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Article

Migrant-Background Student Experiences of Facing and Overcoming Difficulties in Finnish Comprehensive Schools

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Abstract: This article considers what students with a migrant background in Finnish comprehensive schools report as difficult, and how they succeed in overcoming these difficulties. We draw on two sets of school wellbeing and learning surveys for migrant students, conducted in 2016 and 2021 in comprehensive schools (grades 1–9) in and around two major cities in Finland. We pay attention to student answers to three questions: What is difficult in school? How do you succeed in difficult tasks in school? and Who helps you in school? The datasets from the two points in time are compared to see whether changes in school demographic situation and the student length of stay in Finland had an impact on student experiences. Our findings show that theory-based school subjects that depend strongly on language, such as science subjects, maths, Finnish, Swedish and English, are considered difficult. Additionally, interaction with peers, which also relies on language, causes challenges. The students report turning to teachers, other professionals and peers for assistance and support, and also mention personal strategies they have developed to overcome school-related difficulties. Understanding what migrant students find difficult, as well as how, and with the help of whom, they overcome such difficulties is crucial for the development of effective and sensitive pedagogical practices.

Keywords: migrant students; culturally responsive teaching; linguistically responsive teaching; school success; multicultural education; Finland

1. Introduction

When migrant background students (in this paper referring to students who (1) were born abroad or whose parents were born abroad; and (2) speak first languages other than their school's language of instruction) enrol in a school in their new home countries, they start several simultaneous processes of adapting. If the language of instruction is not their first language, students start to acquire a new language of learning. If they have been schooled in another country, they adapt to a new curriculum and school system. If they have missed formal education, which is often the case for children coming from crisis areas, they need to catch up with their peers not only in learning the contents of school subjects, but also in becoming familiar with the routines of schooling. On top of these school-related challenges, their experiences of migration might make them vulnerable to emotional issues, such as stress of separation from their past social and familial networks [1,2]. Migrating to a new life situation might bring positive change for a child's family, but it can also bring loneliness and unfamiliar cultural and social norms. The feeling of being alone or lost is perhaps greatest for migrant students who have recently arrived in their new host countries [3,4].

When learning a language, people are "doing things in language, through language, and with language" [5] (p. 64). Consequently, when students are learning the language and

learning through the language simultaneously, linguistically responsive teachers should pay attention to teaching language while teaching the content at the same time [6,7]. Students also start a process of developing a sense of belonging with their new peers and other actors in their new social spaces through processes that also require language and communication. Some of this development happens naturally in the interactions between children. However, the conditions for it can also be fostered from the outside. Adult professionals can create welcoming, safe environments [8] and support migrant student adaptation and wellbeing in the new school environment. They can also support migrant student learning of, and through, language.

In this article, we explore the experiences of migrant children and youth who study Finnish as a second language (the term Finnish as a second language (F2) is used in the Finnish educational documents, even though many students speak more than one language in addition to Finnish). Our aim is to understand what these students find difficult in school, how they overcome difficulties in school and how teachers, other educational professionals or other people can help them. Our focus is not only on listing the challenges these students face; we also aim to show how, and with the help of whom, students overcome these difficulties. We acknowledge that some of the issues we discuss are not exclusive to recently arrived migrant students; they are also experienced by children of migrants who identify more closely with a culture and language that is not those of the classroom. Yet, as explained later in this article, it is noteworthy that the first stage of the survey (2016) was conducted just after the so-called 'refugee crisis' (similar to, for example, [9] and [10], we consider the events leading to increasing forced migration in 2015 to be a crisis of humanity, politics, protection and solidarity, rather than a crisis of refugees) of 2015, when the number of asylum seekers in Europe increased tenfold. This means that the first group of respondents in this study included many recently arrived refugee students. Students who migrate from areas of conflict often face complex educational, social and emotional challenges stemming from their forced migration experiences and from their often limited or interrupted education [3,8,11,12]. Although the students' refugee or other migrant backgrounds do not determine their educational outcomes, they might contribute to a number of particular challenges, as well as particular strengths [13], that need to be taken into consideration in their education. What is important is that teachers simultaneously build on students' strengths and find ways to address their challenges.

