypical images of what was understood as Other and the question of religion was centrally placed in this, as it meant increasing antisemitism and anti-Muslim attitudes.<sup>2</sup> This process of creating an idea of the "Other" is a politically important tool that could be and still is used to exclude and include.<sup>3</sup> The year 1492 represented a major turning point, when Europe became aware of indigenous lands across the Atlantic. This launched a development that connected the continents and made emerge a cultural framework through which people, places, and phenomena were seen, described, and represented.<sup>4</sup>

The voyages of "discovery" were closely linked to early history of racism, colonialism, subjugation of indigenous people, slavery, and the greatest genocide known to human history as the European expansion to other continents was an extremely violent process. The voyages of "discovery," European expansion, and the threat that Ottomans represented for Europe contributed in a crucial manner to the formation of Western

1 Pekka Isaksson and Jouko Jokisalo, *Kallonnmittaajia ja skinejä. Rasismien aatehistoriaa* (Helsinki: Rosebud/Rauhanpuolustajat, 2018), 7; Minna Seikkula and Pauline Hortelano, "Arjen rasismi ja rasisminvastaisuus arjessa," in *Rasismi, valta ja vastarinta. Rodullistaminen, valkoisuus ja koloniaalisuus Suomessa*, eds. Suvi Keskinen, Minna Seikkula and Faith Mkwasha (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2021), 160.

2 Isaksson and Jokisalo, *Kallonnmittaajia ja skinejä. Rasismien aatehistoriaa*, 48–53.

3 Paul Lappalainen, *Det blågula glashuset – strukturell diskriminering i Sverige. Betänkande från Utredningen om strukturell diskriminering på grund av etnisk eller religiös tillhörighet* (Stockholm: Statens Offentliga Utredningar SOU 2005:56), 192.

4 Isaksson and Jokisalo, *Kallonnmittaajia ja skinejä. Rasismien aatehistoriaa*, 45.

mentality. Europeans started to perceive the representatives of other cultures as potential conquerors and oppressors. Hidden and open racism permeated the ways in which the populations of European colonial powers reacted to indigenous populations in the territories under their control.<sup>5</sup> European enlightenment philosophers contributed to outlining the idea of modern racism that was used to justify exploitation and enslavement by placing the white man above nature.<sup>6</sup>

Finland is often perceived as an outsider in this colonial history and history of racism, and aspects related to these two are placed on some faraway locations outside Finnish territory. However, racism is not unknown to Finnish society, on the contrary it is deeply rooted in its structures, policies, and practices.<sup>7</sup> Historically and geographically important for the Finnish racial system have been interactions and identity construction in relation to Sámi (on Finnish territory) and Russians (outside and inside Finnish territory), for example. In the framework of this system, the Finnish white majority holds a dominant position and aims at racializing other groups.<sup>8</sup>

Finnish state, population, and enterprises have abused their positions of power, participated in the creation and maintenance of global inequalities, and oppressed minorities such as Sámi and Roma present on Finnish territory. The history of Finland includes involvement in colonialism, production of hierarchical classifications based on race and culture, and assimilation policies aiming at fading out minority cultures.<sup>9</sup> An individual who lives in a society built on the oppression of some groups of people cannot somehow place racism outside herself, which means that she inevitably is part of it.<sup>10</sup> A person born in Finland becomes part of its racial system, in which the white majority forms the dominant group that aims at racializing other groups and keeping them outside of positions of power by

5 Isaksson and Jokisalo, *Kallomittaajia ja skinejä. Rasismen aatehistoriaa*, 45–47.

6 Riina Tanskanen and Samu Kuoppa, *Kapitalismin suuri illuusio*, (Helsinki: Into Kustannus, 2023), 127–129.

7 Suvi Keskinen, "Kolonialismin ja rasismien historiaa Suomesta käsin," in *Rasismi, valta ja vastarinta. Rodullistaminen, valkoisuus ja koloniaalisuus Suomessa*, eds. Suvi Keskinen, Minna Seikkula and Faith Mkwesha (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2021), 69; Seikkula and Hortelano, "Arjen rasismi ja rasisminvastaisuus arjessa," 150.

8 Vesa Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi* (Helsinki: Gaudeamus Helsinki University Press, 2011), 268–269; Seikkula and Hortelano, "Arjen rasismi ja rasisminvastaisuus arjessa," 149.

9 Keskinen, "Kolonialismin ja rasismien historiaa Suomesta käsin," 70.

10 Tanskanen and Kuoppa, *Kapitalismin suuri illuusio*, 152; Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi*, 268.

implementing diverse racist practices.<sup>11</sup> However, racializing hierarchies in Finland have been understood as something unaffiliated with Finnish society, and racism as a phenomenon that concerns marginal groups and manifests only in exceptional occasions.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the processes of organizing people into categories based on their presumed features are firmly integrated into the history of Europe—and Finland makes no exception. These categories are often used in justifying the attitudes that people have towards the groups that they consider to be “differing” from the norm, such as minorities.<sup>13</sup> In Finland, the norm, or access to the majoritarian culture, which could also be expressed as the representation or understanding of Finnishness or the “Finnish race,” is often linked to language, place of birth, ancestry, and religion. In the Finnish context, religion mainly refers to the Protestant Evangelical Lutheran Church, which has been present in the country since the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There is also a strong tendency to perceive Finnishness as a quality that unites inseparably nation, territory, and culture. This tendency refers to Finnishness as something that defines Finns as people who are born and grow up in Finland, who through bloodline and culture can be “recognized” as Finns.<sup>14</sup> To temper the nationalistic edge of such view, researchers have pondered alternative ways in which to understand the question of citizenship, and through that also the question of belonging in a broader sense, as a more neutral state granted right, not in such an emphasized manner connected to territory, origin, culture, or bloodline.<sup>15</sup> Due to this strong connection, social inclusion and social privileges that follow them seem often to be granted only to those who belong to the majority and can share majoritarian characteristics. Additionally, one can observe that being part of these tends to be accessible only by birth and therefore they cannot be acquired.

11 Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi*, 268–269.

12 Seikkula and Hortelano, “Arjen rasismi ja rasisminvastaisuus arjessa,” 150–151.

13 Cf. Lappalainen, *Det blågula glashuset – strukturell diskriminering i Sverige*, 99; Anna Pöysä, *Portugalin pimeä puoli*. (Tampere: Vastapaino, 2018), 11–12.

14 Erna Bodström, “Welcome to Fantasy Finland”: *Integration as a Cultural Process in Information Packages of Finnish Ministries in years 2000–2018*, (Doctoral dissertation, University of Helsinki, 2020), 15; Laura Huttunen, “Kasvoton ulkomaalainen ja kokonainen ihminen: marginalisoiva kategorisointi ja maahanmuuttajien vastastrategiat,” in *Puhua vastaan ja vaieta. Neuvottelu kulttuurisista marginaaleista*, eds. Arja Jokinen, Laura Huttunen and Anna Kulmala (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2004), 134–154, 135. Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi*, 69.

15 Huttunen, “Kasvoton ulkomaalainen ja kokonainen ihminen,” 136.

## Unity or Diversity: The Idea of Multicultural Finland

In 2024, Lutheran Christians represented 63.6% of Finland's population, Orthodox Christians 1%, others 1.8%, and secular or unknown groups 33%. At the beginning of the twentieth century, these statistics had been: Lutherans 98%, Orthodox 1.7%, and others 0.2%.<sup>16</sup> The category of "others" includes Muslims, Jews, Catholics, and other believers registered in parishes or religious groupings in Finland. We can perceive two parallel Finnish historical discourses connected to faith and nation. One discourse underlines unity in one faith and one nation; the other stresses acknowledgement of religious diversity.

The Peace Treaty of Westphalia brought religious tolerance to the European mainland in 1648, but it did not reach the Nordic countries. In Finnish territory, Catholicism was prohibited by law from 1599 to 1783; practicing Catholicism led to a death penalty.<sup>17</sup> In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, some 50,000 Orthodox Christians fled from Finland to Russia because of Lutheran propaganda and conversion campaigns run by the authorities.<sup>18</sup> Jews were not allowed to enter the territory unless they converted, at least formally. Yet research indicates that the reality was more polyphonic. In the region of Karelia near the Russian border, the authorities had to maintain a balance between the ideally purely Lutheran country and the reality of a multireligious state—or at least a religious duality. In Karelian areas with Orthodox dominance, some Lutherans converted to Orthodox Christianity in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, even though it was forbidden.<sup>19</sup>

From a minority perspective, this demonstrates that cultural and religious blending might occur on the local level, contrary to official state policies. In 1809, Finland was annexed to the Russian Empire. Under the rule of the Russian czar, Jews, Muslim Tatars, and Orthodox Christians

16 Statistics Finland, *Finland in Figures 2024* (Helsinki: Statistics Finland), <https://toolbox.finland.fi/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/09/finland-in-figures-2024.pdf>.

17 B. Boëthius, 'Zacharias Olai Anthelius', *Svenskt Biografiskt Lexikon*, urn:Sbl:18738. <https://sok.riksarkivet.se/sbl/Start.aspx>.

18 Veijo Saloheimo, *Pohjois-Karjalan historia. 2. 1617–1721*, (Joensuu: Karjalaisen kulttuurin edistämisseätiö Joensuun korkeakoulun kirjasto, [jakaja] Joensuun korkeakoulu, 1976).

