

“You’re Supposed to Feel Safe, You’re Supposed to Feel Respected, You’re Supposed to Feel Heard”: Lived Experiences of Racism in the Finnish Education System

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Abstract

Individuals who are racialised as ethnic minorities often report a host of adverse experiences during their educational careers. There has been some research on direct experiences of racism in education, but mostly in English-speaking countries. As racism can be manifested in diverse ways depending on the context, we cannot generalise from one country to another. In this pilot study, we explore lived experiences of students in Finland, a country that has a world-famous education system that is supposed to be equal for all learners. We interviewed nine university students who identified as ethnic minorities. We constructed three overarching themes, utilising

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an inductive thematic approach. These themes were (a) experiences of racism in the education system, (b) student actions and institutional and staff responses to questioning racism, and (c) consequences and impacts of racism for students. We discuss the results in the context of Finland and give recommendations for future practice.

Keywords

race/ethnicity, college/university, bullying

Introduction

Racism at all levels of education systems is a common, large-scale, and global problem. In this context, discrimination often intersects with race (i.e., skin colour and physical features), ethnicity (i.e., culture, heritage, and ancestry), and religion (i.e., islamophobia and antisemitism), manifesting in a myriad of different ways (Abbas & McNeil-Willson, 2025; Jackson, 2025). The experiences encompass racism at peer level (e.g., bullying and exclusion), teacher level (e.g., unfair treatment and use of racist terminology), and structural level (e.g., discriminatory institutional practises and colonialist approach to teaching; Abel et al., 2024; Leath et al., 2021; Lincoln & Stanley, 2021; Wong et al., 2021, 2022; Zacheus et al., 2019). Racism in education is often subtle, covert, and indirect (Ikuenobe, 2011; Ogunyemi et al., 2020). It can be presented in the form of microaggressions, everyday low-intensity events that send a negative message to the targets who belong to minoritised groups (Ogunyemi et al., 2022). Due to their subtle nature, racism can be challenging to identify and deal with. Nevertheless, all kinds of racism have been conceptualised as acts of violence (Sanders-Phillips, 2009). Being a target of racial discrimination relates to multiple adverse outcomes, including mental health difficulties, lower academic performance, and suspension of studies (Brown, 2015; Stoll et al., 2022). Understanding and combatting racism in education is a global fight, with calls for making it a top priority in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (Walker et al., 2023).

Experiences of racism, as well as the whole concept of race/ethnicity in the education systems, are highly context-specific (Jackson, 2025), and we should not automatically expect that one country is the same as another. Therefore, it is important to start empirical investigations with a bottom-up, inductive, emic approach when exploring relatively under-investigated educational contexts and topics (Matthews & López, 2020). In this research, we are interested in the lived experiences of racism in education in the

historically and culturally unique context of Finland. The education system of the small Nordic country has been hailed as “a success story other countries can emulate” (Morgan, 2014). Despite a recent decline, pupils in Finland still score above the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) country average in many indicators of academic performance, as measured by the Programme for International Student Assessment (OECD, 2023). Academic performance aside, the education system in Finland is supposed to be equitable and accessible to all, with publicly funded free schooling from primary up to higher education, free school meals, and free transport to school for pupils living in remote areas (Basic Education Act, 1998). Despite the successes, the system reproduces inequalities for minoritised groups of learners (Corral-Granados et al., 2025), leading to educational attainment gaps between students from migrant and non-migrant backgrounds (Zacheus et al., 2017).

Traditionally, Finland has been portrayed as a culturally, ethnically, and racially homogeneous society, where most of the population is of White, Finnish heritage (Keskinen et al., 2019). With changing migration patterns, the society and the education systems have become more diverse, but the education systems and academic scholarship on racism have not kept up with these changes (Sommier & Roiha, 2017). This could be partially due to colour-evasiveness (i.e., denying the significance of race) and exceptionalism (i.e., the perceived superiority of the Finnish education system; Alemanji, 2016; Alemanji & Mafi, 2018; Rastas, 2012). There is currently limited research exploring racism in education in Finland.

