



Article

# Non-Native Gifted Students in a Finnish Teacher Training School: A Case Study

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**Abstract:** It is a global challenge to meet the needs of non-native gifted students in the classroom. This case study investigates how Finland, a country with a high-achieving school system and a growing multicultural student population, serves its non-native gifted students. In interviews at a Finnish teacher training school, non-native gifted students and their parents and teachers described their school experiences. The interviews were analyzed for patterns in two categories: instructional strategies and curriculum design. The findings highlight the fact that Finland's education system is based on egalitarian approaches to learning in inclusive educational settings. The results show that teachers are differentiating for their gifted students and parents and students recognize this.

**Keywords:** gifted education; diverse student; non-native; differentiation; Finnish education system; teacher training school; a case study

## 1. Introduction

This case study aims to ascertain the experiences of non-native gifted students in a Finnish teacher training school through the practices of teachers ( $n = 4$ ) and the experiences of students ( $n = 5$ ) and their parents ( $n = 4$ ).

A popular and important topic of research in the gifted education sphere is how to serve diverse gifted students [1,2]. For decades, gifted education researchers have recognized and understood the inequalities within gifted education [1,3,4]. Despite the depth and breadth of this research, little has changed regarding equitable services for diverse gifted students [4,5]. Culturally diverse students are still less likely to be seen as gifted, presented with challenging instructional materials, placed in advanced-level classes, or included in enrichment or accelerated programs [4].

Gifted education varies from country to country [6]. In the United States of America, for instance, most school districts formally identify students as gifted [4]. These students are most often white, Asian, and/or wealthy, making students of color and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds under-identified and under-served by gifted programs [4]. A recent study on gifted Syrian refugees in Jordan found immigrants to be under-identified, and therefore, underserved by the education system [7]. In England, they shut down "elitist" and "inequitable" gifted programs in favor of differentiated instruction for all by classroom teachers [6]. In Finland, the focus on equality leads to a lack of formal mention of gifted students with more emphasis on meeting individual learning needs in the classroom [8]. According to Dai and Chen: "It is inevitable that different values and priorities influence the ways we conceptualize giftedness and define the mission of gifted education" [9].

All over the world, gifted students from diverse backgrounds, particularly those from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds, are underserved and overlooked [7,10,11]. According to Davis and Moore, "Although many of these children possess tremendous talents that are of value to their nations, gifted children of color,



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especially those from economically disadvantaged communities, tend to be the most underrepresented in gifted and advanced programs worldwide" [10] (p. xv). International research evidence shows that schools around the world are not meeting the needs of diverse gifted students.

In an increasingly connected and globalized world, we must prepare our gifted learners to use their talents to "improve human conditions" [12] (p. 156). Dr. Renzulli states that the intended outcome of this goal is "to increase the reservoir of people who will use their talents to create a better world" [12] (p. 156). Often, systems and structures that serve gifted students do not adequately serve students from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLED) backgrounds [11]. Finnish gifted education researcher, Dr. Kirsi Tirri, explained that gifted students have a right to educational opportunities that meet their needs and advance their future: "This is especially critical for gifted students who face disability, poverty, low socioeconomics, poorly educated parents, and/or live in non-native speaking homes" [8]. It is a global challenge to meet the needs of different learners in a variety of subjects [13].

The terms to describe gifted students vary all over the world. Words may include highly able, talented, high ability, high potential, and gifted and talented. There is also a wide range of definitions of giftedness [9,14]. This study will use the term gifted to describe students with specific cognitive, creative, psychosocial, and psychomotor abilities (see Appendix A). This definition comes from the National Association for Gifted Children's guidebook on Traits of Giftedness.

When discussing non-native gifted students, this study refers to students who are not part of the dominant Finnish culture. The students may also be from linguistically and economically diverse backgrounds. They qualified for this study by not being native to Finland. This means that either they or their parents immigrated to Finland from another country.

### 1.1. Theoretical Framework

Ford provides a theoretical framework on how to develop the potential of diverse gifted learners [15]. Ford explains three aspects that fuel the continued lack of services for culturally diverse students in gifted education—deficit thinking, white privilege, and colorblind ideology. This theory on underrepresentation explains that to develop the potential of diverse gifted learners, schools and systems must first eliminate deficit thinking, recognize white privilege, and disrupt colorblind ideology. There needs to be an "attitudinal or philosophical change" in how schools actualize the education of underserved gifted students [16]. Our study will look for these elements in student, teacher, and parent responses to interview questions (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Ford's Theory on Reasons for Underrepresentation [15].

Reasons	Definition
Deficit Thinking	Deficit thinking is grounded in the belief that culturally different students are genetically and culturally inferior to white students.
White Privilege	White privilege is unearned benefits that advantage whites while disadvantaging others.
Colorblind Ideology	The philosophy and practice exist when educators/individuals intentionally or unintentionally suppress the importance of and role of culture in learning, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and expectations.

Ford's theory on underrepresentation lays the foundation for understanding best practices in serving gifted students from ethnically diverse backgrounds in partnership with Baldwin's research.

Alexinia Young Baldwin detailed important considerations when serving gifted students from diverse backgrounds in her research. Her practical approach to curriculum

and instruction for diverse gifted learners guides this study. Culturally Diverse Students who are Gifted [1] outlines how to develop organizational and instructional strategies that lead to effective support for diverse learners. Baldwin “expressed the urgency and the great possibilities present in recognizing the high quality of students from diverse backgrounds”. [1] (p. 140). Aspects of these practical recommendations for stakeholders in gifted education are the framework for this case study. The two main aspects of program planning that will guide this study are curriculum design and instructional system. The identification components of this theory will also not be included because there are no formal identification protocols in Finland [8]. “A total program plan that recognizes the potential for growth in culturally diverse students is an important factor in meeting the educational needs for gifted children of all cultural groupings” [1]. These recommendations serve as a framework for the rest of the study (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Baldwin’s Recommendations for Serving Diverse Gifted Learners [1].