2. Migrant Student Learning

Research on migrant student learning predominantly focused on second language development, as well as "bridging learning gaps" to help students catch up with their peers (see, for example, [4,14]. The focus on language learning is understandable, as it is a dimension that unites most migrant students regardless of their background. Yet in many other ways, migrant learners are as diverse as any other groups of students. Some migrate from countries with well-developed education systems, while others come from areas offering very limited chances for good quality formal education. Some students are literate in their first languages, while others are not. Recent studies have begun to more fully address this diversity and recognise the fact that, regardless of their background, migrant children and youth are first and foremost learners. Regardless of their nationality or backgrounds, they have the right to equal and high-quality education, granted in international conventions and domestic legislation [15] (see also [16,17]).

2.1. Language Learning

Language and language learning are essential parts of migrant-background student schooling: students are both learning the language and learning through the language [18]. To provide optimal learning opportunities for these students, teachers need to understand the mechanisms of language learning, as well as the role of language in other learning. This means teachers need to have skills to support language learners during all lessons [7,19–21]. Linguistically responsive teachers should be able to provide learning strategies for their

students, guide their work explicitly, and take their students' prior knowledge and skills into account when designing and implementing their instruction [7,20,22]. Teachers should also recognise students' first languages as learning resources, because strong first language skills promote the learning of other languages and content [21,23,24].

Language learning is a complex phenomenon which varies for each individual and is influenced by a variety of psychological, social and contextual factors [25]. A key aspect of communicating in a new language is believing in one's own skills and having the courage to try them out. Previous research shows that students who believe in their abilities, despite challenges and past adversities, are often self-confident, autonomous, motivated and persistent. Migrant students are often rather positive and motivated about their future educational trajectories [26], demonstrating strong resilience [26,27] and high hopes for the future beyond education [13]. Students who believe in their abilities also demonstrate high levels of self-efficacy and enjoyment of working hard [28], which lead to more learning. These apply to language learning, as well as to all other kinds of learning, and are equally important for all learners [29]. However, students coming from disrupted educational backgrounds are likely to have experienced adverse situations in the past, and students who are not fluent in the language of schooling continue to face language-related challenges. These challenges can be mitigated by supporting the students' belief in themselves [30].

Another key aspect of language learning is social interaction [31]. An optimal learning environment is one that enables students to engage in authentic, learner-relevant, social interaction. Natural discussions and negotiations with others are crucial as students learn meanings of utterances and expressions that are abstract and non-frequent [32]. Social interaction provides opportunities for receiving language affordances, i.e., potential meanings offered in the environment of interaction [32], and producing language [33]. To enable learning, the affordances must be understood by the learner, and they must be moderately more challenging than the learner's current language level [32].

Understanding the affordances of language learning is also related to the fact that language use is different in different situations. For example, the language that students use with their peers, especially in informal situations, may differ from the language of instruction used in classrooms [20]. Academic language is more challenging and time-consuming to learn than everyday language, both for language learners and native speakers alike [6,34]. Thus, understanding the linguistic affordances during instruction may be remarkably challenging even if students have a good command of the everyday language used in the school [6,21,35].

Having the courage to try, communicate and interact with others is possible in a safe learning environment. While anxiety may hamper all learning, [36], more anxiety may be caused by language learning than other subjects, especially when it comes to oral communication situations [37]. Creating a safe learning atmosphere reduces anxiety and encourages students to try and is, therefore, of the utmost importance for language learners to achieve better learning outcomes, feel a sense of belonging and generally feel good about their education [21].