19 Teuvo Laitila, "Coercion, Cooperation, Conflicts and Contempt: Orthodox-Lutheran Relations in Swedish-Occupied Kexholm County, Karelia, in the Seventeenth Century," *Entangled Religions* 11 (1) (2020).

established their communities.<sup>20</sup> Development of the school education system started in the 1860s. An important figure in this development was a Lutheran clergyman Uno Cygneaus, who is also known as the father figure of Finnish elementary education. Clergymen—pietists, especially—were active in the framework of Finnish nationalist and in the twentieth century far right and fascist movements. After the peace treaty with the Soviet Union in 1944, these movements were abolished, but they started to show signs of revitalization again in the 2010s.<sup>21</sup>

In the immediate post-war period, ideas about the purity and excellence of the Finnish nation and race influenced the educational system. Finland had sterilization laws in force from 1935 to 1970 that affected minorities and were implemented more eagerly in the 1950s and 60s. Public schools had the task to sort out children and report to the municipalities on children, who did not comply with the desired standards. Susanna Agge observes that a child with a linguistic background that differed from the mainstream could be sorted out in this way.<sup>22</sup> In Finland, conformism is highly valued and the schools have continued to place children in segregated special education in the 2000s. Furthermore, special education has tended to show signs of medicalization. Reasons for placing children there are often due to diagnoses such as dysphasia or neurodiversity.<sup>23</sup> What has this culture of classification meant for religious minorities in Finland? Until now there is no comprehensive research conducted on the matter—contrary to Sweden, where research focusing on minorities, religious affiliation, and forced sterilizations has been published.<sup>24</sup>

It can be challenging to discuss religious minorities in the Finnish educational context, as many want school to be a space perceived as

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- 20 Ruth Illman, Kimmo Ketola and Riitta Latvio, *De många religionernas och åskådningarnas Finland*, ed. by Jussi Sohlberg (Kuopio: Kyrkans forskningscentral, 2017), 109, 121.
- 21 Aapo Roselius, Oula Silvennoinen and Marko Tikka, *Svart gryning: Fascismen i Finland 1918–44*. Translated by Mattias Huss. (Stockholm: Lind & Co, 2018).
- 22 Susanna Agge, "Heikkomielisyyden levenemisen ehkäisy – Sterilointilain vaikutukset Turun kansakouluissa," *Kasvatus & Aika* 8, No. 4 (2014): 55–67.; Markku Mattila, "Suomalainen rotuhygieniä," *Tieteessä Tapahtuu* 15, No. 8 (1997); Markku Mattila, "Sterilization Policy and Gypsies in Finland," *Romani Studies* 28 (June 2018):109–39.
- 23 Timo Saloviita, "Inclusive Education in Finland: A Thwarted Development," *Zeitschrift Für Inklusion* 3, No. 1 (2009).
- 24 Terry-Lee Marttinen, "Eugenics, Admixture, and Multiculturalism in Twentieth-Century Northern Sweden: Contesting Disability and Sámi Genocide," *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies* 1, No. 2 (2022).

“neutral.” The influences of Western Christianity tend to remain unnoticed, because the entire epistemology is constructed within its domination. Christian normativity is thus dominating educational settings. The attempt by schools to be neutral, staying silent about other religions and religious minorities, might result in “overlooking their value to contribute to knowledge sharing and onto-epistemic diversity.”<sup>25</sup> This, for its part, might result in the Western Christian norm dominating and conformism flourishing.

Similar to many European nations, Finnish schools provide Religious Education (RE) to their students. The Finnish non-denominational model for RE has its roots in a historic alliance between the state and the Protestant Evangelical Lutheran Church, with dominant Lutheran instruction evolving over time.<sup>26</sup> For example, the two largest churches, Lutheran and Orthodox Christian, differ in fiscal status from other religious groups. Muslim and Jewish communities have been present since the 19<sup>th</sup> century; religious freedom was introduced in 1923.<sup>27</sup>

Even though the Nordic countries often are described as secularized and modern, religious traditions exercise a considerable influence. Ingrid Storm points out that European, predominantly Protestant Christian, countries such as Finland, are places where “religion is used to identify with national traditions and ethnic heritage rather than with faith.”<sup>28</sup> In this way, affiliation with the Protestant Christian Evangelical Lutheran tradition constitutes a benchmark for being Finnish, even though faith per se is not considered part of Finnishness. This paradox is possible when religious tradition is assimilated into a paradigm of Finnish exceptionalism—a discourse in which Finland has no links to European colonialism and is regarded as permeated with rationalism and modernity. Thus, the dominant religion can be socially deemed “neutral,” while minority religions are problematized as being too

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25 Sachi Edwards, “Christian Normativity in Global Higher Education Policy and Practice,” *Comparative Education* 61, No. 1 (2025): 83–101, 13.

26 Silvio Ferrari, “Teaching Religion in the European Union,” in *Religious Education and the Challenge of Pluralism*, ed. A.B. Seligman (Oxford University Press, 2014), 26, 29.

27 Ruth Illman, Kimmo Ketola, Kimmo, Riitta Latvio and Jussi Sohlberg, *De många religionernas och åskådningarnas Finland*, Kyrkans forskningscentralers webbpublikationer, 51, (Tammerfors: Kyrkans forskningscentral, 2017).

28 Ingrid Storm, “Christian Nations’ Ethnic Christianity and Anti-Immigration Attitudes in Four Western European Countries,” *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, 24, No. 1 (2011): 75.

connected to faith.<sup>29</sup> In this article we will use both terms religion and faith. We use the first referring to the religious traditions we focus on in this study, and the second referring both to a tradition and to an inner conviction or belief.

In Finnish schools, the law safeguards religious minorities, providing spaces where they can convene. Consequently, minorities are afforded the opportunity to receive instruction in their respective faiths within public schools.<sup>30</sup> If there are at least three students from the same faith community in the same municipality, the instruction should be made available, if the guardians so wish.<sup>31</sup> “Religious education is a compulsory subject at Finnish schools. Education is non-confessional, and teachers do not have to belong to any denomination.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, the curriculum is academically oriented, encompassing human rights education and the study of world religions. The entitlement of specific religious instruction dates back to the early 1920s and has since undergone significant evolution. As of 2021, the Finnish National Agency of Education has sanctioned curricula for fourteen different religious traditions.<sup>33</sup>

Multiculturalism can be understood as an idea that the dominant political culture grants recognition in the society to diverse groups, such as minorities, cultural, religious, or ethnic groups. It also “raises important questions for citizens, public administrators, and political leaders about balancing recognition of groups with the interest of the entire society.”<sup>34</sup> When one speaks about multicultural society, one can refer to diverse understandings of what it comprises. It however usually gravitates around problematics of having cultures that differ from each other present in one society, and examines what is the importance of these cultures in relation to the concept of citizenship.<sup>35</sup> In Finland, the concepts of multiculturalism

29 Harriet Zilliacus and Arto Kallioniemi, “Supporting Minority Belonging: Finnish Minority RE Teacher Perspectives on the Significance of RE,” *Religion & Education*, 42, No. 3 (2015): 350–351.

30 Pasi Saukkonen, “Multiculturalism and Nationalism: The Politics of Diversity in Finland,” in *Debating Multiculturalism in the Nordic Welfare States*, eds. Peter Kivisto and Östen Wahlbeck (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 278.

31 Saukkonen, “Multiculturalism and Nationalism”, 280; Finlex, *Perusopetuslaki 21.8.1998/628*, <https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/1998/19980628>.

32 Saukkonen, “Multiculturalism and Nationalism,” 279.

33 Opetushallitus, *Uskonnon oppimäärät*, (Helsinki: Opetushallitus, 2021).

34 Britannica, *Multiculturalism*, *sociology*, 2025.

35 Outi Lepola, *Ulkomaalaisesta suomenmaalaiseksi. Monikulttuurisuus, kansalaisuus ja suomalaisuus 1990–luvun maahanmuuttopoliittisessa keskustelussa*, (Helsinki: Suomalaisen

and multicultural society became part of administrative language used in the 1990s.<sup>36</sup> As a phenomenon it was mainly considered to be connected to immigration and often detached from other minorities.<sup>37</sup> More generally these concepts seemed to be anchored in ethnic groups, and are not used when one referred to just any kind of culture. The concepts were, for example, understood as disconnected from subcultures and not materializing on individual level.<sup>38</sup>

Otti Lepola argues that even though multiculturalism is appreciated, it is also clearly limited and framed by what is understood as Finnish values and norms.<sup>39</sup> Multiculturalism is impregnated with elements that aim at managing and controlling the diversity instead of engaging in a more radical dialogue with others and listening to differing points of view. Thus, multiculturalism is defined and implemented on the terms of Finnish culture and governance.<sup>40</sup> Differentiated multicultural policies have created in Finland societal circumstances in which members of different minorities hold unequal positions.<sup>41</sup>

Multiculturalism that opposes itself to cultural assimilation tends to represent groups as more unified than they actually are. Therefore, it might be that minority groups are put into positions in which they need to somehow show proof of their authenticity, which can be an obstacle for border-crossing and interaction between different groups and in turn offer fertile ground for stereotypes.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the member of a minority group might be perceived only through his or her culture, or religion, which also creates a distorted and, in the worst case, racialized image of an individual.<sup>43</sup> Explaining, for example, behavior with culture means racializing a person to be non-white. Furthermore, those who are not white tend to be perceived as shackled prisoners of their own culture.<sup>44</sup> The experiences of minorities, including religious minorities, within the Finnish educational framework have been comparatively under-researched. Critical Race Theory (CRT) and counter-storytelling present new and promising

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Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2000), 200.

36 Lepola, *Ulkomaalaisesta suomenmaalaiseksi*, 203.

37 Lepola, *Ulkomaalaisesta suomenmaalaiseksi*, 258, 266.

38 Lepola, *Ulkomaalaisesta suomenmaalaiseksi*, 266.

39 Lepola, *Ulkomaalaisesta suomenmaalaiseksi*, 269.

40 Lepola, *Ulkomaalaisesta suomenmaalaiseksi*, 270.

41 Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi*, 263.

42 Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi*, 264–265.