Program Planning	Description
Curriculum Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To provide an opportunity for gifted students of color to experience differentiated curriculum experiences that draw on their cultures.</li> <li>- To help students of all ethnic groups understand the bravery, the strength of character, and cleverness of various cultures, despite negative circumstances.</li> <li>- To increase the knowledge of all students regarding the contributions of all ethnic groups.</li> </ul>
Instructional System	Sensitivity Enhancement
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Involve the students in activities such as simulations, debates, analysis of rhetoric, and the design of answers to problems.</li> </ul>
	Information Processing
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Includes library research using original documents, interviews, the collection of materials for information, role assumptions, field trips, or time capsule strategies.</li> </ul>
Instructional System	Concept Development
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Involves the use of materials from different cultures instead of relying on the traditional materials provided in most schools. Sociopolitical parallels, language structures, graphic and performing arts of the world, and family life are some of the concepts that can be taught by using a combination of materials from different cultures that are standard for most classrooms.</li> </ul>
Instructional System	Creative Problem-Solving Processes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Involves metaphoric thinking, which makes it possible for students to use one idea to express or explain another; visualization, in which students are able to visualize things they cannot see and play with mental images; and finding order in chaos, in which students prefer visual images that are complex over those that are simple.</li> </ul>
Teachers	It is important that identification, program development, and evaluation of the program include parents. The role that parents play can be effective in developing the potential of the child. Karnes (1984) developed activities for Head Start parents to use with their children at home so that the various areas defined as indicators of giftedness could be developed at an early age. She found that sessions with parents on how to recognize and develop this potential helped many students be among those nominated for classes for the gifted and succeed in the program.

Table 2. Cont.

Program Planning	Description
Parents	It is important that identification, program development, and evaluation of the program include parents. The role that parents play can be effective in developing the potential of the child. Karnes (1984) developed activities for Head Start parents to use with their children at home so that the various areas defined as indicators of giftedness could be developed at an early age. She found that sessions with parents on how to recognize and develop this potential helped many students be among those nominated for classes for the gifted and succeed in the program.
Evaluation	The evaluative process should include all elements of the program design: goals, objectives, the teacher, the parents, and the administrator. Portfolios of work and reflections of students can determine student outcomes. Objective and subjective assessment can be used in conjunction with portfolios as well. A total evaluative profile of the program would include all of the previous elements and the relationship of outcomes to the goals that were set.

For this study, the focus is on two of the five Program Planning components: Curriculum Design and Instructional System. Students, teachers, and parents are the participants in this study. This case study does not measure evaluation because there is no overall program for gifted students in Finland to evaluate.

### 1.2. Context of the Study

This study is relevant and unique because Finland is the setting. First, Finland is a model for education reform all over the world because of its consistent success in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), an international measure of student achievement [17]. Second, Finland has seen an increase in immigrant and multicultural populations over the last few years [18]. Last, Finland's focus on egalitarian approaches to teaching and learning has led to no national policy for gifted learners [9]. While there is a body of research on gifted education in Finland, there is a gap in research on the intersection of gifted education and non-native students.

#### 1.2.1. Finland's International Prominence

After a fairly recent reform of the education system and consistent success in international assessments, many other countries look to Finland as an example. Some researchers even call Finland "a supermodel with regard to education" [19] (p. 1) On an international scale, Finland consistently outperforms most countries on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The PISA is a worldwide measure of student performance in mathematics, science, and reading. Finland scored higher than the average in all three domains in 2018 [20–22]. Often, Finland is a "target for educational tourism" because of this success [18].

Despite consistent top rankings, there has been a slight decline in PISA scores over the past few years. Some researchers theorize that this decline is happening because students, including gifted learners, do not have opportunities to move out of their comfort zone [9,23]. Other researchers wonder if the increase in immigration over the last few years caused this decline in PISA scores [24].

#### 1.2.2. Finland's Multicultural Student Population

Finland is a mostly homogenous country with less immigration than many other European countries. In the last twenty years, however, there has been an increase in immigration. According to Migri, Finland's immigration services, most immigrants are from Russia, Ukraine, India, China, and Somalia. They come to Finland seeking work or asylum [25]. Social mobility is relatively high amongst immigrants, with little difference

compared to the native population [26]. This shows that there has been some success with the integration of immigrants into Finnish society.

There are several ways Finland is responding to increasing numbers of non-native students in their schools. There has been a recent focus on understanding multicultural issues in some teacher preparation programs [18,27]. According to the Finnish National Agency for Education, “linguistic and cultural diversity are paid attention to in the national core curricula” [28]. One of the agency’s main goals is to “increase equality and open-mindedness in education” [28]. In a study conducted in 2018 about the educational trajectories of immigrant-origin youth, the study found that students were hopeful, with high academic aims and career aspirations [29]. While there have been efforts to serve this growing multicultural study body, PISA scores showed non-native students performed worse than native Finnish students in all areas [18]. Finnish schools are still learning how to best serve their new multicultural populations.

With the changing population in Finnish schools and a trend towards a more multicultural student population, serving gifted students from non-native backgrounds has become essential. According to Sinkkonen and Kyttälä, “students with multicultural backgrounds may be in danger if schools cannot meet these new challenges. To teach heterogeneous groups, it is essential to find good practices that can create effective educational methods aimed at increasing equality and social integration” [18] (p. 180). Thus, it is also important to look at how teachers and schools play a role in the Finnish education system.