2.2. Schools as Places of Belonging

Several studies have shown that, especially for migrant students, schools are not merely places for measurable learning. As institutions that gather the whole age cohort under the same roof, schools are also places where students develop a sense of belonging, meaning that an individual feels that she or he is included as a valuable member of a group [38–40]. Previous studies show that schools can create conditions for belonging through explicit teaching of values, and by developing a school culture of inclusion, respect and reciprocity [41]. In such environments, all students, regardless of background, can feel empowered and accepted [42].

The concept of belonging is strongly connected to language, as the process of coming to belong in a social environment rarely happens without students' ability to communicate with peers. The sense of belonging is also connected with other psychological aspects of

wellbeing, such as positive thinking and cooperation skills [28]. Although the relationships between belonging and learning is not simple, causal or linear, it is clear that they support each other [43]; if migrant students feel that they belong and are accepted, they feel more confident in communicating in a group and develop their skills [39]. Feeling accepted as a part of a group means, in turn, that their emerging language skills can be further supported, that they can participate in schoolwork with lower fear of failure, and that their learning and general wellbeing improves [28] (see also [43]).

The above-mentioned dimensions of language learning, sense of belonging and confidence in one's language skills, all interconnect to support migrant student educational success. They also all play a role in determining how teacher pedagogical practices are received. In the final theoretical subsection below, we discuss the importance of good teacher–student relations when educating migrant learners, and the additional support students receive from other school staff and peers.

2.3. Support from Teachers, Other Staff and Peers

Our previous research shows that Finnish teachers have a generally positive stance towards migrant learners, but teachers also acknowledge the challenges of being able to adequately support student learning, development and wellbeing [44,45]. It is not surprising that help from teachers and other school professionals is the single most important factor in academically supporting students from migrant and refugee backgrounds [46], but this fact highlights the importance of ensuring that teachers and other school professionals, such as teaching assistants, have enough time and resources to attend to the needs of migrant students [47]. Teachers also need special skills and competences to work in multicultural groups and such professionalism is not limited to how they support students' academic learning. Good teacher–student relations contribute to the development of a positive atmosphere in the whole classroom. They result in positive outgroup attitudes, meaning students are not prejudiced towards those who they do not consider belonging to their group. Good teacher–student relations also contribute to overall intercultural openness in the group [48]. Such an open and positive atmosphere is desirable in all kinds of schools, not only in those with high numbers of migrant learners.

It has also been noted that migrant students, like students in general, find comfort and assistance from peers. Peers who speak the same language can help in interpreting some messages via students' first languages [49,50], while local-born peers can support the development of the new language by speaking it [49,51–56]. Support from family members also plays an important role [46], even if the family is not familiar with the educational system of the current host country. As we show later in this article, support from peers and families was also important for the students in this study. Before we move on to the findings, however, we describe the context and outline our methodological choices.

3. Finnish Context

Since its establishment in the 1970s, the main aim of the current Finnish comprehensive school system is to minimise disadvantages of students' unequal backgrounds and provide the same education for all [57]. The Finnish educational system follows a national core curriculum for basic education [58], which sets the broad framework for the aims, content and assessment of each grade and subject. According to the core curriculum, students who do not speak Finnish as their first language must be offered Finnish-as-a-second-language (F2) studies if their parents or guardians wish it and if their basic Finnish language skills are still developing. The aim of F2 education is to enable students to be members of the school community in their daily interaction and schoolwork, and to develop their proficiency in Finnish language [58]. Sometimes F2 teaching occurs in separate groups for this purpose; on other occasions it is integrated into whole-class Finnish language classes [59].

The current Finnish National core curriculum for basic education was published in 2014 but implemented mainly from 2016 onwards. Therefore, the first stage of the survey discussed in this article reflects the state of Finnish comprehensive education during

the end of the previous curriculum, whereas the second survey stage (2021), conducted approximately five years later, reflects the state of Finnish comprehensive education during the current version. The most significant difference in the curricula is that the current version is more explicit about the importance of language, and the fact that all teachers should be linguistically responsive in their teaching [60]. Compared with many other European countries, Finland remains ethnically and linguistically quite homogenous with less than 7.5% of people speaking a language other than Finnish, Swedish or Sami as their first language, but this represents a 400% increase since 2000 [61,62]. This trend indicates that the comprehensive school student cohort in Finland is slowly becoming more multicultural. Teachers, therefore, need new skills to cater for these students.