43 Seikkula and Hortelano, "Arjen rasismi ja rasisminvastaisuus arjessa," 153.

44 Seikkula and Hortelano, "Arjen rasismi ja rasisminvastaisuus arjessa," 155.

perspectives within Finnish academic circles. A handful of previous studies have explored a range of religious minorities in Finnish schools.<sup>45</sup> Previous research has typically focused on a single minority—be it religious<sup>46</sup> or ethnic, such as the Roma<sup>47</sup> or Sámi.<sup>48</sup>

In this article, we present narratives from teachers representing diverse religious minorities and examine their strategies for fostering resilience and

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- 45 Milena Parland and Martins Kwazema, “Looking for Hidden Notebooks: Analyzing Social Exclusion Experienced by Teachers of Minority Religions in Finnish Schools,” in *Contemporary Discourses in Social Exclusion*, eds Aminkeng Atabong Alemanji, Clara Marlijn Meijer, Martins Kwazema, Francis Ethelbert and Kwabena Benyah, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 91–118; Milena Parland, “‘When somebody tells you who you are:’ Religious education and fraudulent appropriation in Finnish Schools,” in *Approaching Religion* 13, No. 3 (2023): 82–98; Harriet Zilliacus, “Key challenges in supporting identity development in segregated instruction about worldviews,” in *Contextualising Dialogue, Secularisation and Pluralism: Religion in Finnish Public Education*, eds Martin Ubani, Inkeri Rissanen and Saira Poulter, (Religious Diversity and Education in Europe, 40), (Münster: Waxmann Verlag, 2019); Harriet Zilliacus, *Supporting Students Identities and Inclusion in Minority Religious and Secular Ethics Education: A Study on Plurality in the Finnish Comprehensive School* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Helsinki, 2014); Zilliacus and Kallioniemi, “Supporting Minority Belonging.”
- 46 Risto Aikonen, “What is the purpose of religious education in the Finnish context?,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 57, No. 1–4 (2012): 63–79; Mercédesz Czimbalmos, *Intermarriage, Conversion, and Jewish Identity in Contemporary Finland: A study of vernacular religion in the Finnish Jewish communities* (Doctoral dissertation, Åbo Akademi University, 2021); Pekka Metso, “Making minority faith (in)visible through religious education: Parents’ experiences of the identification of their children’s Orthodox identity in Finnish public schools,” *Journal of Religious Education* 67, No. 1 (2019): 61–76; Inkeri Rissanen, *Negotiating identity and tradition in single-faith religious education: A case study of Islamic education in Finnish schools* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Helsinki, 2014, Münster: Waxmann Verlag; Inkeri Rissanen, Kirsi Tirri and Elina Kuusisto, “Finnish Teachers’ Attitudes About Muslim Students and Muslim Student Integration,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54, No. 2 (2015): 277–290; Inkeri Rissanen, Martin Ubani and Tuula Sakaranaho, “Challenges of Religious Literacy in Education: Islam and the Governance of Religious Diversity in Multi-faith Schools,” in *The Challenges of Religious Literacy: The Case of Finland*, eds Tuula Sakaranaho, Timo Aarrevaara and Johanna Konttori (New York City: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 39–53.
- 47 Marko Stenroos and Jenni Helakorpi, “The Multiple Stories in Finnish Roma Schooling,” in *Social and Economic Vulnerability of Roma People: Key Factors for the Success and Continuity of Schooling Levels*, eds Maria Manuela Mendes, Olga Magano and Stefânia Toma (New York: Springer, 2021), 99–116.
- 48 Rauna Rahko-Ravanti, *Saamelaisopetus Suomessa: Tutkimus saamelaisopettajien opetustyöstä suomalaiskouluissa*, (Doctoral dissertation, University of Lapland, 2016).
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crafting counter-narratives with their students in public schools. We begin by detailing the collected interview material gathered and our methodological approach. Subsequently, we discuss the theoretical underpinnings of Critical Race Theory, specifically counter-stories, before analyzing the qualitative interview material. We conclude with our final observations.

### **Compiling Interview Material**

The participants in this study all belong to religious minority groups and represent their faiths within schools predominantly influenced by the majority Christian Evangelical Lutheran tradition. Although most teachers in minority Religious Education (RE) are adherents of the religions they instruct, the law permits anyone with the requisite academic qualifications to teach, regardless of personal religious affiliation.<sup>49</sup>

The interview data consists of semi-structured in-depth interviews with nine educators who instruct in Islamic, Jewish, Catholic, or Orthodox Christian religions. Each informant has served, or currently serves, in public schools administered by municipal authorities, with many having taught across ten to seventeen different schools in various municipalities concurrently in different parts of the country. Parland recruited the teachers through non-governmental channels such as the National Forum for Cooperation of Religions in Finland (CORE Finland), owing to the difficulty of locating these teachers through municipal channels. This choice was also influenced by documented challenges associated with accessing schools for research purposes in fields related to social exclusion and anti-racism in Finland.<sup>50</sup>

This study deliberately excluded RE teachers from the Evangelical Lutheran tradition to center the perspectives of minority groups. It also omitted educators who are not members of any religious community. The selected informants averaged seventeen years of work experience in religious education, which provided a comprehensive view of the situation across Finnish municipalities. Among the interviewees was one retired teacher. Two of the interviewees had moved to Finland as adults, but most had been raised in the country as children within minority communities. Five of them carried personal school experiences of minority religious life, which included also experiences of exclusion and racialization linked to religion and ethnicity.

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49 Saukkonen, "Multiculturalism and Nationalism," 279.

50 Aminkeng Atabong Alemanji, personal conversation, March 2021.

This could even have intergenerational dimensions. Some informants had also converted to minority religions. The informants hold higher academic degrees, as is the requirement for being a teacher in Finland, and all are well-established teachers. They chose to take part in this study, being highly motivated, and participated in it outside their work context. The impression was that these informants from minorities appreciated that somebody listened to them and was interested in their viewpoints when their narratives got challenging and critical.

The interviews were carried out by Parland during the pandemic lockdowns from October 2020 to February 2021, utilizing digital video-conferencing platforms to facilitate communication with teachers across different regions of Finland. Conducted in Finnish or Swedish, the interviews were individualized, and the transcripts were subsequently archived in the Cultura Archive of Åbo Akademi University. Parland translated the Finnish and Swedish interviews into English. In this article, interviewees are referred to by the initials B, K, M, O, P, Q, T, U and Z. We elected to use the gender-specific pronouns when referencing the informants, recognizing the importance of considering the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and religion, and their potential influence on a teacher's role within the school community.

Both authors, Parland and Repo-Saeed, hold positions of relative power and privilege within Finnish society. However, Parland's affiliation with a minority faith likely engendered trust among the interviewees, as she shared details about her own religious identity and related experiences of family members who faced marginalization in school due to their faith. Repo-Saeed, who did not directly interact with the informants, contributed to the analysis and writing stages of the research. Repo-Saeed has developed an understanding of the struggles faced by minorities in Finland through both professional support work with migrants and other minority groups, as well as academic research.<sup>51</sup> Both researchers have actively engaged in the area of minority rights in Finland for numerous years.

Recognizing that all knowledge production is inherently subjective and influenced by the scholars' social positioning, our methodological choices aim at challenging (re)production and perpetuation of existing hierarchies

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51 Nora Repo-Saeed, "Toivo on ihmisoikeus. Paperittomien auttaminen vallankäyttöön liittyvänä, eettisenä ja diakonisena kysymyksenä," *Journal for the Study of Diaconia* 1 (2020):25–50. Nora Repo-Saeed, "Manifestations of social exclusion in qualitative interview material. Experiences of people with a foreign background in Finland," *International Journal of Minority and Group Rights* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

and inequalities.<sup>52</sup> Critical Race Theory (CRT) inherently includes an activist dimension, aiming not only to analyze and understand social realities but also to effect positive change.<sup>53</sup> This kind of “[a]ctivist scholarship provides us with a unique opportunity to learn from errors and to recognize the highly contextual, political and conditional nature of knowledge production.”<sup>54</sup> In the field of arts research, this approach enables us to contribute to expanding the horizons and understanding.

### CRT as an Analytical Starting Point

In this article we apply the framework of Critical Race Theory through Critical Race Methodology (CRM), which operationalizes CRT. CRM employs “counter-storytelling as an analytical tool for understanding discourses on race and the intersections of other forms of oppression.”<sup>55</sup> Bryan Hubain and his co-authors regard counter-storytelling “as a form of resistance to standard and majoritarian-stories.”<sup>56</sup> The application of CRT, particularly in the Nordic research contexts, is rare.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, a philosophical exploration of racism and of race is rather recent.<sup>58</sup> In the European context, there exists a tendency of denying the importance of race as a social marker of difference, shifting “the focus from ‘race’ to ‘culture’, and [building] hierarchies in which some cultures would be superior to others”.<sup>59</sup> Given its origins in North American critical legal studies, this

52 Angéla Kóczé, “Transgressing Borders. Challenging Racist and Sexist Epistemology,” in *Roma Activism: Reimagining Power and Knowledge*, eds. Sam Beck and Ana Ivasiuc (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), 111–128, 114.

53 Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Third Edition (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 8.

54 Kóczé, “Transgressing Borders,” 124.

55 Bryan S. Hubain, Evette L. Allen, Jessica C. Harris and Chris Linder, “Counter-stories as representations of the racialized experiences of students of color in higher education and student affairs graduate preparation programs,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 29, No. 7 (2016): 946–963, 948.

56 Hubain and others, “Counter-stories as representations of the racialized experiences,” 949. See also Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 8, No. 1 (2002): 23–44, 23.

57 See Koko Hubara, *Helsingin yliopiston sosiaalityön opetus kriittisen rotuteorian näkökulmasta: Teemoitteleva sisällönanalyysi* (Master’s thesis, University of Helsinki, 2020).