### 1.2.3. Inclusive Education in Finland

The goal of the Finnish education system is to provide equal learning opportunities for all students regardless of their background [18]. “The Nordic countries have a long tradition of fair and equal educational systems that aim to provide equal access to education irrespective of social status, economic situation, gender, language, religious or ethnic background” [19] (p. 1). Finland is one of the Nordic welfare states in which equality and inclusiveness are the main guiding values in educational policy [30,31]. Typically, in policies, the term equality is used to describe educational practices over equity. Since Finland’s education reform in the 1970s, they have taken an egalitarian approach to teaching and learning. Inclusive classrooms are the norm in the Finnish education system.

The UNESCO Salamanca Statement is the basis for defining inclusion in the Finnish education system. The Salamanca Statement reads:

*The guiding principle that informs this framework is that schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, linguistic, or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic, or cultural minorities, and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas and groups. [31]*

The term inclusion often refers more to the services of students with disabilities. The Salamanca Statement broadens this definition of inclusion by mentioning meeting the needs of gifted children as well as students from diverse backgrounds. Inclusive practices in Finland aim to reach all students as listed in the above statement.

In practice, Finland’s inclusive education approach differs depending on the classroom and the teacher [14,23,32]. Teachers in Finland have autonomy over their instructional decisions. While differentiation and inclusion are the expectation for all in this educational model, gifted students are often overlooked. With no clear definition of giftedness, these traits are sometimes seen as fixed and not something to nurture [33]. Gifted researchers in Finland believe that gifted students “have a need and a right to educational opportunities and learning that meets their special needs” [33].

### 1.2.4. Gifted Education in Finland

Because of the emphasis on equality rather than equity, there is no official national policy regarding gifted education in Finland [33]. There are no pull-out programs, identification protocols, or special schools for academically gifted children. Formal identification

of students as gifted is not a practice in the Finnish education system [32,33]. There is no clear definition of gifted students to guide teachers and administrators.

Despite the lack of formal gifted education policies, the needs of gifted students are being met in a variety of ways [6,33]. Teachers differentiate for the needs of their students [33]. Starting in kindergarten, gifted students receive instruction based on their intellectual abilities [33]. Most Finnish teachers know gifted students need more challenging assignments [34]. Finnish teachers are expected to meet the special needs of all of their students through differentiated and personalized instruction. This approach to education emphasizes support for all learners, which includes gifted students [33,34]. Based on these ideals, Finland is seen as having effective strategies for teaching gifted learners.

These instructional practices are expected in Finland, but they may not always be carried out in practice. Many teachers focus on meeting the needs of their lowest-achieving students and overlook their gifted students. The findings of Tirri and Laine state: "Often, the gifts and talents of gifted students are not identified at school or they are not supported effectively. There are many reasons for this, such as a lack of teachers' knowledge about gifted students and their special learning needs or a lack of knowledge of evidence-based practices proven to be effective with gifted learners" [14]. These reasons can lead to misconceptions about how to serve gifted students in the classroom.

#### 1.2.5. Finnish Teacher Training Schools

In Finland, teachers are considered ethical professionals with the freedom to plan, organize, and evaluate their own teaching [32]. Researchers Malinen, Väisänen, and Savolainen assert: "Teacher education in Finland is organized in eight universities in eleven campuses that are spread across the country, covering all geographical regions from south to north and from west to east" [35].

The setting for this research study is a teacher training school in a major city in Finland. There are 940 pupils and 110 employees at this school. According to the school's website, the mission is to "foster partnership as our school spirit, characterized by openness, honesty, mutual respect, fairness, shared responsibility, and safety". It aims to "protect and nurture" diversity because the school is "home to people of different backgrounds, ages, and positions" [36]. The school is located in a middle-class district. It serves students based on the neighborhood school principle [37].

## 2. Data and Methods

### 2.1. Author Positionality

As researchers conducting this study, it is important for us to acknowledge our positionality and how it may have influenced the research process and interpretation of data. We approached this study as impartial observers with backgrounds in educational research and a shared interest in understanding the challenges faced by non-native gifted students within different educational systems.

It is important to note that the primary author of this study is a monolingual American researcher who conducted research on a culture outside of her own. Recognizing the potential challenges and limitations associated with researching a culture different from her own, the primary author relied on the expertise and insights of the two other contributing authors who have firsthand experience and knowledge of the Finnish culture. Their perspectives were crucial in honoring and valuing the Finnish culture throughout the research process.

### 2.2. Methodology

This case study aims to investigate the experiences of non-native gifted students and their parents and teachers in a Finnish teacher training school through in-person and video interviews.

The setting for this case study was a Finnish teacher training school in the spring of 2022–2023. The school had primary and secondary levels. There were 940 pupils and 110 employees at this school.

A monolingual English speaker and two bilingual Finnish/English speakers developed the nomination form in English (see Appendix B). It could have been translated to Finnish upon request. It was an online survey that was sent to all teachers at the teacher training school via email. It had eleven questions. The survey collected information about student demographics, students' gifted characteristics, and teacher demographics. It served as a way to collect information about potential participants. The National Association for Gifted Children developed and published the gifted characteristics [38]. The researchers encouraged teachers to fill out the form if they had a gifted student from a multicultural background in their class.

After the formal nomination process, the researchers contacted parents for permission to interview their children and their interest in participating in the study. Once parents granted permission, researchers scheduled the interviews with parents, students, and teachers.

Three researchers developed the interview protocols in English (see Appendix C). The bilingual researchers translated the interview protocols to Finnish, and the researchers compared it to the English version.