4. Methodology

Data, Participants and Instrument

The data used for this article consists of two similar surveys collected in Finnish comprehensive schools: the first in a paper-and-pen survey in 2016 and the second in a combined online and paper-and-pen survey five years later, in 2021. Most of the participating schools were in and around two large Finnish cities, Turku and Oulu, and were participants of VALMO, a development project for teachers in preparatory education for migrant students, funded by Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016–2017, in which the first author Kaukko and second author Alisaari worked. All F2 students in those schools were invited to participate; in total 347 responses were given in 2016, and 291 in 2021 (see Table 1 for background information). The instrument was a modified and simplified version of an earlier survey measuring comprehensive school student experienced emotional and cognitive engagement and school-related wellbeing [28]. The modified version was first tested and commented on by teachers in one of the participating schools before being distributed to all participating schools.

Table 1. The background information of the participants.

Background Factors	2016 (Total *n* = 347) (%)	2021 (Total *n* = 291) (%)	*t* Test *t, df, p*
Gender	Female 43.8% Male 55% No response 1.1%	Female 38.8% Male 55% Other 0.3% I do not know 0.7% Cannot be interpreted 3.1% No response 2.1%	−2.0, 636, 0.043 *
Age	7–9 yrs 22.2% 10–12 yrs 40.3% 13–15 yrs 25.6% 16 + 10.7% No response 1.2%	7–9 yrs 18.9% 10–12 yrs 41.4% 13–15 yrs 28.1% 16 + 4% Cannot be interpreted 1.7% No response 2%	−0.36, 635, 0.72
Living situation	With family 88.5% Not with family 8.4% No response 3.2%	With family 93.8% Not with family 0.7% Cannot be interpreted 2.7% No response 2.7%	−0.62, 636, 0.53

Table 1. *Cont.*

Background Factors	2016 (Total *n* = 347) (%)	2021 (Total *n* = 291) (%)	*t* Test *t, df, p*
Languages spoken at home	Finnish 26.1% Arabic 18% African languages 10.5% Russian, Estonian, Baltic languages 9.2% Other non-European Union languages 8.3% Dari 8.3% Kurdish 6% Other non-European language 4.7% Other Western Asian language 3.9% Other Asian languages 3.4% Cannot be interpreted 0.9% No response 0.8% *(Multiple Response Set: students named more than one language spoken at home)*	Finnish 24.1% Arabic 14.8% African languages 6.2% Russian, Estonian, Baltic languages 8.6% Other European Union languages 16.9% Dari 4.3% Kurdish 6.2% Other non-European Union language 6.2% Other Western Asian language 3.8% Other Asian languages 5.3% Cannot be interpreted 1.9% No response 1.7% *(Multiple Response Set: students named more than one language spoken at home)*	−1.9, 636, 0.06
Length of residence in Finland	Less than 1 yrs 26.8% 1–4 yrs 24.5% 5–9 yrs 15% More than 10 yrs 2% Born in Finland 31.3% Cannot be interpreted 0.6%	Less than 1 yrs 1.4% 1–4 yrs 22.3% 5–9 yrs 20.6% More than 10 yrs 3.8% Born in Finland 41.2% Cannot be interpreted 3.8% I do not know 3.4% No response 3.4%	−4.4, 636, <0.001 ***

* Statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ level; *** Statistically significant at $p < 0.001$ level.