Increasing the understanding of lived experiences of racism in Finland is timely, especially in the context of increasing xenophobia, islamophobia, and anti-Black discrimination (FRA, 2023; Tessieri, 2024). For instance, a European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (i.e., FRA) demonstrated that Finland was among the most racist countries in Europe for first- and second-generation individuals with Black African heritage (FRA, 2023). Educational institutions tend to reflect what happens in society at large (Arneback & Jämte, 2022), which makes investigations around racism in education a top priority. Indeed, the high levels of racism in society, coupled with an increasing number of learners from ethnically or culturally diverse backgrounds highlight the fundamental importance of researching racism in the education systems in Finland.

The few studies in this context have discovered that racism is a pervasive issue, from primary and secondary levels up to university education. At a structural level, racism in Finland is visible in the colonialist curriculum (Kohvakka, 2022; Mikander, 2023). At an interpersonal level, racism is often masked as a joke (Loukola et al., 2025; Zacheus et al., 2019 for secondary,

and Souto & Lappalainen, 2025 for the university setting), which makes it difficult to question (Zacheus et al., 2019). When students try to raise issues about their lived experiences, they are faced with White fragility and ignorance, negating their experiences (Souto & Lappalainen, 2025). Racial slurs from peers are not dealt with by the teachers, and the targets of racism are easily blamed for being too sensitive (Rastas, 2009). However, learners also have strengths (e.g., resistance, aspirational, linguistic, familial, and social capital) that help them to cope effectively with experiences of racialisation inside and outside the educational institution (Enns-Kananen, 2021). Aside from a few academic articles and some media reporting, we currently know very little about racism in the Finnish education system.

The current research is a pilot study that explores the experiences of individuals who are racialised as ethnic minorities in the context of Finland. We utilise a qualitative inductive approach as this is a powerful and robust method for exploring racism from a lived perspective (Abreu & Williams, 2025). The interviews are analysed with reference to the research question “What are the lived experiences of racism in the education system in Finland, from the perspective of students who are racialised as ethnic minorities in this context?”

Method

Participants

We had a total of nine participants (five women and four men) who were university students self-identifying as belonging to an ethnic minority. Of these, two were first generation (born abroad and moved to Finland), and six were second generation (born in Finland, but at least one of their parents was born abroad). One participant did not disclose this information. The participants were students in diverse disciplines (e.g., economics, humanities, education, natural sciences, technical science, law, and social sciences) from six Universities. Six interviews were held on university premises, and three via secure remote connections. The interviews lasted from 30 to 75 min. The original theme of the interviews was around the role of bystanders in racism, and these analyses will be reported elsewhere. During initial analyses, it became obvious that there were rich descriptions that did not fit the original idea (i.e., bystanders in racism). We decided to conduct a secondary analysis, but with a focus on experiences of racism throughout the years in education.

Eight of the participants were sampled via word of mouth and contacts of one of the researchers (FM). One participant left their details after an online survey (results reported in Lyons et al., 2026), indicating their willingness to

participate in an interview. Participants were asked about some background variables (gender/gender identity, field of study, country of birth, parent's country of birth, and ethnic minority identity). These will not be reported in the study to protect confidentiality.

Of the interviewers, one identified as being racialised as Black (FM), and two others identified as being racialised as White (TZ and a female student research assistant) in the context of Finland. FM interviewed seven, and TZ (together with the assistant) interviewed two individuals. The importance of having a Black interviewer cannot be understated, as the participants clearly felt more comfortable sharing their experiences (Mizock et al., 2011). One of the interviews was in Finnish, and the rest were in English. The Finnish interview was translated into English by TZ and audited by ML. The interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and transcribed word for word.

After giving informed consent by signing a written consent form, the participants were informed that they did not have to talk about anything that they were not ready to discuss and that they could end the interview at any point without giving an explanation. The interviewers also created a safe space following antiracism practices, which allowed the students to have moments of breathing if they felt overwhelmed with emotions or were triggered by racial trauma (Chilisa, 2019). The study gained ethical approval from the University of Helsinki Ethical Review Board in Humanities and Social and Behavioral Sciences [2/2023].

The analysis of the interviews was data-driven, using an inductive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021). All three researchers (FM, TZ, and ML) read the interviews several times. One of the researchers (ML) devised an initial coding system for sections of the interviews that discussed experiences in the education system, from primary and secondary education to further, higher, and adult education. She organised the codes into initial themes, which were audited by FM and TZ. During this process, the codes were rearranged from four to three themes that are broader reflections of the participants' experiences.