58 Jani Sinokki, ”Esipuhe,” in *Rasismi ja filosofia*, ed. Jani Sinokki, (Turku: Eetos, 2017), 7–9.

59 Kóczé, “Transgressing Borders,” 116.

theory has plenty to tackle within a research landscape like Finland's.<sup>60</sup> We posit that CRT provides valuable insights into the study of religious and other minorities in Finland. The interconnectedness of race and religion in the European context has been previously explored by Anya Topolski, for example.<sup>61</sup>

Pekka Isaksson and Jouko Jokisalo point out that, since 1945, forms of racism have started to focus on ethnicity, culture, and religion instead of biological characteristics, or have placed those characteristics alongside biological ones.<sup>62</sup> For instance, anti-Islamic stances became central questions in European home affairs policies in the 2000s.<sup>63</sup> Anti-Muslim racism fuses together ethnic origin, religion, ethnicity, and culture and sets as the defining denominator religion for all Muslims. Anti-Muslim and antisemitic attitudes build on a long historical legacy that represented the Jewish population as Europe's internal foe and the Muslim population as the external one.<sup>64</sup>

In this paper, we do not intend to replace the concept of race with religion; rather, we investigate how religion may be used for the purpose of racialization. Assuming that religious affiliation serves as an instrument of racialization, we can apply CRT as a theory for our analysis. Due to the historical legacy of racism in Europe that has linked questions of religion to race by giving Christianity often a dominant, normative, and privileged position in the European societies, we find that Critical Race Theory fits particularly well into this study context. It may render possible perception that crystallizes the interaction as well as inclusive and exclusionary practices between dominant religious group and minorities in the Finnish educational system. Even though race as concept often builds on external assumptions made on individual's appearances and religion can be something that does not necessarily manifest that way, assumptions made on confessional affiliation might still be racializing and promote hierarchization.

As a theory, CRT "critiques how the social construction of race and institutionalized racism perpetuate a racial caste system that relegates people of color to the bottom tiers. CRT also recognizes that race intersects

60 Cf. Mathias Moschel, "Color Blindness of Total Blindness – The Absence of Critical Race Theory in Europe," *Rutgers Race & the Law Review* 9, no. 1 (2007): 57–128.

61 Anya Topolski, "The dangerous discourse of the 'Judaeo-Christian' myth: Masking the race–religion constellation in Europe," *Patterns of Prejudice* 54(1–2) (2020): 71–90.

62 Isaksson and Jokisalo, *Kallonmittaajia ja skinejä. Rasismen aatehistoriaa*, 351.

63 Isaksson and Jokisalo, *Kallonmittaajia ja skinejä. Rasismen aatehistoriaa*, 359.

64 Isaksson and Jokisalo, *Kallonmittaajia ja skinejä. Rasismen aatehistoriaa*, 361–362.

with other identities, including sexuality, gender identity, and others. CRT recognizes that racism is not a bygone relic of the past.”<sup>65</sup> CRT has six fundamental tenets:<sup>66</sup>

- 1) Racism should be understood as an endemic part of the society, embedded and present in the societal structures.
- 2) Interest convergence or material determinism refers to the fact that the currently prevailing situation benefits materially and psychologically the white population regardless of their social class.
- 3) Race as such is a social construction produced by social thinking and social relations. Therefore, race can never be an objective question or find ground in natural sciences.
- 4) Even though race is a social construction, people are exposed daily to differential racialization. This means that such perceptions and stereotypes are imposed on people, which have a concrete impact on their everyday lives and often place them in subordinate positions.<sup>67</sup>
- 5) Anti-essentialism and intersectionality point out that people’s identities are always tied to context and time and, therefore, are constantly changing. Intersectionality underlines that a person’s societal positioning is influenced by many factors such as gender, race, origin, social class, and family background. These factors also influence each other and can create “a system of multidimensional domination”.<sup>68</sup>
- 6) The importance of actively including voices of color in epistemologies is recognized.<sup>69</sup> This tenet is a call to enable wider

65 Janel George, “A Lesson on Critical Race Theory,” *American Bar Association*, 2021.

66 Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*; Moschel, “Color Blindness of Total Blindness”; Solórzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology”; Hubara, *Helsingin yliopiston sosiaalityön opetus*.

67 Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 8–11; Hubara, *Helsingin yliopiston sosiaalityön opetus*, 30–31.

68 Kóczé, “Transgressing Borders,” 111; Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 10–11; Hubara, *Helsingin yliopiston sosiaalityön opetus*, 31–32; Leena-Maija Rossi, “Intersektionaalisuus – kun sukupuoli ei riitä,” *Niin & Näin* 1 (2021): 74–75.

69 Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 11; George, “A Lesson on Critical Race

access to “[e]pistemic privilege [which] is a flexible, temporal, and spatial position, conditioned by those who possess material and symbolic power over knowledge production”.<sup>70</sup>

Our study examines qualitative interview material on the basis of these six tenets, with a focus on elevating *voices of color* and *counter-storytelling* to amplify the narratives of minorities in academic discourse and society. The process of othering minorities in Finland is often linked to Finnish and Nordic exceptionalism, used strategically to bypass ethical responsibilities toward those excluded. This can manifest as a perception of other as infecting the “purity” of Finnishness, deemed “the best of best.”<sup>71</sup>

We examine the *voices of color*, adapting the concept to the Finnish context by equating it to *voices of minorities* such as religious groups, ethnic groups, and indigenous people who claim their own identities within the Finnish societal framework. As Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso highlight, the experiences of people of color can be regarded “as sources of strength.”<sup>72</sup> Counter-storytelling is based on a premise that there is a prevailing narrative that silences the voices of racialized people, often minorities. This implies that a counter-narrative is not merely a story, but an active process. These narratives help us understand the world and how the stories that “we believe in and adhere to affect our lives, how we interact with others, and how we interact with our environment.”<sup>73</sup> Majoritarian methods claim to be neutral and objective, yet they implicitly make assumptions that reflect negative stereotypes. Counter-stories bring to light voices that challenge the dominant narrative about the majority’s excellence, thereby amplifying the voices of the minorities. Counter-stories, therefore, can offer strength and hope of social justice for minorities, as they enable us to hear stories that break the silence, teaching us to listen.<sup>74</sup> Subsequently, these

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Theory”; Hubara, *Helsingin yliopiston sosiaalityön opetus*, 32; Solórzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology”.

70 Kóczé, “Transgressing Borders,” 123–124.

71 Aminkeng Atabong Alemanji, *Is there such a thing...?: A study of antiracism education in Finland* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Helsinki, 2016).

72 Solórzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology,” 24.

73 Margaret M. Zamudio, Caskey Russell, Francisco A. Rios and Jacquelyn L. Bridgeman, *Critical Race Theory Matters. Education and Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 124.

74 Lisa C. Ikemoto, “Furthering the inquiry: race, class, and culture in the forced medical treatment of pregnant women,” *Tennessee Law Review. Spring* 59, No. 3 (1992): 487–517; Solórzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology,” 32.

“stories can be used as theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical tools to challenge racism, sexism, and classism and work toward social justice.”<sup>75</sup>

As “[c]ounter narratives often derive from the voices and experiences of oppressed, the liminal, and the disenfranchised,” counter-storytelling is apt for exploring the experiences of minorities, which are often racialized in the Finnish societal context.<sup>76</sup> The counter-story responds to the prevailing narrative it opposes, as Critical Race Theory (CRT) counters ahistoricism by emphasizing the importance of understanding racism within its social, economic, and historical contexts.<sup>77</sup> In societal debates, the attention often centers on those in marginal positions. However, it is more often those in the center who are given the platform to speak and are heard. This results in understandings and perceptions being shaped by those who are at the center, rather than by those in liminal positions.<sup>78</sup> CRT-related approaches are thus necessary and have even been advocated by many scholars in the European context.<sup>79</sup> Silenced voices need to be amplified, and methodologies that have often been used to silence can, conversely, be employed to give voice and create space for transformative resistance at the margins.<sup>80</sup>

CRT also provides powerful tools for analyzing educational institutions.<sup>81</sup> In the following analytical sections, we explore narratives shared by teachers of minority Religious Education (RE) as expressions of Critical

75 Solórzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology,” 23.

76 Zamudio et al., *Critical Race Theory Matters*, 124.

77 Mari J. Matsuda, Charlers R. Lawrence III, Richard Delgado and Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, *Words that wound. Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment*, (Portugal Cove: Boulder Books, 1993); Mari Matsuda, “Looking to the bottom: Critical legal studies and reparations,” in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*, eds Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller and Thomas Kendall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 63–79; David Gillborn, “Intersectionality, critical race theory, and the primacy of racism: Race, class, gender, and disability in education,” *Qualitative inquiry* 21, No. 3 (2015): 277–287; Solórzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology.”

78 Arja Jokinen, Laura Huttunen and Anna Kulmala, ”Johdanto: neuvottelu marginaalien kulttuurisesta paikasta,” in *Puhua vastaan ja vaieta. Neuvottelu kulttuurisista marginaaleista*, eds Arja Jokinen, Laura Huttunen and Anna Kulmala, (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2004), 19.

79 See David Gillborn, “Critical Race Theory and Education: Racism and anti-racism in educational theory and praxis,” *Discourse* 27, No. 1 (2006): 11–32, 19.

80 Solórzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology,” 37.

81 Jessica T. DeCuir and Adrienne D. Dixson, “So When It Comes Out, They Aren’t That Surprised That It Is There”: Using Critical Race Theory as a Tool of Analysis of Race and Racism in Education,” *Educational Researcher*, 33(5), 2004: 26–31, 26.

Race Theory's voices of color and as counter-stories. In the first analytical section, we examine how teachers of religious minorities negotiate the visibility of their minority within the public space of the school. Next, we investigate how the religious celebrations of minority groups are introduced and positioned within schools. In the third and final analytical section, we investigate expressions of claiming one's rights as a religious minority in the school environment, as emerged from the teachers' narratives.