The survey was completed by students during school time, with assistance from their teachers or other school staff. Teachers were instructed to help as much as was needed so that students understood the questions. All F2 students present on the day of the survey participated, but it was emphasised that they could leave the survey unanswered or fill only parts of it, if they so wished. Blank or spoiled surveys are included in the category 'no response' in Table 2. The answers were given in Finnish but, when needed, teaching assistants who spoke the same language as the students translated some parts. Answers were typically rather short, though there was no limitation on the number of items that could be mentioned in each open answer.

Although the participating schools and the survey questions remained the same in both datasets, two other significant differences distinguish the 2021 dataset from that of 2016. The first difference is the move from a paper-based survey to an online survey. In 2016, all schools insisted on a paper-based survey, while in 2021, most schools preferred the online version, using technology which had by then become more widely available. In 2016, we know that many teachers considered each question of the paper-based form carefully before asking their students to answer them. Some teachers contacted us with clarifying questions about the survey, and they used their professional expertise and good student knowledge to either explain the questions to their students, or to sometimes skip those they thought were too difficult. Kaukko saw this in practice, as she was present in some of the classrooms when the survey was being conducted. The answers to the question "How do you succeed in difficult tasks" illustrate this difference. The question was deleted entirely from the 2016 paper survey given to 121 students in one of the participating cities, because teachers in that city made a joint decision that it was too difficult for their students to understand and answer. The decision to omit the question, rather than simplifying or explaining it, was based on their professional expertise and lack of time, and, therefore, a practical necessity to facilitate those schools' participation. Because of this modification, the answers to this particular question differ significantly between the two datasets. The 2016 paper-based survey which include this question have longer and more elaborate answers, whereas the 2021 survey includes short answers like "well" or "badly". It is likely that teachers in 2016 helped students with this difficult question, but guiding instructions are more difficult to give when the students complete the survey online, using their personal devices. Online

surveys encourage students to respond quickly and move on to the next question, whereas paper surveys are more conducive to editing and reflection. This limitation is further discussed in the end of the article.

Table 2. Main category frequencies of responses to the question "What is difficult in school?".

Main Categories	Subcategories	2016 (*n* = 427) (%/*n*)	2021 (*n* = 365) (*n*/%)
Theory subjects (languages, science, maths)		60.9%/260	52.6%/205
Interaction and wellbeing		8.4%/36	7.4%/27
	Language issues	7.7%/33	5.5%/20
	Socialising/playing	0.7%/3	0.8%/3
	Wellbeing-related issues	0	1.1%/4
Schoolwork		4.2%/18	6.2%/23
	School work in general	4%/17	4.9%/18
	Lessons	0	0.5%/2
	Learning in general	0	0.5%/2
	Teaching technology	0.2%/1	0.3%/1
Other		18%/77	16.7%/61
	Arts and crafts	5.9%/25	3%/11
	Mealtime	0.2%/1	0
	Everything	0.2%/1	1.4%/5
	Nothing	11.7%/50	12.3%/45
Cannot be interpreted		3%/13	3%/11
I do not know		0.9%/4	3.3%/12
No response		4.4%/19	7.1%/26

The second difference is that the group that answered the 2016 survey included a much larger group of students who had recently arrived in Finland. This was also apparent in the independent *t*-test conducted to investigate possible differences between the two datasets: the datasets differed on the length of residence, with the 2021 respondents having stayed in Finland longer than the respondents in the 2016 dataset (see Table 1). This is due to the rapid increase in forced migration in 2015. Some of the newly arrived students had left Finland by 2021, and naturally, those who had stayed in Finland were no longer newly arrived. It is likely that students who had stayed in Finland for a shorter period found it more difficult to answer questions, even with help from the teachers. However, the surveys showed that they were able to express their opinions and, as discussed later, their experiences did not significantly differ from those who had been in the country for a longer time. Comparing such different student cohorts caused methodological limitations but was justified as the selection criteria remained the same. The demographic and other background factors of the participants are presented below in Table 1. The datasets also differed in the gender distribution, with more female respondents in the 2016 dataset (see Table 1). The differences and their methodological implications are further discussed in the limitations of the study.