All three researchers have experience of mixed methods investigations of racism in Finland. ML (a White woman) and TZ (a White man) do not have direct experiences of being targets of racism but have observed it as bystanders. ML has also witnessed racism against close family members, including towards her children in the school environment. FM, as a Black Zimbabwean woman living in Finland, has direct experiences of racism in the education system and through her children's experiences. FM conducted a workshop with the White team members on antiracism reflexivity and Whiteness, which further supported our approach to the project. We have collectively engaged in racism research, activism, and self-reflections (e.g., on White privilege).

We feel that the team, collectively, was able to connect with the students' stories and convey them in a fair and representative way.

Findings

We constructed three broader themes from the responses. These were named (a) experiences of racism in the education system, (b) student actions and institutional and staff responses to questioning racism, and (c) consequences and impacts of racism for students.

Theme 1: Experiences of Racism in the Education System

This theme broadly captures the types of experiences at different levels of schooling. Participants discussed how they had been targets of racism throughout, from primary and secondary education to university. One participant noted how "The first time was first grade. . . when I came across racism. Then like, in uni as well. And pretty much every school I've been in" (P3). Racism in education was also discussed in terms of being a visible minority in schools that have very little diversity, which linked to being a target of racism. P5 recalled how the racism was bad throughout the different grades in school throughout the years of education ". . . especially where I grew up, in [city] and you know it's a small city. Me and my siblings, we were the only foreigners in school with . . . Trust me, it was very rough. It was actually rough." This sentiment was echoed in other participants, "Let's say it like this, in kindergarten, I was the only dark-skinned person. Elementary school, we were the only dark-skinned persons . . . And then high school was my first dark-skinned friends" (P1), and ". . . here in Finland, I feel like I'm . . . I'm different. I feel like I'm a red dot in the snow just walking around" (P5). One participant explained how her minority status linked to being a scapegoat when negative things happened in school ". . . in my grade, I was the only Black person. So, every time, like something happens, I have to respond, you know?" (P7).

Participants discussed experiences of diverse forms of racism, from direct and derogatory comments to more subtle microaggressions, such as differential treatment, social exclusion, questioning language abilities, and masking racism as a joke. Racism was perpetrated by educators, other students, and the whole educational system. At a more structural level, participants criticised the teaching curricula. When the Global South was mentioned, it was always in the context of something negative. Most examples, theories, and research were drawn from Western literature. According to one participant:

But I think that for me, the most obvious one that I often see in the university is how the academic curriculum is so whitewashed that, you know, the examples and the books that the literature that are available, they are all mostly Western literature and everything. . . All the examples of negative things are mostly from the Global South sovereign countries. . . The literature that is available is really whitewashed and the lectures that are. . . only from White sources. . . Whiteness is the order of the day to go with. (P4)

Other students had similar experiences of structural racism in the Finnish curriculum. For example,

. . . in classes, it's not necessarily always about you. Sometimes it is in, like, courses and stuff. When we are discussing, like Africa or . . . minority groups and stuff, it's the tone and the way people speak about it that is very ignorant and like racist . . . trying to make you seem like it's relating to biology and not, like, education possibilities in the country, for example. (P7)

Attempts to discuss topics relating to race issues were deemed challenging. One student talked about how, in their university course, the teacher asked students to vote on the content for the lectures. There were several ethnic minority students who suggested a subject that was around race and how the voices of people of colour were portrayed in the media. The participant disclosed how “. . . then in this class our teacher brought up all of the different subjects that the students had come up with . . . and she never mentioned this particular, like, subject . . .” (P2). This demonstrates that racism in university is also about the refusal to include diverse voices and perspectives in education.

As well as structural and perhaps more subtle racism, participants talked about experiences of direct racism. Especially in high school, racism was often direct name-calling, sometimes perpetrated by the teachers as well as other pupils. P7 explained how “. . . earlier in my, like, education history, like in schools and stuff . . . sometimes the teachers would be very direct about it . . . you would know which teachers are racist and. . . they wouldn't even hide it . . . They would say the n-word. I had this biology teacher in high school and everybody knew he was racist . . .” Another participant disclosed similar experiences, “So then high school . . . I had a teacher . . . who would say . . . out loud this n-word . . .” (P1). The racism that the participants had experienced in secondary education was open and easy to identify.