### **Resisting Oppression through Artistic Activity**

Informant M, a teacher of Islam in a small town, initiated Islamic RE in the local public school and integrated art as a fundamental part of her teaching methods. Teacher M shared a narrative about her and her students creating colorful, beautiful paper mosques and decorating the school corridors with these artworks. The majority of the school's students, most of whom were Lutherans, referred to these creations as castles, not recognizing the spiritual significance of the mosques. The choice of teaching methods led to the inclusion of visual representations of the minority religion in the school space, but it failed to foster respect for their spiritual aspect, which disappointed the teacher. Subsequently, M organized an exhibition about Islam at the local municipal library with her students, dismissing the idea of hosting it within the school due to a perceived lack of genuine interest in Islam among her colleagues. However, the library exhibition was a significant success, inspiring M to plan for a new exhibition at a small village school where she also taught, in collaboration with the teacher of Evangelical Lutheran RE, who supported the initiative.

In this counter-story the teacher of Islamic RE highlighted how she empowered her students to take pride in their religious tradition by providing them with a visible and creative space for self-expression in the school. Through art, the teacher enhanced her students' positioning by granting them visibility and the opportunity to utilize their voices of color as a counter-narrative to the prevailing norms. The acquisition of space can also be perceived as a material advantage. Teacher M challenged stereotypes commonly associated with Muslims as conservative and backward, presenting Islamic architecture and art in a playful and new manner to the audience. The activities adopted an anti-essentialist perspective, portraying Finland as a diverse nation of multiple identities and beliefs. Voices of color were amplified both within the schools and at the municipal library through vibrant mosques and exhibitions. As art exposes the tensions of the social

world, it can also render them “inhabitable, providing a sense of welcome instead of repulsion.”<sup>82</sup>

This narrative highlights the challenges of gaining space on equal terms with the majority faith. Teacher M encouraged her students to create an exhibition, persevering despite the school’s lack of concrete support for the minority culture, its celebrations, and traditions. When the minority gained space in the school environment, they were not immediately welcomed and supported, leading to diminished experiences, as noted by Teacher M. The endemic nature of racism became apparent in the narrative when other students, unaware of the presence of Muslims or lacking basic information about Islam, referred to the mosques as castles. Furthermore, Teacher M initially did not consider the school as a viable venue for an Islamic exhibition to promote the presence of Muslim culture in the school space.

The counter-story revolves around expanding perceptions of who has the right to space through art. Central to this discussion are questions about visibility, and the ability to express one’s belonging and viewpoints through art.<sup>83</sup> Art can enact “small-scale resistances against the status quo” in social domain, and while individual acts may be limited, they can have a potentially powerful impact.<sup>84</sup> Mieke Bal and Miguel Hernández-Navarro emphasize that art can create political spaces that, while visible, allow the spectator to “experience and participate in the tensions of a nonconsensual society.”<sup>85</sup> Art also makes these tensions visible by providing them a stage, thereby offering viewers an opportunity to experience these tensions differently.<sup>86</sup>

In her interview, Teacher Q recounted how the school did not allow her and her students to leave any traces of their existence and RE classes in the classroom. She sought to create space for the Catholic Christian religious tradition by transporting a small wooden theater from school to school, enhancing the students’ artistic experiences and visualization of their religious tradition within their in-group. This theater was used to visually narrate the life of Saint Mary, and the method was accessible to

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82 Mieke Bal and Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro, “Introduction,” in *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture: Conflict, Resistance, and Agency*, eds Mieke Bal and Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 17.

83 Kaisa Hiltunen, Nina Sääskilahti, Kaisa Ahvenjärvi, Saara Jäntti, Tuuli Lähdesmäki, Tuija Saresma and Antti Vallius, “Kuulumisen neuvotteluja taiteessa,” in *Kuulumisen reittejä taiteessa*, eds Kaisa Hiltunen and Nina Sääskilahti (Turku: Eetos, 2019), 10.

84 Bal and Hernández-Navarro, “Introduction,” 9.

85 Bal and Hernández-Navarro, “Introduction,” 11.

86 Bal and Hernández-Navarro, “Introduction,” 17.

all the students attending the classes, taking into account also those facing challenges with the Finnish language. The materiality of art makes it “tangible, and thus brings it closer to the social agents that interact with it,”<sup>87</sup> fostering participation due to its proximity with the spectator. As Bal and Hernández-Navarro state, “no art can exist without its audience; therefore, art is by definition performative,”<sup>88</sup> with its agency “embedded in its display and in its audience’s participation.”<sup>89</sup>

Q’s narrative reveals that public schools often did not allow religious minorities to leave traces in the school space. Interviews indicated that minority groups were frequently denied specific spaces within schools for storing their items or visualizing their work and tradition in shared spaces. Minority teachers were often unable to use standard classrooms for teaching, being directed instead to the school’s library, canteen, or even storage room.<sup>90</sup> A recent investigation by the Finnish government into RE and ethics tuition in schools, addressing questions of equality and equity, found that the marginalization of minority students and teachers is a common issue, with no easy solutions.<sup>91</sup> Research also delves deeper into the reasons why Finnish schools seem to create structures that produce and reproduce the othering of religious minorities and others, highlighting that the legal protection of children in schools seems to fail, empowering local administrators and leaving families and children vulnerable.<sup>92</sup>

Studies also suggest that well-intended assimilative policies may pose greater risks than exclusion for minorities.<sup>93</sup> Teacher Q’s counter-story illustrates how visualization of religious tradition and creatively enlarging one’s own space can be achieved through theater, used in classrooms despite the wider prohibition against visualization in the school context.

87 Bal and Hernández-Navarro, “Introduction,” 11.

88 Bal and Hernández-Navarro, “Introduction,” 11.

89 Bal and Hernández-Navarro, “Introduction,” 12.

90 Parland and Kwazema, “Looking for Hidden Notebooks”.

91 Eero Salmenkivi and Vesa Åhs, *Selvitys katsomusaineiden opetuksen nykytilasta ja uudistamistarpeista*, Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriön julkaisu 13, (Helsinki: Opetus- ja kulttuuri-ministeriö, 2022).

92 Niina Mäntylä, Ville Karjalainen, Maria Refors-Legge and Hanna-Kaisa Pernaa, *Pukki kaalimaan vartijana – kuka valvoo peruskouluja?* Kunnallissalan kehittämissäätö Tutkimusjulkaisu-sarjan julkaisu, no. 111, (Helsinki: Kunnallissalan Kehittämissäätö, 2021), 67–70.

93 Jon A. Levisohn, “Rethinking the Education of Cultural Minorities to and from Assimilation: A Perspective from Jewish Education,” *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education (DIME)* 7, No. 1 (2013): 54–68, 54.

Visualization was accessible only to in-group members, possibly indicative of a significant influence of the majoritarian discourse in public spaces. From an intersectional perspective, it is noteworthy that Teacher Q, a female with a migrant background, might have faced challenges in making her theater project visible to the majority, potentially due to her gender and background. Interviews with female teachers often featured themes of creative activities with the children (K, M, Q, T), while male teachers' narratives included also confrontations with the directors (B, P, Z). More research is needed to draw definitive conclusions about gender-related patterns in these contexts.

Art distinguishes itself from other educational forms by enabling minority voices to be heard and their presence to be visible through creativity. Art can be perceived as a place within which social identities can be created and shaped, facilitated by the forms of art and related technologies. This suggests that art can generate methods to organize social categories.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, art can serve as a means to foster a common identity or a sense of belonging.<sup>95</sup> Research indicated that not only do teachers of minority religious education find artistic activities in schools positive, but students and their families, especially those conducted by minorities themselves, also view these activities as benevolent.<sup>96</sup>

In her interview, Teacher K reflected on alternative solutions to challenges faced in schools. She devised a "hide-and-seek" game for the children in her Orthodox Christian student group in response to the school's prohibition against leaving RE materials in the classroom. This prohibition was transformed by Teacher K into an engaging game, where children were invited to hide their books in high places, such as on a cupboard or shelf. The next lesson would begin with the children climbing to retrieve their items, checking their presence. This narrative serves as a counter-story, transforming an oppressive restriction into a delightful game for the children.

Teacher K, having grown up as a member of the Orthodox minority and navigated the same public education system, demonstrates remarkable ingenuity in addressing ongoing marginalization, creating her unique counter-story. Sharing this strategy became part of her teaching, raising student awareness of the challenges minorities face in Finnish society. Her narrative illustrates the power of creativity and art in constructing, deconstructing, and redefining established meanings.<sup>97</sup>

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94 Hiltunen et al., "Kuulumisen neuvotteluja taiteessa," 16.

95 Hiltunen et al., "Kuulumisen neuvotteluja taiteessa," 17.

96 Parland, "'When somebody tells you who you are'".

97 See Hiltunen et al., "Kuulumisen neuvotteluja taiteessa," 12.

Teacher K also mentioned the indirect role her faith tradition could play. Upon entering the school premises, she audibly greeted three other teachers, who did not return her greeting. She laughed, noting that the day was the joyful Orthodox feast of Theotokos often unrecognized by the majority population.<sup>98</sup> The Nativity of Theotokos, celebrated on September 8<sup>th</sup>, holds particular significance for Orthodox Christian women, commemorating Mary, who, as a three-year-old child, was greeted and honored by everybody upon her entrance into the temple. Attachment often manifests something through stories and performances.<sup>99</sup> Teacher K's counter-story highlights her reliance on her religious tradition for support, when feeling excluded from the school community. The struggle for visibility of minority religious traditions remains evident, as they often face restricted access to public space. Interviews suggest that teachers became more proactive in creating space for the minorities in their unique ways.