5. Analysis

The data of the current study consist of respondents' answers to three open-ended questions:

Q1. What is difficult in school?
Q2. How do you succeed in difficult tasks?
Q3. Who helps you in school?

These open-ended questions were analysed and categorised by Kaukko and Alisaari, who read through all the answers inductively, formulating data-driven categories for the responses of the first 50 answers. All authors read the responses to gain an understanding

of the data. Based on the initial analysis, Kaukko suggested initial categories for a more detailed content analysis (15 for Q1, 10 for Q2, 9 for Q3). After that, Kaukko and Alisaari agreed on the number categories and analysed the first 50 responses to the open-ended question discussed in this article. After the initial analysis, all authors discussed the categorisations, added subcategories, resulting in 43 (Q1), 24 (Q2) and 18 (Q3) subcategories, and further defined them. Then, after discussing and agreeing on these initial categories, the rest of the data was analysed using the finalised set of categories. The categories are listed in Tables 2–4 below.

Table 3. Main category frequencies of responses to the question "How do you succeed in difficult tasks?".

Main Categories	Subcategories	2016 (*n* = 425) (%/*n*)	2021 (*n* = 343) (%/*n*)
With someone's help		37.4%/159	44.9%/154
Own strategies		21.6%/92	29.4%/101
Others		4.8%/21	13.7%/47
	Well	0	11.4%/39
	Materials and aids	4.2%/18	0.6%/2
	Badly	0.2%/1	1.7%/6
	Wellbeing-related issues	0.2%/1	0
	Nothing	0.2%/1	0
Cannot be interpreted		2.8%/12	2.6%/9
I do not know		0.7%/3	2.6%/9
No response		32.5%/138	6.7%/23

Table 4. Main category frequencies of responses to the question "Who helps you at school?".

Main Categories	Subcategories	2016 (*n* = 502) (%/*n*)	2021 (*n* = 425) (%/*n*)
Teacher		58.6%/294	57.9%/246
Friends/ Fellow students		20.1%/101	22.6%/96
Others		12%/60	10.2%/44
	Someone else	9.8%/49	6.8%/29
	Family	1.2%/6	1.6%/7
	No-one	1%/5	1.6%/7
	God	0	0.2%/1
Cannot be interpreted		6.2%/31	4.2%/18
I do not know		0	0.2%/1
No response		3.2%/16	4.7%/20

Then, frequencies for the different categories within the three different open-ended questions were calculated by the third author, Heikkola. As students could give more than one response to each of the three questions, the frequencies were calculated using the Multiple Response Set function. Finally, Chi Square tests, *Cramér V* values and z tests were performed in order to investigate whether the two datasets (2016 vs. 2021) differed from each other. In addition, Chi Square tests, *Cramér V* values and z tests were carried out to examine whether the respondent background factors (gender, age group, living

situation, length of residence in Finland) were linked to their responses to the open-ended questions. Even though the participants were not asked to give multiple responses to any of the questions, some listed more than one answer. In order to run the statistical analyses, the items mentioned first were used.

6. Findings

The responses to the three open-ended questions were analysed qualitatively, and then categorised. The frequencies of these categories are presented in Tables 2–4 for both datasets (2016 and 2021).

6.1. Challenges in Languages, Maths and Science

In both datasets, most students (approx. 60% in 2016 and 53% in 2021) named theory-based subjects (languages, science, maths) as difficult (see Table 2). Some respondents also reported arts and craft subjects, language-related issues, and general schoolwork as difficult, while around 12% of respondents stated that nothing was difficult. Approximately 8% in 2016 and 7% in 2021 mentioned aspects that had to do with wellbeing or interaction with peers, including challenges in communication with them. Typical answers to this question were: "maths", "Swedish is difficult", "sometimes homework is difficult", "To explain things, like SPACE", or "talking with [names of friends]". It is noteworthy that the Finnish word *vaikea*, which is used in the original survey, can refer to both challenges and difficulties. When comparing the two datasets (2016 vs. 2021), the overall Chi Square test was not significant (χ^2 (5, n = 592) = 24.9, p = 0.024, *Cramér V* = 0.20).