In the university context, however, racism was more subtle, “. . . in universities, as I said, it's not as direct as it was in, like high school and middle school . . .” (P7). The same participant noted that despite the hidden nature,

racism is noticeable to individuals who have a lifelong experience of being targets “. . . But most of my experience has been indirect in a sense, like you’re treating me differently. And because I live in Finland, I kind of . . . you learn how to recognise racism pretty quickly.” Another example of subtle racism was demonstrated in the lack of opportunities to answer questions in class. One participant discussed how “. . . this form of racism is . . . very subtle. Like, let’s say if I’m putting my hand up to answer, I never get picked. And I have in my class, it’s me and a [background] with a hijab and one [background] girl. So, we are a minority in 40 students” (P5). This kind of unfair treatment was obvious and visible to students from ethnic minorities.

Another form of racism was the denial of academic opportunities. One participant disclosed how he became a target of discrimination by the teachers because of his religion, which also led to difficulties when applying for a foreign exchange. The participant recalled how he left the class for a prayer in his university, and the lecturer made it a big deal, stating that it was inappropriate. The repercussions were that the student was discriminated against when he applied for an exchange place in another country:

And then she pulled out my exchange paper application to the table, and she said, like, ‘I have this paper here. I just want to ask you one question before I give you the opportunity to go there’. And I said, ‘Well, what is it, like?’ . . . And she said, like, ‘now if you were to go to this specific country for exchange, are you going to leave the classes for prayer as well?’ That one was . . . really the biggest signs of racism that I’ve never seen in this school. (P9)

Another student believed that she was treated differently by her lecturer in an employment decision at the university. Despite similarities in qualifications and experiences, the student was not selected for an interview, but her White friend was. The participant had already had suspicions about the lecturer, which were confirmed during the recruitment process “. . . then one position she was in charge of . . . immediate rejection. And then I was like, okay, whatever. And then the girl that got the position, she was my friend. And later on we were talking and then she told me that she heard the teacher, like the planning officer, say something racist” (P7). These experiences suggest that racism can lead to fewer opportunities also in extra-curricular employment.

Participants also gave examples of open racism in university. For example, a lecturer “. . . made his own book where he talked in a very racist tone about Muslims being filthy. . . saying horrible things like our Prophet Muhammad is gay or paedophile. And there was a lot of things like about Black people, about this and this and that. . .” (P5). This demonstrates that

openly racist comments are not only limited to compulsory education but also take place in higher education and can be manifested in the way that the staff prepares and uses their teaching materials.

Racism was also manifested in questioning integrity and honesty based on race/ethnicity. One person recalled how students were assigned into small groups to work on a project in university, “. . . then when we had asked to be also put as a group of four, just like: ‘I don’t think I can do that because I can’t trust you guys’. And then I asked, like, ‘why is it you can’t trust us?’ And her response was: ‘Look at you guys’. And I think that was a form of racism. . . . Our group was all minority from different places of the world, and the other groups were all Finnish” (P9). These kinds of comments implied that the teaching staff assumed that individuals from non-Finnish backgrounds are not trustworthy. As well as questioning a person’s honesty, language, and accents were also targets of racist comments. One participant described how

. . . when the African person speaks. . . the White students don’t understand what you’re saying. . . I think there’s a racist mindset to that, like. . . ‘Oh, anyway, we know that English is not your language’. But then there are many who are in the class are well, that English is not their first language, it’s not a native language and they are not good in English. But people listen to them and understand what they are saying. And you don’t understand, [name]. You don’t understand [name] what he’s saying because it’s Africans, you know? (P4)

Participants also talked about how their Finnish language abilities were questioned in university because of their skin colour, “. . . I could speak Finnish and I understand Finnish and. . . and I’ve been here ten years so I could. . . cope with Finnish studies. But as soon as they saw my name, they put me with the foreigners that just came to Finland, like, in the same month. . . I tried to tell my teacher so many times, but they didn’t want to listen to me. . .” (P9).

This theme highlights how participants discussed racism as diverse, common, and persistent throughout all levels of schooling. They disclosed experiences at the interpersonal level, perpetrated by teachers and other students. It was also manifested in the curriculum and the type of discussions that were “allowed.” Racism was viewed as more open in compulsory education and more subtle in the university context.

Theme 2: Student Actions and Institutional and Staff Responses to Questioning Racism

Students talked about different actions that they had taken during their educational careers to combat racism. These varied from direct questioning of

the racist acts to filing official complaints. However, due to potential adverse consequences, some participants did not act (see also Theme 3). The attempts to complain were met with a host of negative responses, such as silence, jokes, negating racism, and gaslighting the targets into thinking that they were wrong, or too sensitive. In addition, students risked retaliation from their teachers, for example, in the form of lower grades.