Viewing these interview excerpts through the lens of CRT reveals that all teachers incorporated self-expression methods into their teaching, thereby producing their own voices of color and actively utilizing their agency. These voices emerged as stories of generational survival drawing inspiration from their religious traditions. Endemic majoritarian narratives failed to equip majority students with the understanding of the significance of mosques, the subject of Muslim students' artworks. Nonetheless, teachers' agency adeptly broadened the space allotted to Muslim students.

Teachers' narratives express a desire for visible space in public schools and recognition of their religious traditions as socially valid. The validity of different Christian traditions' having their own RE tuition groups, for example, may be questioned. However, instances of internalized oppression were also observed, with teachers often choosing not to confront diminishing treatment and finding solitary coping mechanisms. The interviews clearly delineated diversity and diverse identities, suggesting that individuals in Finland should not be viewed homogenously, and minority group members should also be recognized as individuals.

### **Visualization of Religious Celebrations**

Religious diversity and freedom of faith may raise considerations within the school environment, related to taught subjects other than RE, the use

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98 Greek for "God-bearer," a title given to Mary as "Mother of God."

99 Hiltunen et al., "Kuulumisen neuvotteluja taiteessa," 14.

of religious symbols, and annual events and celebrations. The lack of official national guidelines grants schools a significant degree of interpretive freedom.<sup>100</sup> Interviews with teachers revealed narratives about religious feasts that not only brought joy, but also countered the dominant narrative of the Finnish feast canon, which often prioritizes the Lutheran celebration of Christmas, thereby limiting the visibility of a more diverse range of religious celebrations. This scenario exemplifies how the predominant narrative “distorts and silences the experiences” of racialized people.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, the Finnish National Agency of Education’s guidelines also support this colorblind approach, promoting a nationalist(ic) celebration canon<sup>102</sup> potentially facilitating cultural assimilation.<sup>103</sup> This leads therefore to the question of whether schools should merely reproduce the existing social order or act as “equalizers” in society, thereby fostering a more democratic society.<sup>104</sup>

In her interview, Teacher O recounted an event where Jewish students sang a Hanukkah song in front of the entire school, receiving applause from students of other faith traditions. This event highlighted Hanukkah celebration, the Festival of Lights, celebrating the Jewish struggle for religious freedom. The story of Hanukkah commemorates the Jewish revolt against Greek rulers who attempted to desecrate their temple and enforce the worship of the Greek god Zeus. Despite the depletion of oil needed for the lamps, a miraculous event allowed the temple light to continue burning, symbolizing the preservation of Jewish faith and resilience against cultural domination. Teacher O’s narrative about the young Jews’ singing can serve as a powerful counter-story, illustrating the significance of maintaining one’s religious traditions and the potential for minority survival under oppressive conditions. It demonstrates how personal and political can merge in artistic expression, allowing personal experiences to gain symbolic and political significance.<sup>105</sup> According to Teacher O, this performance marked the first recognition by many in the school community of the Jewish presence, effectively breaking down their previous invisibility through a celebratory act.

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100 Saukkonen, “Multiculturalism and Nationalism,” 280.

101 Solórzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology,” 29.

102 Opetushallitus, Anvisning om anordnande av undervisning i religion och livsåskådningskunskap i den grundläggande utbildningen och åskådningsfostran i förskoleundervisningen samt om gemensamma fester och religiösa evenemang, (Helsinki: Opetushallitus, 2022), 6.

103 Zamudio et al., *Critical Race Theory Matters*, 95.

104 Zamudio et al., *Critical Race Theory Matters*, 96.

105 Hiltunen et al., ”Kuulumisen neuvotteluja taiteessa,” 15.

Muslim Teacher U detailed how she annually organized events related to the Islamic fasting month of Ramadan at her school, providing Muslim students an opportunity to be visible and heard within the school environment at least once a year. When the school director, adhering to the Lutheran tradition, prohibited fasting for Muslim students under the age of twelve, Teacher U intervened. She described the director's prohibition as a *fatwa*, using the term to highlight her opposition to the director's decision, thereby advocating for the children's right to observe their religious practices.<sup>106</sup> Teacher U emphasized that the director lacked understanding and sensitivity towards the lived experiences of faith and the social significance of Ramadan for Muslim children. This account serves as a counter-narrative, challenging the dominant discourse and asserting the rights of the minority within the educational system.

Teacher U reappropriated the term *fatwa*, usually connected to Islamic *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and mostly portrayed as exotic and frightening in mainstream narratives, employing it to describe the inflexible attitudes within educational institutions towards RE. This reinterpretation of *fatwa* as a descriptor for the director's actions illustrates the frustration experienced by those advocating for minority rights and underscores the need for persuasive storytelling to illuminate and address the marginalization and oppression faced by Muslims in educational settings. Racism often arises from ignorance of minority practices rather than from deliberate discrimination.<sup>107</sup> Despite the intent, ignorance regarding religious practices, attire, or social customs can be perceived as demeaning or injurious by the affected individuals.<sup>108</sup>

Teacher U, knowledgeable in anti-racist educational practices, employed the term "spiritual abuse" to describe the majoritarian approaches to interacting with Muslim children. She highlighted the issue of appointing teachers from the dominant culture to teach Islamic RE, despite their lack of experience with the lived Islamic faith. Such experiences are often crucial for children and their families for a deeper understanding of their religion. This situation mirrors challenges in the Turkish educational context, where secularist public education, including RE, failed to serve as a bridge, instead excluding conservative believers and minorities and leading to a forgetfulness

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106 Fatwa is formal ruling or interpretation on a point of Islamic law given by a qualified legal scholar (Britannica, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/fatwa>).

107 Helena Siipi, "Kulttuurinen rasismi ja aito puhdas ruoka," in *Rasismi ja filosofia*, ed. Jani Sinokki (Turku: Eetos, 2017), 73–88, 76.

108 Siipi, "Kulttuurinen rasismi," 76.

of Islamic traditions.<sup>109</sup> The director at Teacher U's school may have relied on the notion that the Lutheran cultural tradition, perceived as neutral, rational, and progressive, contrasts with other religious traditions like Islam. Further research is needed to explore racialization processes through this form of othering, termed "religification" and spiritual abuse.<sup>110</sup>

Teacher T, who provides Orthodox Christian RE, recounted how a Muslim minority teacher assisted Orthodox Christian students with fasting, presenting a counter-narrative to the prevalent story that religious individuals inherently tended to struggle to coexist. This prevalent narrative often positions the secularized Finnish version of Lutheranism, considered rational and tolerant, as "safe," while minority faiths are viewed as undeveloped and emotional. The interview excerpt challenges the notion that majority members, assumed to act neutrally, are solely qualified to guide minorities, initiate dialogue, and solve problems objectively.<sup>111</sup> Both Islamic and Orthodox Christian RE teachers emphasized that minorities are experts on their own issues and that religious minorities are capable and willing to help each other.

Teacher T also organized a camp for her Orthodox Christian RE students, where they baked traditional Karelian pastries and listened to stories from elderly Karelian refugees. The Karelian minority, primarily Orthodox Christian and traditionally living in the Eastern Finland, was displaced westwards during the Second World War when parts of Finnish territory was annexed to the Soviet Union, resulting in over 400,000 people becoming refugees within Finland.<sup>112</sup> As a member of the Karelian minority, Teacher T created a cultural space for her students, introducing them to survival strategies developed within this Finnish minority. This experience

109 Ahmet T. Kuru, "Secularism(s), Islam, and Education in Turkey. Is e pluribus unum Possible?"; in *Religious Education and the Challenge of Pluralism*, ed. Adam B. Seligman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 150–167, 163–164.

110 Cf. Tuomas Martikainen, "Muslimit suomalaisessa yhteiskunnassa," in *Islam Suomessa. Muslimit arjessa, mediassa ja yhteiskunnassa*, eds Tuomas Martikainen, Tuula Sakaranaho and Marko Juntunen (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2008), 62–84, 66–68.

111 Cf. Michael Gray and Ronda Gray, *Stew That Grew* (Melbourne: Walter McVitty Books, 1990); Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Abingdon-on-Thames, England; New York, NY: Routledge, 2000 [1998]) 118–123.

112 Frode Ulvund, *Religious Otherness and National Identity in Scandinavia, c. 1790–1960: The Construction of Jews, Mormons, and Jesuits as Anti-Citizens and Enemies of Society*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020).

brought joy to the students, who seldom heard stories that affirmed their traditions and heritage.

In Finland, public discourse often promotes a unified narrative of a country characterized by a singular traditional faith and a uniform tradition of celebrations, rendering the dominant religious tradition so self-evident that it scarcely needs naming.<sup>113</sup> However, this type of consensus is inherently exclusive.<sup>114</sup> Teacher T shared experiences of Orthodox Christian students visiting their churches, having lunch there, and inviting friends from different religious backgrounds to join them. In the context of cultural racism, the significance of food as a vital aspect of culture and individual identity becomes apparent, serving as a tool for resisting racism, and acting as a counter-narrative.<sup>115</sup>

Viewed through the lens of CRT, it is clear that the teachers were actively using their own “voices of color” to craft counter-narratives. Their initiatives within the school community allowed for religious traditions to gain visibility and space, altering the material balance of realities. Some minorities adopted confrontational stances to defend their traditions and religious freedom. These efforts also demonstrated a desire among minority religious traditions to share communal spaces, extending invitations to other to join in their spaces, share meals, and offer mutual support. This approach facilitated discussions on topics that united minorities such as fasting. Being uncommon in the Lutheran tradition, fasting remains relatively unfamiliar to the majority population.