The researchers conducted open-ended interviews with school teachers, students, and parents during the spring of 2022 and 2023. The participants interviewed included a subject teacher who taught non-native gifted students in secondary grades ( $n = 1$ ), class-teachers whose students were in elementary grades ( $n = 3$ ) and gifted students from non-native backgrounds teachers had nominated ( $n = 5$ ), and parents of two nominated students ( $n = 4$ ).

Teachers selected potential student participants based on their extensive training and professionalism regarding their students' needs. While their teachers nominated the participants, they were not required to participate, and thus voluntarily did so. The parent interviews were conducted in English and teacher interviews were conducted in English and Finnish based on participant preference. The student interviews were conducted in English or Finnish also based on participant preference. All parent and teacher interviews were conducted via video conference for 20–30 min. The student interviews were conducted via video conference or in-person for 10–20 min.

The interview questions included a variety of questions related to the student's experiences with challenging instruction in school. If the students went to school in another country, they were asked to compare their experiences. The interview questions for parents included questions about how they perceived their child's experiences in the school with challenging instruction. The interview questions for the teachers included questions about the instructional decisions and scenario-based questions.

All interviews were recorded with permission from the participants. Bilingual researchers transcribed the Finnish interviews into English, and the translated interviews were reviewed by bilingual researchers to assure that the intended meaning was maintained. There were 13 participants.

This study involved five students (Table 3). Three students identified as female and two identified as male. The students were in grades 2, 3, 6, 8, and 9 when they were interviewed. These interviews were conducted in English or Finnish depending on the student's comfort level with the language. There was one student from a Polish and English background, one student from an Estonian background, two students from a Russian background and, one student from a Chinese background.

### 2.3. Student Profiles

The participants in this case study were five students from multicultural backgrounds whose teachers identified as gifted. Important criteria for the selection of these particular students were their advanced abilities and their non-native backgrounds. The students were all willing to share their school experiences.

**Table 3.** Student Participants.

Student	Grade	Gender
Ela	Elementary	Female
Sara	Elementary	Female
Hannu	Elementary	Male
Raheem	Secondary	Male
Ada	Secondary	Female

Ela (each of the students was assigned a pseudonym) was born to an English-Polish family. Her early schooling took place in England. Her native language was English. She was an elementary student at the time of the interview. Her teacher described her as having the following characteristics: interest in problem-solving, intellectual curiosity, persistence, independence in work, diversity of abilities, creativeness, high expectations of self, and perseverance.

Sara was an elementary student. She was born to Estonian parents and moved to Finland at the age of two. She spoke Estonian, Finnish, and English. Her interview was conducted in Finnish. Her teacher recognized above-average cognitive abilities in her and nominated her for this study.

Hannu is an elementary student of Chinese origin. Although he spoke Chinese, his preference for language in the study was Finnish. Hannu's teacher noticed his interest in problem-solving, persistent and goal-directed behavior, as well as his independence in work and study. Additionally, he showed talent in mathematics. Given his exceptional abilities, Hannu was selected to participate in this research study.

Raheem was a secondary student of Russian descent. Both his mother and father were of the same origin. Raheem's preference for this interview was Finnish. Raheem demonstrated impressive cognitive abilities as a quick learner with a strong interest in problem-solving, intellectual curiosity, and independence in study. Moreover, he had a keen sense of humor, was highly energetic, flexible, and socially skillful. Although the teacher had only taught him for ten lessons, Raheem's potential and exceptional qualities were apparent and qualified him for this research study.

Ada was Russian. She was in secondary level at the time of her interview. Her mother tongue was Russian, but she also spoke English and Finnish. She was nominated for the study because of her cognitive, creative, and behavioral characteristics.

#### 2.4. Parent Profiles

There were four parents interviewed for this study (Table 4). They were two sets of parents. Each couple had a child nominated for this study. The couples were interviewed together resulting in two interviews for four total parents.

**Table 4.** Parent Participants.

Parent	Gender	Child
Peter	Male	Ela
Diana	Female	Ela
Hasan	Male	Raheem
Amina	Female	Raheem

#### 2.5. Teacher Profiles

Four teachers agreed to be interviewed for this study (Table 5). There was one subject teacher and three elementary teachers. They were all Finnish and female. These interviews



were conducted in English and Finnish. Two of the four teachers nominated students to be interviewed for this study.

**Table 5.** Teacher Participants.

Teacher	Grade Level	Gender	Ethnicity
Suvi	Elementary	Female	Finnish
Karoliina	Elementary	Female	Finnish
Tuija	Elementary	Female	Finnish
Mina	Secondary	Female	Finnish

### 2.6. Data Analysis

The data collected from interviews with teachers, parents, and students were analyzed using a hybrid coding approach [39]. First a deductive coding process was used and then an inductive coding process. The analysis focused on pre-determined categories (Table 6) derived from the theoretical framework based on Baldwin’s research [1] for the deductive coding. The two main categories were curriculum design and instructional systems. Then, within those two categories, subcategories were determined based on a close reading of the interview transcripts. These subcategories—differentiation, culturally responsive, relationships building, grouping, and teacher knowledge—were formed based on inductive coding. This approach allowed for a systematic examination of the data, aligning the identified categories with the theoretical underpinnings of the study then delving deeper into the data to identify new themes. According to Swain’s description of a hybrid approach, this “method is particularly suitable for relatively small qualitative research studies” [39]. This case study has less than 30 interviews, making a hybrid approach to coding a good fit.