Especially when discussing incidents of direct racism, participants felt that they could also respond directly. They recalled confronting secondary school teachers directly, “. . . I said to him in the class, like, ‘because you said it in front of everyone, so I’m going to respond to you in front of everyone’. When he didn’t give me, like, the chance to speak, so I just spoke up. So, I was like, ‘what do you mean by that?’” (P7), and, “. . . I told her that, ‘I don’t think you have any need to say. . . the word out loud’. . . Then I said, ‘hey, that’s it, this class had four dark-skinned people. These are four dark-skinned people and you can see from our four faces. . . you said something that is a statement that is sick’ (P1). These comments suggest that when racism is expressed openly, it can also be easier to address directly. Open racism was also confronted directly when it was perpetrated by the peers. One person explained how they dealt with racist and ignorant remarks “. . . I just like directly speak to them. And then when you question them in front of everyone, then they get flustered and embarrassed and they’re going to go, I didn’t mean it that way. And I was like, you chose your words, so. . .” (P7). When participants tried to talk about racism with their classmates, they were met with indifference:

. . . talk with this to my classmates and they told me, ‘you know, it is what it is. Ei voi mitään. You just move on, move on’. And I told them, you are White. You’re not allowed to say that. I can say that if I feel like that. But you’re not allowed to say that to me. I understand your point because you never experienced anything. Obviously, if I never experienced this type of behaviour or racism, I would be as ignorant as you. I’m not. (P5)

This quote highlights how the students attempted to educate White Finns about racism, trying to make them see things from the perspective of the students who are racialised as Black.

Participants recounted how confronting racist teachers resulted in further gaslighting where the accused individual feigned innocence. According to one participant, the teacher “. . . tried to ignore me first because, like, I raised my hand and then he tried to ignore me. And then when he didn’t give me, like, the chance to speak, so I just spoke up. So, I was like, ‘what do you mean by that?’ And then he was like, ‘with what?’” (P7). Other participants had

similar experiences of ignorance “. . . I have a Finnish friend and then the teacher treats me bad and then the Finnish friend realises and was like, wondering why. . . then we both go and ask, like, ‘what’s the problem?’ And then the teacher could just be like, ‘I don’t know what you’re talking’, or just be acting dumb. Then it really doesn’t really help” (P9).

Gaslighting the participants into making them feel like racism did not take place or accusing the students of being too sensitive were also among the responses. For instance, one participant talked about how her lecturer made her feel like she was in the wrong when she challenged him about racist content in the lecturer’s book “. . . you know, my teachers are [occupation]. They’re very good at arguments and gaslighting back. And I remember one time I said something about with this teacher that had this racist book and he. . . gaslighted me into thinking that I was in the wrong” (P5). As well as gaslighting, participants were blamed for being too sensitive. One person recalled how they verbally confronted a high school teacher about racism and was targeted with an angry response, “. . . and then he was like, ‘yeah, that’s the problem with you people, that you take everything so sensitively’. . . and then he just went on a rant” (P7). These comments demonstrate how directly addressing the issue with the perpetrator could also result in further victimisation of the targets of racism.

Students also escalated their complaints to higher levels (e.g., to school/university leadership). However, this rarely led to any action. For instance “. . . and we made a complaint about him [the racist teacher]. Like previously, students made a complaint about him. . . and nothing happened” (P5). Students felt like filing complaints was pointless, as racism was brushed under the carpet:

I feel like that’s a problem with like institutionalised racism in a sense. Like, would it really even help if I would do a complaint? It doesn’t go anywhere. I’m using my energy and time for me to complain about you, but you are buddies with that supervisor, just like nothing’s going to happen to you, you know that. I know that. So, does it actually make a difference? In my opinion, it doesn’t in the current state. (P7)

Also, escalating to higher levels resulted in “closing ranks,” where the staff who perpetrated racism were protected. A participant who decided to file a complaint about a lecturer disclosed how “They told us that it’s his opinions and he is a good professor because his. . . CV is so like up here. And they just, like brushed it under the carpet” (P5). Participants recalled how emails complaining about teachers or asking for policies around racism were left unanswered. This demonstrates how universities do not have an effective

route to raising issues around racism, and students felt like complaining is a pointless exercise.