Making religious celebrations visible in the shared school environment not only highlighted the minority presence, but also allowed diverse identities and “voices of color” to emerge within the school community, challenging prevailing norms. These actions provided opportunities for minorities, which might even have a long history in Finland, to be acknowledged. Several informants voiced concerns over attempts by authorities to exert complete control over RE and to dictate the version of Islam taught in Finland, for example. Additionally, instances of antisemitism were reported, despite the positive reception of a Jewish song performed by the students. Particularly in confrontational scenarios, proficiency in the Finnish language and an

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113 Cf. Madina Tlostanova, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art: Resistance and Re-Existence*. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, imprint: London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 23.

114 Cf. Bal and Hernández-Navarro, “Introduction,” 10.

115 Siipi, “Kulttuurinen rasismi,” 74.

awareness of one's rights and antiracist strategies empowered teachers to pursue inclusive objectives within the educational setting.

### **Standing Up for One's Rights**

In the interviews, numerous teachers discussed how the school directors were reluctant to provide assistants for teachers of minority RE groups. Teacher Z, who teaches Orthodox Christian RE, recounted opposing the director, when the latter was unwilling to assign him an assistant. The director assumed that the teacher's request for an assistant stemmed from a lack of teaching skills. However, the teacher, humorously challenging the director, suggested that he teach the class himself, implying superior skills. Subsequently, the director acquiesced, assigning an assistant to the class without further remarks. From an intersectional perspective, it is notable that this teacher was a male belonging to the Finnish majority ethnicity, which seemingly strengthened his position, enabling him to confront the director more directly. Conversely, Teacher Z also shared a story about his departure from a school where he failed to earn respect as a teacher.

Muslims, as a religious minority, encounter discrimination in Finland.<sup>116</sup> The interview narratives, however, consistently reveal that all religious minority groups experience oppression and exclusion, each being racialized uniquely. Legal and social science scholars have highlighted how the "dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times, in response to shifting needs."<sup>117</sup> While it is not feasible to quantitatively compare the levels of oppression experienced, an intersectional analysis of the interviews reveals that female teachers with migrant backgrounds tend to report more instances of oppression. In contrast, Finnish ethnicity teachers, particularly males, appear more capable of resistance. Focusing on these intersectionalities of oppression allows for a deeper understanding of its complex layers.<sup>118</sup>

The narratives suggest that minority religions are marginalized and othered in Finnish public schools, facing prejudice. Mattias Gardell observes

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116 Huttunen, "Kasvoton ulkomaalainen ja kokonainen ihminen"; Parland and Kwazema, "Looking for Hidden Notebooks"; Katarina Pettersson, "The discursive denial of racism by Finnish populist Radical right politicians Accused of anti-Muslim hate-speech," in *Nostalgia and hope: Intersections between politics of culture, welfare, and Migration in Europe*, eds Ov Christian Norocel, Anders Hellström and Martin Bak Jørgensen (New York: Springer, Cham, 2020), 35–50.

117 Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 8.

118 Solórzano and Yosso, "Critical Race Methodology," 31.

that the prejudice against Muslims in Sweden mirrors the historical bias against Catholics in the Lutheran kingdom.<sup>119</sup> The interviews reveal that overt discrimination against Muslims occurs alongside the exclusion of other religious groups. They also hint of a heightened focus on discrimination against Catholics, especially concerning females with migrant backgrounds.

Teacher B reported feeling significantly more respected as a French language teacher compared to his experience teaching Islamic RE. While teaching French, he found that other teachers were more inclined to engage with him. He shared a narrative about his colleague, another Muslim teacher, who had openly challenged the school director for using the derogatory term “small Isis soldiers” (in Finnish, *pikku isikset*) to describe students in the Islamic RE class. This act of defiance resulted in Teacher B being compelled to leave the school, with the director continuing to use the offensive term.

In the Finnish context, Muslims are often viewed as outsiders and others are frequently relegated to the cultural periphery.<sup>120</sup> The discourse around Islam and Muslims in Finland, and Europe more broadly, frequently intersects with debates over gender and gender roles. Muslims have long been cast as the “other” against which European identity and boundaries are defined, a dynamic that intensified post-9/11, leading to accentuated associations between Muslim identity and terrorism.<sup>121</sup> Additionally, certain physical appearances have been linked to specific cultures, especially in the context of Muslims, leading to a conflation of cultural discussions with appearance-based hierarchies, an inherently racist practice.<sup>122</sup> Teacher B’s narrative, while ending in humiliation, offers a counter-narrative that, despite its lack of optimism, might encourage minority groups to preserve their dignity by leaving hostile environments where the prospects for addressing racism and prejudice are bleak.

Furthermore, Teacher B emphasized the significance of support from his peers and community for his work, presenting a narrative that challenges the assimilation-focused mainstream discourse. This discourse suggests that children from minority groups should assimilate into the majority by interacting with and emulating majority members, learning the language, and adopting their habits. In contrast, Teacher B’s students, who came from various ethnic backgrounds, spoke different languages, and practiced

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119 Mattias Gardell, *Islamofobi*. (Stockholm: Leopard förlag, 2011).

120 Huttunen, “Kasvoton ulkomaalainen ja kokonainen ihminen,” 152.

121 Huttunen, “Kasvoton ulkomaalainen ja kokonainen ihminen,” 146–147.

122 Huttunen, “Kasvoton ulkomaalainen ja kokonainen ihminen,” 146.

diverse cultural traditions, formed a close-knit community within the school, demonstrating solidarity as if they were siblings.

Teacher P, a male educator, actively engaged in creating counter-narratives that challenged the dominant historical narratives presented during history lessons, particularly those containing negative stereotypes associated with the Catholic Church. The religious homogeneity in Sweden, which Finland was part of for several centuries, was solidified by the establishment of the 1634 constitution following prolonged conflict between Protestants and Catholics. This constitution, foundational to the administrative traditions still referenced today,<sup>123</sup> recognized only the prevailing Lutheran State Church, fostering tight links between state governance and the Lutheran Church, notably in education. Although Finland formally ceased this exclusivity with the 1923 introduction of religious freedom, the constitution's indirect effect on contemporary attitudes and policies might persist.<sup>124</sup>

Given this backdrop, the portrayal of church history or the Lutheran reformation in educational settings may retain biases. Therefore, Teacher P seized the opportunity within the educational framework to construct counter-narratives that disputed the dominant narrative perpetuating antiquated anti-Catholic sentiments. He introduced viewpoints that supported students in minority religious education, particularly Catholics, who faced biased instruction during history classes. Central to all educational, schooling, and classroom practices are epistemological questions, inquiries into “how knowledge is constructed, whose knowledge counts, what knowledge is valued, how knowledge is shared and acquired, how we assess what someone knows, and how we know what we know.”<sup>125</sup> These considerations indicate that epistemologies are both racialized and gendered.<sup>126</sup>

Analyzing the interview excerpts through a CRT lens highlights that the teachers consistently utilized their unique perspectives, voices of color, to counteract their marginalized status within the educational system. They sought to alter the prevailing conditions and reconfigure the distribution of resources by advocating for space, public discourse, and their rights.

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123 Sveriges Riksdag, *Sveriges grundlagar och riksdagsordningen, Med inledning och sakregister*, (Stockholm: Riksdagens tryckeri, 2020), 9.

124 Pirjo Markkola, “The Long History of Lutheranism in Scandinavia: From State Religion to the People’s Church,” *Perichoresis* 13, No. 2 (2015): 3–15, 12–14.

125 Zamudio et al., *Critical Race Theory Matters*, 99.

126 Zamudio et al., *Critical Race Theory Matters*, 99.

This involved demanding assistance when necessary, presenting alternative historical analyses, and addressing derogatory language directed at religious minorities. The interviews suggest that Lutheran education was regarded as the standard, endemic norm, with minorities facing bias and prejudice in the examined contexts.

The counter-narratives that emerged from the interviews showcased an anti-essentialist and intersectional framework, emphasizing the importance of diversity over uniformity. Differential racialization could, however, perpetuate norms to the extent that members of religious minorities were sometimes labeled as terrorists within the educational setting, contributing to Islamophobia. The narratives explored the socially constructed perceptions of religious minorities and the acceptable language used to describe them, while also shedding light on their resilience, resistance, and the creation of cross-cultural bonds.

The narratives revealed that experiences of exclusion were common among all religious communities in Finnish schools. Previous research has documented that children from these groups face exclusion, including name-calling, lack of access to space, diminishing, spiritual appropriation and harassment.<sup>127</sup> Thereby the need to investigate processes of exclusion, and even hate, present in the thinking of the dominant group toward minority groups is obvious. In the schools there is a pressing need for hopeful and practical measures to support children, their families, and educators. Our research suggests that artistic endeavors could offer solutions, proposing that art introduces elements that go beyond historical internalized narratives and could foster respectful coexistence in educational settings. This article also demonstrates the applicability of CRT in understanding the day-to-day experiences of religious minorities within educational institutions.

Processes of exclusion, hatred, and racialization may target multiple groups simultaneously, with minorities frequently subjected to these dynamics. Current debates within the anti-racism movement concerning polarization and the promotion of binary thinking, focusing solely on the colonizer/colonized or white/black dichotomy, are being critically examined. This kind of binary perspective might obscure the recognition of exclusion experienced by groups such as Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Catholics in Finnish schools, while these minorities might be perceived as “white, privileged, and colonizers.” Muslims on the other hand are often considered

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127 Parland and Kwazema, “Looking for Hidden Notebooks,” 102–114; Parland, “When somebody tells you who you are,” 88–92.

as “non-white,” yet religious identity can be overlooked as a basis for exclusion and racialization.