**Table 6.** Main Categories and Subcategories.

Main Categories from Theoretical Framework	Subcategories
Curriculum Design	Differentiation Culturally Responsive
Instructional Systems	Relationship Building Grouping Teacher Knowledge

The interview questions focused on the experiences of students, parents, and teachers. Since there are no official identification protocols in Finland, the questions were mostly about curriculum design and instructional systems. Subcategories were developed for each topic (Table 6). For curriculum design, the categories that emerged from inductive coding were differentiation and culturally responsive strategies. For instructional systems, the categories were relationship building and grouping and teacher knowledge. These categories served as a framework for understanding the experiences of these non-native gifted students.

The initial analysis involved a careful reading of the interview transcripts to identify recurring ideas, concepts, or perspectives related to the response. Codes were generated through an iterative process, ensuring that the identified themes were grounded in the participants’ responses. Examples of the categorization process (Table 7) include a review of the interview transcript for a code.

**Table 7.** Examples of the categorization process.

Unit of Analysis	Code	Subcategory	Main Category
Example 1: "In physics we once had to make a presentation. The teacher chose the topics for each one, and me and my pair were given the most difficult one. And it was really hard. Luckily my pair was good too". (Raheem).	Grouped with similar ability peers	Grouping	Instructional Systems
Example 2: "I think it is quite easy to find small ways to differentiate, for example, in discussions I ask different kinds of questions, easy ones and difficult ones depending on the student". (Tuija)	Changing teaching methods for gifted students	Differentiation	Curriculum Design

The authors who conducted the interviews and analyzed the data engaged in frequent discussions and negotiations. Discrepancies in coding decisions were resolved through consensus and mutual agreement.

Through discussions and negotiations among the authors, the data analysis of the interviews provided insights into the experiences of teachers, parents, and students in serving non-native gifted learners in Finland.

### 3. Results

The analysis of the collected data revealed several key findings regarding the experiences of non-native gifted students in this teacher training school. The major themes that emerged from the data analysis were organized first by the pre-determined categories and then by the subcategories that emerged.

#### 3.1. Curriculum Design

##### 3.1.1. Differentiation

Differentiation is a common practice for Finnish teachers [8]. In the interviews, many of the students talked about ways their teacher differentiated for them. All the teachers detailed ways they differentiated for their students. Both sets of parents mentioned how their children had differentiated tasks at school.

All the students talked about extra work or additional tasks as a strategy their teacher would use to challenge them, especially when they finished their work early. In her interview, Sara explained: "Yeah, for example, if I'm fast at the end of a project, they will give me first another book to read and then more math. Then, if I have done all of that, the teachers will give me other assignments as the challenge becomes more difficult". All teachers mentioned giving their students extra tasks if they finished their work early.

Some of the students talked about having harder or above-grade-level assignments. Ela, the second-grader, described how her teacher challenged her by giving her third-grade-level math books because she mastered the second-grade skills. "I think she just pushes me to do like harder books. Now I'm on third-class books and that feels like it makes me feel more challenged". Ada also described a similar practice. In her math books, there were more advanced tasks labeled the "blue tasks". Her teacher encouraged her to try the harder blue tasks. "Like, for example, in math we have series and then at the end of each series there's like a blue task that's like considered hard, and those are when you have to put something in that you just learned. But it's a much harder task". One set of parents knew that their child had harder tasks to complete but could not describe them.

Three out of the five students mentioned completing projects as a way of being challenged in the classroom. It was not always clear from their responses if these projects were differentiated or if all students in the class were completing the same project. One student, however, described this type of practice, and he gave an example of being challenged in a physics presentation project: once all students had to make a presentation, but the teacher

matched the project level to be appropriate for the student and his friend by giving the most challenging topic to them. One secondary-level teacher mentioned providing the opportunity to participate in competitions. She only offered these national and international competitions to her gifted students. One of the secondary teachers explained that she used projects to personalize the curriculum for her gifted students.

The parents did not comment on project-based learning. Both sets of parents knew that their child may have different tasks at school. Neither couple could explain those tasks in detail.

### 3.1.2. Culturally Responsive

Students were asked to consider how their cultural and ethnic background influenced their school. Teachers were asked how a student's cultural background might affect instructional decisions in the classroom. Parents were asked to reflect on how their child's multicultural background affected their schooling.

All of the teachers mentioned language as a major barrier to serving their non-native gifted students. One teacher explained that she always allowed students to speak in their native language to their peers who spoke the same language.

The teachers exhibited some colorblind ideals about students' multicultural backgrounds. One of the teachers explained that a student's multicultural background does not inform her decisions about curriculum or instruction. "Well, of course, it [multicultural background] should not. And actually, I think also I don't consider it. When I'm thinking about my students, I really don't even think about that as an issue at all".

On the whole, students felt that their peers and teachers were aware of their multicultural background, but that it did not take away from or negatively impact their school experience. One secondary student may have had the most experience and the language to clearly communicate what it felt like to be gifted, a non-native Finn, and go to school in Finland. She said: "Like definitely I feel like I'm not entirely Finnish. So my culture and my ways of thinking and talking to people might differ, but I don't feel that I'm getting any other kind of treatment than anybody else". Two of the five students stated similar things, saying that they might be asked to speak in their native language or help another student from their culture, but mostly they felt they were treated equally to the other students.

## 3.2. Instructional System

### 3.2.1. Relationship Building

All the teachers discussed the importance of building relationships with their students as a means of serving their gifted students from multicultural backgrounds. One teacher explained that building relationships and understanding each student was important when making instructional decisions: "Look at the holistic perspective. So, look at the whole person, not just my subject". The other teacher said, "that it is very important that they feel they belong to the group".

One of the parents requested more communication from their child's teacher so that they could better understand how the teacher was challenging their student. "Because there's the pandemic, there's been a much-reduced amount of contact, there's not the usual sort of, like, in the first year, I suppose we would have maybe chatted to the teacher when picking her up. So which is what we did in the UK, for example. And then any issue was like brought up immediately in person or something like that. But the pandemic has made that sort of communication channel, in my opinion, a bit difficult. So I mean, I know there's this messaging system . . . but it's kind of impersonal".