As there were no meaningful differences between the 2016 and 2021 datasets regarding the question about what students feel is difficult in school, we proceeded to investigate the possible differences based on the students' background factors, pooling the two datasets together. We investigated whether student background factors (gender, age group, living situation, length of residence in Finland) were linked to their responses specifying what is difficult in school (see Table 3).

Looking at possible gender differences (girl vs. boy), there was a significant difference (X^2(25, n = 592) = 47.4, p = 0.004, *Cramér V* = 0.28). In the z tests, significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between boys and girls were found for the "schoolwork" category, with more girls reporting this to be difficult.

Investigating possible differences based on age, there was also a significant finding (X^2(25, n = 591) = 70.3, $p < 0.001$, *Cramér V* = 0.35). In the z tests, differences ($p < 0.05$) between different age groups (7–9, 10–12, 13–15 and 16 years old) were found in the following categories: in both "theory subjects" and "interaction and wellbeing" categories, there was a difference between age groups 7–9 vs. 16 years, with the older student not reporting these to topics to be difficult at all.

Examining possible differences based on living situation (living with family vs. not living with family), there was a significant result (X^2(20, n = 592) = 37.0, p = 0.012, *Cramér V* = 0.25). In the z test, however, no significant differences between these two groups were found.

Examining the possible effects of language background, no significant results were found (X^2(55, n = 592) = 60.2, p = 0.29, *Cramér V* = 0.32). Also, no significant results were found for the length of residence (born in Finland, less than 1, 1–4, 5–9, 10+ years), although this was hypothesized based on the differences of the two datasets (X^2(35, n = 592) = 35.6, p = 0.44, *Cramér V* = 0.25). However, as both these categories had many responses, these results are inconclusive and warrant further analysis in the future.

6.2. Help from Others and Own Strategies in Overcoming Challenging Tasks

Next, we investigated which factors helped the students succeed in difficult tasks (see Table 3).

To see whether student background factors were linked to their responses regarding how they succeed in difficult tasks, Chi Square tests were performed. The two datasets

did not differ from each other significantly ($X^2(4, n = 477) = 23.0, p < 0.001, Cramér V = 0.22$). To investigate the possible differences between the genders regarding student responses on how they succeed in difficult tasks, we performed Chi Square tests, *Cramér V*s and z tests. There was no significant result for any of the categories: gender (boys vs. girls) $X^2(20, n = 477) = 27.7, p = 0.12, Cramér V = 0.12$); age (7–9, 10–12, 13–15, 16 years) $X^2(20, n = 476) = 28.0, p = 0.11, Cramér V = 0.24$); living situation (with or without family) ($X^2(16, n = 477) = 22.1, p = 0.14, Cramér V = 0.11$); language background ($X^2(44, n = 477) = 38.5, p = 0.71, Cramér V = 0.28$); nor length of residence (born in Finland, less than 1, 1–4, 5–9, 10+ years) ($X^2(28, n = 477) = 23.9, p = 0.69, Cramér V = 0.22$). As some of the categories were still quite small, the results are inconclusive.

6.3. Help from Teachers, Other Staff and Peers

Next, we examined students' responses to the question "who helps you at school?". Almost 60% of respondents in both the 2016 and 2021 datasets named the teacher as the person who helps them. Also, over 20% of responses in 2016 and 2021 named "fellow students" as a source of help. Less than 10% of respondents in both datasets named someone else as a source of help at school. Typical answers to this question were short: "Teacher", "Teacher and friends" or "Friends and teaching assistants". Some mentioned names and some noted that nobody helps them. In the Chi Square test, no significant differences between the two datasets were found ($X^2(4, n = 602) = 7.5, p = 0.11, Cramér V = 0.11$).