Those who objected were also targets of retaliation. One participant spoke about how a complaint resulted in lower grades, “. . . I tried to stand up once to. . . to the racist teacher saying horrible things about Muslims. . . I told him, ‘yeah, this is not true’. Then I saw it in my grade” (P5). This makes it difficult to deal with racism, as the risks to the individual students can be high.

In summary, this theme demonstrated different direct (e.g., talking directly to the perpetrators) and indirect (e.g., complaining about the perpetrators) ways of intervening when observing or experiencing racism. The responses to complaints were often negative, turning the students into targets of further racism. The participants were gaslit to think that racism did not take place. The perpetrators of racism pleaded ignorance (i.e., the person did not mean to be racist, or it was a joke) and dismissed the experiences (i.e., the student is too sensitive).

Theme 3: Consequences and Impacts of Racism for Students

This theme outlines diverse consequences and personal impacts of experiencing racism in the education system. Participants talked about a range of emotions, being silenced and disempowered, and feeling like they do not belong in the education setting or society.

One participant disclosed how racism in the university setting was more harmful than racism experienced outside the university:

. . . I feel like when you get racially discriminated in a big institution such as a university, where you are supposed to feel already as a student . . . you are supposed to feel safe, you are supposed to feel respected, you are supposed to feel heard. And if those needs are not met in a university, then I think it creates even more uncertainty and fear. Because in your everyday life, you might meet people who . . . aren’t significant to you . . . even if they say slurs or if they, you know, follow you or whatever, you can get past it, you can get over it. But since you have to attend a university every single day of your life and you have to show up, you have to be around these people, it affects you a lot harder . . . it’s easier, I think, to deal with it, outside of . . . of an institution or an organisation in your everyday life. (P6)

Experiences of racism made the students feel like they do not belong, which could lead to dropping out of education. According to one participant, “I think I felt discouraged to like, I guess continue with the . . . with the course in a way” (P2). When attempts to complain about racism were ignored,

students wanted to stay quiet, finish their degrees, and move on. One participant recalled how his complaint about racism was ignored, and how “. . .at that moment I realised that this is a sign. . .Let me not push it, you know? So, I just accepted that I just need to finish my degree. . .” (P3).

Anger and humiliation were common emotions. One participant disclosed how he had to lie to a study coordinator to receive approval to attend an exchange programme at a foreign university. Previously, the participant had left the classroom to pray, which the instructor called into question. The participant felt outraged and humiliated,

So, at that point, I had to lie. I just told her that, ‘hey, of course when I go to exchange, it’s different. I’m not going to put, like the university name in jeopardy, da daa. So, yeah, don’t worry about that’. And she is like, ‘all right, good. Good to hear. You know, then you can go, I’m going to send this. Perfect’. And when I left that place, I’ve never felt so humiliated. Never. (P9)

Another participant talked about an event in university where her Black, Muslim classmate was targeted by a racist joke from the lecturer. This caused anger in the participant, and apparent confusion and embarrassment in the target of the racist comment: “White people laughed. I was so angry. I tried to keep it inside because I can’t just say I was, like. . . I was like, ‘oh, my God. Like, what is happening? And this is very rude’. The girl. . .the girl was very confused. She kind of laughed. She was very embarrassed and could see she was very uncomfortable and that the teacher just brushed it off and continued to the next topic” (P5).

Participants also felt fearful, silenced, and powerless. For example, “. . .I got scared. . .I haven’t opened my mouth. If something happens, everyone is silent. We don’t complain anymore. It’s just like we just have to go through this . . . Like keep the peace” (P5). The same participant talked about how her classmate who was a target of racism said “. . .it’s better to laugh than start something. At the end of the day, I’m a Black girl. . .I’m tired. I’m just going to focus on my grades in school. If they want to bash me, say stuff, whatever.”

The culture of fear made the students feel like they do not have power, which also impacted self-esteem in a negative way. P9 disclosed that “. . .in my head, I feel like, you know, okay, if I make a big deal about this at the end, I’m going to end up being the wrong. . .in the wrong, you know? So, I’m just like, like, there’s no point. . .it makes you feel weak. . .And it hurts your self-esteem. You know? It makes you feel powerless, basically.” Another participant explained how “It’s so hard to go fight against something as a student.