### 3.2.2. Grouping

Only one of the students mentioned working in groups or being grouped based on their abilities. He continued that it is more challenging for him when they are working in mixed groups, as quite often he needs to guide the group work and tell others what to do. The parents did not mention grouping. However, many teachers talked about grouping

based on ability and/or cultural background. One teacher explained that she sometimes groups her gifted multicultural students with those from the same linguistic or cultural background if they need help with assignments. Another teacher explained a flexible ability grouping strategy she employed in math. She and her colleague took turns taking the advanced math group from both classes to provide accelerated learning. She explained that this was not a typical practice used in Finland, but she felt like it was working well.

Table 8 shows some direct quote examples from interviews with students. Meeting the needs of gifted students is important, and students like Ela and Sara felt more challenged when their teachers gave them harder assignments. Ela says that when she found the work too easy, she told her teacher, who would either give her a more challenging task or allow her to work on harder ones. Sara felt that her teacher pushed her to read harder books and gives her more difficult assignments when she quickly finished her work. While these students have different backgrounds, such as Ela's English language education or Sara's Russian heritage, they do not feel that this affects the way they are treated in class. Ada, for instance, acknowledges that she feels different from other students because of her culture, but does not believe that she is any differently treated. However, Sara noted that when working with Finnish students, they spoke Finnish, but were able to freely speak Russian when no Finnish students were present.

**Table 8.** Student Interview Question Response Examples.

Interview Question	Direct Quotes	Themes
Meeting the needs of gifted students	"Well, if it's too easy, I might tell the teacher and then she'll either, like, give me a harder one, or they'll say, like you can do all of these easy ones and you can go up to this point". (Ela)	Differentiation
	"In physics we once had to make a presentation. The teacher chose the topics for each one, and me and my pair were given the most difficult one. And it was really hard. Luckily my pair was good too". (Raheem).	Grouping
Challenging gifted students	"I think [my teacher] just pushes me to do like harder books. Now I'm on third-classes books and that feels like it makes me feel more challenged". (Ela)	Differentiation
	"Yeah, for example, if I'm fast at the end of a project, they will give me the first book to read then and then the math. Then, if I have done all of that then the teachers will give me other assignments as the challenge becomes more difficult". (Sara)	Differentiation
Acknowledgement of student background	"Like definitely I feel like I'm not entirely Finnish. So my culture and my ways of thinking and talking to people that might differ, but I don't feel that I'm getting any other kind of treatment than anybody else". (Ada)	Inclusive education
	"Well, if you have to do assignments with other Finns, we speak Finnish because it would be rude and then when we are left alone and there are no Finns but we speak Russian freely". (Sara)	Language

Some direct quotes from the parent interviews are displayed in Table 9. Several themes emerged from the quotes provided by the parents. The first section relates to the identification and development of talent. One parent expressed the importance of identifying their child's strengths and nurturing them in the school environment. Another parent highlighted their child's demand for additional challenging tasks in subjects where they found the material too slow and repetitive. The second question focuses on meeting the needs of gifted students. Parents shared their opinions that Finnish schools tend to

concentrate more on struggling students and may overlook those who can perform well. Parents also discussed the importance of challenging tasks and assignments for their gifted children, which they felt were not always provided by teachers. The final question relates to the acknowledgment of the student's background. One parent reported that their child's proficiency in English resulted in some difficulties with Finnish terminology. However, another parent did not believe that their child's non-Finnish name had any influence on their education.

**Table 9.** Parent Interview Question Response Examples.

Interview Question	Direct Quotes	Themes
Identification of gifted students	"I think from my perspective it would be good if you know, her strengths were identified and kind of nourished in the school environment. And this is what seems to be happening and I hope you know it goes even further". (Diana)	Talent development
Meeting the needs of gifted students	"Mathematics is one of the things that she complained about initially that it was just too slow and she was really bored and she said that she started making mistakes because everything was just too boring and repetitive. So this is when she demanded additional things". (Peter)	Differentiation
	"We are kind of telling to him that he should also ask for more challenging tasks from the teachers, because in Finnish school they are more concentrated on students that are stuck and who are not doing good, maybe at school. Because of the resources, and this is my opinion, and the students who can who can do well, they are kind of sometimes left behind and cannot grasp everything which can be taught to them". (Hasan)	Inclusive education
Challenging gifted students	"I know that the teacher has been giving her [my daughter] harder mathematics". (Peter)	Differentiation
	"If he receives more challenging tasks or assignments then he tells them us and he was kind of proud when he received this. And we were proud that he was taking care of those and he was managing those tasks". (Hasan)	Differentiation
Acknowledgement of student background	"At the last parents meeting, the teacher said that she was struggling to give Ela harder things because she has learned maths in English. And so she will ask her in Finnish. 'Have you done multiplication before?' Obviously speaking in Finnish and Ela said no. And then the second the teacher gives her the problems she's just like, 'Oh, I know this I just didn't know the word for it'". (Peter)	Culturally other
	"I don't see there is anything, any problems with his background in his education. No, it doesn't kind of influence I believe, but for instance, because his name is not Finnish, he was asked if he needs support in Finnish language or something like this. But you know it doesn't come to my mind or at least we don't know if it is influencing him or not". (Hasan)	Culturally other
	"She's clearly becoming much, much more aware of this diversity and that she is slightly different from other children. And I think part of it comes from this frustration that she says like, well, they are adult Finnish words that she does not understand". (Peter)	Linguistically other

Table 10 shows sample responses from interviews with teachers. The responses are divided based on the topic of the interview question. In terms of identifying gifted students, teachers recognized the limitations of their identification and relied on their experience and knowledge to identify giftedness. They also acknowledged their role in researching and identifying giftedness in their class. Regarding meeting the needs of gifted students, teachers used different strategies such as challenging students with more difficult tasks. The teachers emphasized the importance of making sure gifted students felt like they belonged to the group. Finally, the teachers also recognized the importance of acknowledging the student's backgrounds and allowing them to speak in their mother tongue, but gave no mention to recognizing cultural differences when designing and implementing the curriculum. The responses provide insights into how teachers recognize and address the needs of gifted students in their classrooms.