While transferring CRT to Europe, the European history with its racial laws and Holocaust must be considered. “Europe’s history in fact is filled with religious wars, pogroms, and persecutions. Jews, Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, and other religious minorities have to some extent and at some point all been or become victims of this reality.”<sup>128</sup> A pluralistic understanding of the various forms and manifestations of racism is crucial in the context of schools where children from diverse backgrounds spend significant time together. This study shows that CRT can be applied to analyze the minority narratives inside a specific societal context. It also demonstrates that processes of exclusion, hate, and oppression are flexible and can target a variety of groups. Thus, these processes should be confronted also at the ontological and a historical level in the aim of generating spaces for dialogue. There is a risk for the dominant voice to take over the space. As Veli-Pekka Lehtola points out, this dominant voice has prevented progress and even the implementation of law promoting Sámi language and culture, as the voice has been “commanding paternally/paternalistically” (in Finnish, *sanelivat isällisesti*) instead of being in dialogue.<sup>129</sup>

## Conclusions

In this article, we have analyzed narratives shared by teachers of minority RE in public schools in Finland. We looked for an answer to the question: can artistic activities improve the experienced daily life of religious minorities in Finnish schools by analyzing stories shared in semi-structured interviews by teachers who taught Judaism, Islam, Catholicism or Orthodox Christianity in public schools run by municipalities in various parts of the country. We leaned on Critical Race Theory and Methodology as a conducive analytical framework with an emphasis on counter-storytelling, since it “offers a liberatory or transformative solution to racial, gender, and class subordination; and...focuses on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences” of people of color.<sup>130</sup> The choice of counter-storytelling was

128 Mathias Moschel, *Law, Lawyers and Race: Critical Race Theory from the USA to Europe* (Oxfordshire: Taylor and Frances, Routledge, 2014), 92.

129 Veli-Pekka Lehtola, *Entiset elävät meissä saamelaisten historia ja Suomi* (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2022), 178–179.

130 Solórzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology,” 24.

made as we wanted to emphasize that the voices of the minorities and their narratives are important and worthy.

In the interview material gathered, the teachers of minority RE stood up for the children belonging to minorities by successfully creating counter-stories. They often spread these stories throughout the whole school community, thereby also creating bridges with the students belonging to the majority. In Finland, the space shaped by the law that grants religious minorities their own religious tuition gives minorities an opportunity to raise their voices of color and tell their own stories, even though this does not materialize in every local context. In the narratives of all nine informants, we could detect counter-stories as means to stand up against experienced marginalization and oppression. The teachers were personally motivated to support their students to become stronger persons, and to encourage them to dare to express their own religious tradition in the school environment. The narrative of each teacher expressed individual strength and creativity. These examples of how to counter the majoritarian narratives might support the students and help them to survive and thrive as members of minorities in Finland in the future.

Minority students exhibited a propensity to gravitate toward minority teachers, even to the extent that Orthodox Christian students were said to trust a Muslim teacher more than the teachers belonging to the majoritarian Lutheran tradition. They sought support from the Muslim teacher when their own Orthodox Christian teacher was absent. It appeared that resistance of the minorities through arts was successful and inspiring for the students. Furthermore, it was evident that the members of the majority welcomed, accepted, and even enjoyed the visibility and activities of the minorities expressed creatively. Examples of such occasions were the Jewish children singing Hanukkah songs, the Muslims spreading artworks of mosques around the school, and the Orthodox Christian students having friends from other religious traditions joining their trip to an Orthodox Church.

All informants pointed out the diversity of their own group. The tuition groups of minority RE often bring together children with various mother tongues, ethnic and social backgrounds, and ways of interpreting and living their religious tradition. Thereby art was important for these students, as it could have the function of creating cohesion. As Bal and Hernández-Navarro discuss, the imagination can “contribute to the possibility of becoming visible.”<sup>131</sup> Art can offer opportunities for crossing linguistic, timely,

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131 Bal and Hernández-Navarro, “Introduction,” 16.

material, and imagined boundaries.<sup>132</sup> Art helps the students of the minority groups to cross borders inside their own community, and simultaneously art can promote reshaping of the spaces in the entire school and reorganization of social categories that contribute to the visibility of the religious tradition of every child. For example, Teacher M, who promoted Islamic culture by visualizing it creatively, joyfully, and attractively, shaped new concepts for Islamic tradition and its place in the social categories of the school.

The narratives showed that belonging is important, and that the minority RE groups created and shaped spaces of togetherness and art within Finnish educational system. Experience of belonging takes various forms, which can be situated in societal structures or even in approaches implemented through art aiming at expressing belonging.<sup>133</sup> From the minority perspective, the marginality and marginal position can be “much more than a site of deprivation...it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance;”<sup>134</sup> counter-storytelling “can help strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance.”<sup>135</sup> When majoritarian narratives tend to fuel social exclusion, one way to stand up against oppression is to create counter-stories that some teachers already were doing successfully. By spreading these stories within the whole school community, they created contact also with the members of the majority.

In the universal and individualistic legal tradition that is predominant in Finland, “collective group-differentiated rights easily seem to become far more controversial and complicated questions than is the case with individual rights.”<sup>136</sup> Even though the Finnish constitution (17 §) guarantees minorities the right to preserve and maintain their language and culture, the wording of the law remains ambiguous.<sup>137</sup> The law may seem to prohibit coercive assimilation, but there still is a visible lack of political will, as well as administrative and financial means to really ensure that minoritarian languages and religions would become more sustainable elements of the society.<sup>138</sup> Thus, “[n]ationalism and multiculturalism are

132 Hiltunen et al., ”Kuulumisen neuvotteluja taiteessa,” 12.

133 Hiltunen et al., ”Kuulumisen neuvotteluja taiteessa,” 9.

134 bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 149.

135 Solórzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology,” 32.

136 Östen Wahlbeck, “*Multicultural Finnish Society and Minority Rights*,” in *Debating Multiculturalism in the Nordic Welfare States*, eds Peter Kivisto and Östen Wahlbeck (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 295–324, 313.

137 Finlex, *Suomen perustuslaki*, 11.6.1999/731.

138 See Saukkonen, “Multiculturalism and Nationalism,” 291.

in the Finnish case paradoxically intertwined;<sup>139</sup> multiculturalism is often used as a tool to implement control instead of aiming at creating ground for a non-discriminative society. When cultural differences are continuously produced and maintained, one creates opportunities for hierarchization and inequality.<sup>140</sup> Multicultural activities and policies in the worst case scenario can reproduce racializing hierarchies and racism.<sup>141</sup> In Finland, building a non-racist, inclusive, and culturally diverse society is first and foremost subject to rejecting unequal and inequitable social policies.<sup>142</sup> Dismantling colonial and racializing structures of power requires knowledge of how they have been formed and whose voices have been marginalized in the process.<sup>143</sup>

Vesa Puuronen mentions that even until recent decades one has enforced laws and maintained practices that weaken the minority rights in Finland.<sup>144</sup> Until now minority groups such as Sámi, Roma, and Karelians do not have the same rights to instruction in their language on a national level as religious minorities have. Minorities without legal protection and rights to their culture might more easily disappear or face assimilation, and the opportunity of religious minorities to have their tuition within the educational framework is therefore important for identity shaping.<sup>145</sup> In order to tackle racism and the structures that produce it in Finland, one would need to dismantle the prevailing myth of one homogenous Finnish nation;<sup>146</sup> to stop whitewashing the historical narratives connected with it;<sup>147</sup> and to challenge the Finnish exceptionalism that seeks to detach Finland from the colonial legacy.<sup>148</sup> Finland has always been culturally heterogenous, and its history and cultural legacy should therefore be represented in this light, decoupling these from

139 Saukkonen, "Multiculturalism and Nationalism," 291.

140 Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi*, 267–268.

141 Seikkula and Hortelano, Arjen rasismi ja rasisminvastaisuus arjessa," 154.

142 Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi*, 270.

143 Keskinen, "Kolonialismin ja rasismien historiaa Suomesta käsin," 84.

144 Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi*, 69.

145 Zilliacus and Kallioniemi, "Supporting Minority Belonging," 355.

146 Miika Tervonen, "Historiankirjoitus ja myytti yhden kulttuurin Suomesta," in *Kotiseutu ja kansakunta: miten suomalaista historiaa on rakennettu*, eds Pirjo Markkola, Hanna Snellman and Ann-Catrin Östman, (Historiallinen arkisto; Vuosikerta 142) (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2014), 137–162.

147 Marko Stenroos, *Osa 4: Rasismien historiaa Suomessa* (Helsinki: Terveystieteiden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos, 2023), <https://thl.fi/aiheet/maahanmuutto-ja-kulttuurin-moninaisuus/tyon-tueksi/verkkokoulutus-antirasismista-ammattilaisille/osa-4-rasismien-historiaa-suomessa>.

148 Laura Eklund Nhaga and Nia Sullivan, *Kansan valtaa! Neljä näkökulmaa Kansanvaltakuntaan* (Helsinki: Amnesty International Suomi, 2023).

the hypothetic national identity characteristics that nurture racism. In these processes minorities and their cultural legacies play important roles.

Aja Martinez stresses the importance of counter-storytelling inside institutions and how these narratives support students of color, influence the institutions, and even improve their ways of functioning while dismantling negative stereotypes and bias.<sup>149</sup> We can conclude that “schools are structured, policies are adapted, and practices are implemented to serve broader political, social, and economic purposes.”<sup>150</sup> This often means that policies and practices that are considered to be objective might actually legitimate the disadvantage of some students belonging to minorities.<sup>151</sup> Finnish minorities—such as Jews, Tatars, and Swedish-speakers—who have had opportunities to establish their own schools, now have a rather well-established status in the society and are active societal contributors. One can note that when the educational system grants spaces to minorities, they can begin to flourish—or, at least, can begin to move towards visibility, strength, and societal contribution.

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149 Aja Y. Martinez, A Plea for Critical Race Theory Counterstory: Stock Story vs. Counterstory Dialogues Concerning Alejandra’s “Fit” in the Academy. *Composition Studies* Vol. 42 (2), 2014:33–55, 33, 52–53.

150 Zamudio and others., *Critical Race Theory Matters*, 95.

151 Zamudio et al., *Critical Race Theory Matters*, 95.



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