Like you feel so powerless. . . It's like shock and shame in a sense. And like, you feel yourself very small" (P5).

Experiences of racism in education are also linked to loneliness and a lack of sense of belonging. One person disclosed how they ". . . have distanced myself from people who, for example, said racist things or. . . or I saw something that they didn't resonate with me. I just remove myself. . . I just go to study and I go home. . . I want to just study, focus on my school. I have my friends outside of uni and that's it. That's enough for me" (P5).

One of the consequences of racism was that students had to think about how to approach student parties and events. Racism (e.g., racist jokes) was common in these settings, often fuelled by alcohol. When racism happened at parties, it often was unchallenged. This could prevent the students from attending events, for example, ". . . I don't want to go alone and be the only foreigner. It's very uncomfortable. . . Especially in the university settings. Because there's no one to understand you. . . someone might say, like, N-word, and you're like, 'hey, why did you say that?' And everyone is just listening silently. No one is saying, 'hey, she's right', backing me up" (P5).

In summary, this theme highlighted how being targets of racism related to multiple negative emotions. It led to feelings of anger, humiliation, fear, and powerlessness. It also reduced feelings of belonging to education and society. Participants talked about how they avoided student events because of racism. They discussed how they wished to keep their heads down, focus on finishing their studies, and move on with their lives.

Discussion

We constructed three overarching, interlinking themes from the interviews with students who were racialised as ethnic minorities in the context of Finland. Our explorations demonstrated how racism was common throughout all levels of education and manifested itself in diverse forms. Despite student attempts, racism was resistant to change. In addition, it affected the students in multiple adverse ways, showing how racism in education influenced racial trauma. Below, we will discuss the themes, connecting them to each other, as well as to recommendations for practise.

In Theme 1, we demonstrated how racism was apparent at all levels, from primary and secondary to further and higher education. Participants talked about how it was direct and visible (e.g., name-calling), especially in lower educational levels. In university, however, racism was more indirect, subtle, and difficult to tackle. In the higher education context, racism is often perpetrated in the form of everyday, low-intensity, negative microaggressions towards individuals

who are racialised as minorities (Ogunyemi et al., 2020). Microaggressions were clear in the recollections of our participants, who also discussed how racism was manifested in the form of jokes, differential treatment, or ignorance or unwillingness to deal with issues surrounding racism. These are all common experiences reported in other studies from the educational context in Finland (Loukola et al., 2025; Souto & Lappalainen, 2025; Zacheus et al., 2019). They have also been reported in other countries with distinctive educational systems, such as the United States and Canada (Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Tran, 2024), the United Kingdom (Morrison et al., 2023), and Australia (Gonzales et al., 2023).

Microaggressions are also present in the environmental/institutional cues that transmit a message of being unwelcome, devalued, or invisible. Curriculum, for example, can send a hostile message about a person's cultural group by making it invisible or depicting it in a denigrating manner (Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Steketee et al., 2021). Our participants discussed how their learning experiences were shadowed by colonialist curricula and the avoidance of discussing topics around racism in the classroom. The curriculum in Finland ignores minority perspectives (Kohvakka, 2022; Mikander, 2023), and the absence of diversity was visible to our participants, recalled at all levels of education. Colonialist teaching materials and practises can affect the sense of belonging of students who are racialised as minorities (Arday et al., 2021). This is an important issue to tackle, as a sense of belonging (also a topic of our Theme 3) relates to educational outcomes, such as academic achievement (Fong et al., 2024).

In Theme 2, we showed how schoolteachers and university lecturers were not willing to facilitate classroom discussions around race and racism. Indeed, faculty responses to students who wished to raise the issue of racism demonstrated ignorance, denial, and discomfort that exemplifies White fragility. DiAngelo (2011) coined White fragility as a reaction to situations where even a minimal challenge to White position triggers emotional reactions. The negative reactions are barriers to constructive discussions and turn the individuals racialised as the majority into the "victims" of unfair treatment (e.g., the concept of "White tears"; Liebow & Glazer, 2023). In the education context of Finland, the teachers and peers reacted with ignorance, emotions, or indifference, sometimes gaslighting the targets of racism to think that they were wrong.