**Table 10.** Teacher Interview Question Response Examples.

Interview Question	Direct Quotes	Themes
Identification of gifted students	"I am old enough to 'smell' it. I have such a long experience in teaching that I think I can quite easily identify giftedness but who knows, maybe I don't identify all the gifted, I might be limited in my identification and identify some kind of giftedness more easily than other kinds". (Karoliina)	Teacher knowledge
	"It is my task to identify and research this issue in my class based on my pedagogical knowledge and knowledge of the subjects I teach". (Tuija)	Teacher knowledge
Meeting the needs of gifted students	"In many ways. I like the differentiation table by Tomlinson that I use to guide differentiation with both low-achieving and high-achieving students. For gifted, I differentiate with different assignments and processes and tasks, I also use different learning environments, for example, the Internet to find ways to meet the needs of gifted students. I think it is quite easy to find small ways to differentiate, for example in discussions I ask different kinds of questions, easy ones and difficult ones depending on the student". (Tuija)	Differentiation
	"We have a group of very high achieving math students. So one of my colleagues, he's also a sixth grade teacher, so he's taking them and we have been doing this the whole year and that's the kind of like not very Finnish because we don't want to like pick them or show the others that you are not achieving so well but it is working well I think". (Suvi)	Grouping
Challenging gifted students	"I think that's very important that they feel they belong to the group". (Mina)	Culturally responsive
	"I challenge them by luring them and demanding them to do more difficult tasks". (Tuija)	Differentiation
Acknowledgement of student background	"I give them much more difficult assignments". (Mina)	Differentiation
	"I always allow students to speak in their mother tongue". (Suvi)	Culturally responsive

## 4. Discussion

This case study aimed to understand how the needs of non-native gifted students were being met in a Finnish teacher training school. In a society with a focus on equality and inclusion, it was interesting to see how non-native gifted students fit into this model.

### 4.1. Curriculum Design

The three components of curriculum design that Baldwin [1] outlines as essential when serving culturally diverse gifted students are (a) to provide diverse gifted students an opportunity to experience differentiated curriculum experiences that draw on their cultures, (b) to help students of all ethnic groups understand the bravery, the strength of character, and cleverness of various cultures, despite negative circumstance, and (c) to increase the knowledge of all students regarding the contributions of all ethnic groups. It is evident that teachers differentiate for their students.

There were no specific examples of integrating culturally relevant pedagogy into curriculum design. However, many teachers mentioned allowing non-native students to speak to their linguistic peers in their native language. Students commented on this practice as well. This allows students to comprehend curricular resources at a deeper level.

There was a clear emphasis on extra work for their gifted students. There are other attempts to differentiate that include projects, accelerated learning, and competitions. These attempts at serving gifted students are only based on ability and not student background.

### 4.2. Instructional System

On the whole, the students did not feel they were treated differently than others based on their cultural background. Ford theorizes that three factors that lead to inadequate gifted services for diverse students are deficit thinking, white privilege, and colorblind ideology [16]. Deficit thinking is when “educators hold negative, stereotypic, and counter-productive views about culturally diverse students and lower their expectations of these students accordingly” [16]. There was no evidence of deficit thinking in the teachers interviewed for this study. Parents and students also did not mention feeling less than others because they were non-native. White privilege is an interesting concept to consider when discussing it in the context of Finland. All teachers interviewed were Finnish and white and held the privileges that come along with this racial subgroup. The students were ethnically diverse and not from the dominant culture, but many would also be considered racially white. Colorblindness or culture-blindness is another barrier to overcoming underrepresentation [4]. “The philosophy and practice exist when educators/individuals intentionally or unintentionally suppress the importance of and role of culture in learning, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and expectations” [16]. Colorblindness happens when people do not see differences and treat everyone the same. It seemed unintentional on the part of the teachers to declare that they do not take their students’ cultures into account when making curricular and instructional decisions. It aligns with Finland’s focus on equality and egalitarian approaches to learning. It goes against moral and cultural values to treat students differently based on their identities.

### 4.3. Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations to this study, which must be taken into consideration when interpreting the results. Firstly, the nomination form required Finnish teachers to identify students as gifted based on a list of characteristics. In a culture where teachers do not identify students as gifted, this practice may have been foreign and unfamiliar to many teachers. Therefore, many teachers may have chosen not to nominate students for this study.

This study began at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. International visitors were prohibited from entering Finnish schools at that time. It was difficult to promote the study when all communication with teachers was digital rather than in person. More teachers may have nominated students if there was a connection to the researcher in person. Additionally,

most interviews had to be conducted via video conference because of the same reason. Interviews may have been longer and more detailed if they were conducted in-person.

Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that the training school used in this study is a special case, as the teachers are carefully selected based on high pedagogical and academic skills. Additionally, this school does not have a high percentage of students from non-native backgrounds. This means that the findings may not be representative of average schools in Finland or schools with more diverse populations. However, it is still a useful example of practices in serving non-native gifted students in Finland.