The teachers' reactions reported in Theme 2 could also link to the exceptionalist ideology that overshadows the Finnish education system (Alemanji, 2016). If educators perceive the system as fair, equal for all, and superior to other countries, they may be unwilling to admit that there are flaws. For instance, the Finnish teacher education brands itself as exceptional, while

ignoring human rights, equality, and racism. Rather than reducing inequalities, teacher education in Finland reproduces them (Kasa et al., 2024). Antiracism efforts in Finland would benefit from dismantling the illusion of exceptionality, which could facilitate the acknowledgement that racism is an issue in the education system.

Indeed, our study suggests that one of the pressing issues is the lack of understanding of what racism is and the unwillingness to admit that it happens. In the historically predominantly White education system of Finland, the discourses around race and racism are stifled. In a similar way as in the other Nordic countries, in our results, discriminatory educational practises were enacted via two mechanisms – everyday racism and the denial of racism (Dovemark, 2013; Graniz, 2013). This links to secondary microaggressions, which also unify all our three themes. Secondary microaggressions happen when the targets of racism are subjected to dismissive reactions when they try to report or talk about their experiences (Johnson et al., 2021). This can lead to additional psychological harm, in addition to the primary abuse. In our results, when participants tried to raise issues about racism that they had experienced (Theme 1), they were met with racist responses (Theme 2), which linked to a host of negative outcomes (e.g., anger, powerlessness, and Theme 3).

Indeed, as highlighted in Theme 3, our participants disclosed several adverse consequences of racism in education. For example, one result was a low sense of belonging and withdrawing from the learning and social spaces. Participants wanted to just “keep their heads down,” finish the education, and move on. They sometimes avoided social gatherings because of racism, which could also exacerbate feelings of loneliness and lack of belonging to the educational institution. These experiences seem to be common and understandable responses to racism, mirroring findings from multiple other countries and educational contexts (Ezizwelu, 2020; Kennedy et al., 2023; Papp, 2024; Waite et al., 2024).

In addition to loneliness and sense of belongingness, participants talked about a range of negative emotions. Anger, shame, and confusion were commonly discussed experiences. These related to the sense of powerlessness and low self-esteem, which has also been linked to internalised racism (Roberson & Pieterse, 2021). The psychological stress response to racism has been coined as the “racial battle fatigue,” which was invented to describe the experiences of Black students on historically White campuses in the United States (Smith et al., 2011). The psychological toll that our participants in Finland discussed was similar to descriptions of racial battle fatigue from other studies (Quaye et al., 2020). Racism in the “success story” of the Finnish educational system has a major negative influence on the

psychological well-being of racialised minorities, underscoring the importance and urgency of developing strategies to tackle it.

This study has some shortcomings and should be considered a pilot. The discussion topics were mainly around racism and the negative impact it has on students. Future studies should explore other aspects of being a minoritised student in Finland. For instance, resilience and strengths (Ennserr-Kananen, 2021) and strategies for collective well-being (Badio et al., 2024) are important, but under-investigated topics that could give educational institutes directions on how to facilitate more positive educational experiences. Our sample size was small and did not allow us to investigate the diversity within students racialised as minorities. It would be interesting to look at the similarities and differences in the experiences of individuals from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, as well as people living in diverse regions of Finland. The local context and individual, intersecting identities could have a major influence on how racism is experienced (Rask et al., 2018).

The findings of the study have implications for recommendations for practise in Finland. To work on White fragility, Finnish exceptionalism, and secondary victimisation (i.e., not believing/listening to complaints about racist treatment), there should be a stronger focus on antiracism initiatives, from teacher education to continuous professional development training at all levels of education, aimed at both staff and students. Another important action is to start the process of decolonising education, including cultural materials that do not reproduce racism (Mkwesha & Huber, 2021). In addition, one potentially fruitful avenue is bystander training – teaching bystanders to intervene safely could change social norms and impact the whole campus environment positively (Lyons et al., 2026). Furthermore, bystanders and targets of racism need safe, effective, and anonymous channels for complaining about racism (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019). The education institutes in Finland should work not only towards inclusive practise but also towards useful management of complaints.

In summary, our interviews with nine students racialised as ethnic minorities in the context of Finland revealed multiple adverse experiences throughout all levels of education. Students' complaints about racism were met with hostility or indifference, resulting in further alienation from the education system. The experiences of racism affected the students in multiple ways, from adverse educational outcomes to social and psychological outcomes. We recommend that the issue of racism should be urgently addressed in the Finnish education system. This would work towards ensuring equal educational opportunities for all students and also addressing several of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

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