Overall, while this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of teachers, parents, and students in serving non-native gifted learners in Finland, the limitations must be considered when interpreting the findings. Further research with larger and more diverse samples would be beneficial to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Future descriptive research is needed to address the limitations of the current study and to begin addressing the large gaps in the research on this topic. It would be interesting to learn about the curricular and instructional practices of teachers in other comprehensive schools for non-native gifted learners. Multiple data sources such as direct observation would also be helpful as researchers build the research base in this area.

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this case study examined how a teacher training school in Finland addresses the educational needs of non-native gifted students within its high-achieving school system and increasing multicultural student population. The findings underscored this Finnish school's commitment to egalitarian approaches to learning and inclusive educational settings. Through interviews with non-native gifted students, their parents, and teachers, the study explored instructional strategies and curriculum design. The results revealed that teachers in this school differentiate their instruction to meet the unique needs of gifted students, and both parents and students acknowledged this effort.

These findings highlight the effectiveness of this school in catering to the needs of non-native gifted students. The emphasis on inclusive practices and differentiation demonstrates a commitment to providing equitable educational opportunities for all students, regardless of their cultural background.

It is important to note that further research and exploration are necessary to fully understand the specific strategies and policies employed by Finland in serving non-native gifted students. Additionally, future studies could investigate the long-term outcomes and academic trajectories of these students to assess the impact of Finland's approach.

Overall, this case study contributes valuable insights to the global conversation on addressing the needs of culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse gifted students worldwide, but it is only a small part of what is happening in Finland. This study shows results from a school that is known for best practices in education and the results may not be generalizable to most schools in Finland. With an increasing immigrant population in Finland, it is important to continue to analyze the educational experiences of non-native gifted students.

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## Appendix A Gifted Characteristics

**Table A1.** Traits of Giftedness [38]. No gifted individual is exactly the same, each with his own unique patterns and traits. There are many traits that gifted individuals have in common, but no gifted learner exhibits traits in every area. This list of traits may help you better understand giftedness.

Cognitive	Creative	Affective	Behavioral
		Unusual emotional depth and intensity	- Spontaneity - Boundless enthusiasm - Intensely focused on passions—resists changing activities when engrossed in own interests
- Keen power of abstraction	- Creativeness and inventiveness	- Sensitivity or empathy to the feelings of others	- Highly energetic—needs little sleep or down time
- Interest in problem-solving and applying concepts	- Keen sense of humor	- High expectations of self and others, often leading to feelings of frustration	- Constantly questions
- Voracious and early reader	- Ability for fantasy	- Heightened self-awareness, accompanied by feelings of being different	- Insatiable curiosity
- Large vocabulary	- Openness to stimuli, wide interests	- Easily wounded, need for emotional support	- Impulsive, eager and spirited
- Intellectual curiosity	- Intuitiveness	- Need for consistency between abstract values and personal actions	- Perseverance—strong determination in areas of importance
- Power of critical thinking, skepticism, self-criticism	- Flexibility	- Advanced levels of moral judgment	- High levels of frustration—particularly when having difficulty meeting standards of performance (either imposed by self or others)
- Persistent, goal-directed behavior	- Independence in attitude and social behavior	- Idealism and sense of justice	- Volatile temper, especially related to perceptions of failure
- Independence in work and study	- Self-acceptance and unconcern for social norms		- Non-stop talking/chattering
- Diversity of interests and abilities	- Radicalism		
	- Aesthetic and moral commitment to self-selected work		

## Appendix B Nomination Form Items

Item
Teacher First Name
Teacher Last Name
Preferred Email Address
Would you be willing to participate in an interview?
Student's First Name
Student's Last Name
Student's Grade Level
Student's Cultural Background
Student's Native Language
Can the student participate in an interview in English?
Which gifted characteristics does this student exhibit?

## Appendix C Interview Protocol

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### Interview Questions

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#### For parents:

How does your child feel about school?  
 What does your child's teacher do to meet the needs of your child?  
 What does your child's teacher do to make the studies challenging?  
 What are your hopes for your child's future schooling?  
 How does your child's cultural/racial/ethnic background influence their education?

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#### For students:

What do you like about school?  
 What do you not like about school?  
 What does your teacher do to make your studies challenging?  
 Describe one example of when you felt challenged in school.  
 Do your classmates receive the same schoolwork as you?  
 (For older students) Describe your past experiences with feeling challenged in school.  
 (For students who went to school in other countries) How does this school experience compare to your past school experiences?  
 How does your cultural/racial/ethnic background influence your education?  
 Do you feel different from the native Finnish students in your classroom? Provide an example.

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#### For teachers:

Describe the student you nominated for this study.  
 What traits of giftedness do they exhibit?  
 Why did you nominate them for this study?  
 How do you identify if a student is advanced in your classroom?  
 Describe how you meet the needs of gifted students in your classroom.  
 Describe how you challenge learners in your classroom.  
 How does a child's cultural/racial/ethnic background influence your instructional strategies?

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#### Scenarios for teachers:

You have a student in your class who just arrived in Finland from Syria. This student is seeking asylum with their family. The primary language at home is Arabic. The student speaks some English and no Finnish. You notice this student loves math. They take part in all math discussions in English. They are always eager for the math lessons to begin. After the first test, the student is amongst the top scorers in your class. How would you meet the needs of this student in your classroom?  
 You have a student in your class whose mother is Finnish and whose father is Polish. The student speaks Polish, English, and Finnish. You notice this student is exceptionally creative. Their writing is the best in the class. Whenever there is free time, this student reads or continues writing their short stories. While they do not have a lot of friends or socialize much with their peers, they seem generally content in the classroom. How would you meet the needs of this student in your classroom?

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