Looking at possible gender differences (boys vs. girls), there was a significant result ($X^2(20, n = 602) = 59.5, p \leq 0.001, Cramér V = 0.31$). In the z tests, however, no significant differences between boys and girls were found. Also, the differences between age groups were significant (7–9, 10–12, 13–15, 16 years) ($X^2(20, n = 601) = 48.8, p < 0.001, Cramér V = 0.29$). In z tests, no significant differences were found. Investigating possible differences between students living or not living with family, the result was significant ($X^2(16, n = 602) = 26.4, p = 0.049, Cramér V = 0.21$). In the z tests, only a difference in the responses that "cannot be interpreted" was found between the students with different living situations ($p < 0.05$). Students living at home gave less of these uninterpretable responses compared with those living at home.

There was no difference between students with different language backgrounds ($X^2(44, n = 602) = 49.5, p = 0.27, Cramér V = 0.29$). However, there were differences between students with different lengths of residence in Finland ($X^2(28, n = 602) = 45.6, p = 0.02, Cramér V = 0.28$). However, no differences were found in the z tests. With regards to these results, they are tentative due to the small number of cases per some cells in the analyses.

7. Discussion

The main findings of this study are that students with a migrant background attending Finnish comprehensive schools faced difficulties in school subjects that depend on language (reading, writing, speaking, understanding). These subjects include maths, science and language-subjects, such as Finnish, Swedish and English. Social interaction, which also relies on language [63], was also specified as causing difficulties. The 2016 and 2021 datasets did not differ significantly in these answers. Students responded that they overcome difficulties with "someone's help", and that "someone" was most often a teacher, another adult at school or a friend. Students also used their "own strategies". Both "someone's help" and "own strategies" had more responses in the 2021 dataset.

Difficulties for emerging language learners in theory subjects—subjects requiring reading and writing—were also shown in previous research [64]. The fact that students become fluent in everyday language faster than academic language [6] might hide their challenges in classroom situations. Even if a child's language sounds fluent, a linguistically responsive teacher should be aware that, firstly, academic language development takes years and secondly, learning complicated educational content through an emerging language is challenging [6].

Arts-based subjects were also mentioned as difficult, but less frequently. Arts, crafts and music are among the first subjects in which emerging language learners are integrated during their preparatory education. These hands-on subjects are regarded as less dependent on language and more on watching and doing, but such doing may be challenging if the task itself, or the teacher's specialised subject-specific instructions about it, are not understood. Furthermore, unlike in some other school subjects, the outcomes for hands-on subjects are visible and tangible, and they require each student's independent participation. The fact that subjects, such as arts, were mentioned as difficult point to the fact that they, too, require linguistically responsive instruction from teachers.

When students answered the question about who helped them in school, more than half of them in both surveys specified teachers. References to teacher help indicate that the participating schools had teachers whose help was appreciated and needed, which is a reassuring finding. However, a more concerning finding was that students who had been in the country for less than one year answered much less frequently that they would request help from teachers, peers or other school staff. This might mean that, shortly after arrival to a new country, reaching out for help is difficult for migrant students. The hesitation to ask for help might be due to a feeling that the need for assistance will be continuous (see also [65]). In our previous research, teachers reported that migrant students need more help than they request, which makes it difficult to support them [45]. The pedagogical implication of this finding is that teachers and other school staff need to develop new ways to make themselves available for children and youth in this situation. Support services for newly arrived migrant students should be systematically assessed and developed and, importantly, students' voices should be heard in this process. Linguistically responsive teachers need to be proactive and implement pre-planned scaffolding into their teaching, as well as being able to offer in-the-moment scaffolding to support their students' understanding spontaneously (e.g., [22,65,66]). In other words, they need to learn how to read the non-verbal cues of students who need help and offer help proactively and creatively in ways that do not rely solely on language. This kind of support is not only the responsibility of teachers but of the whole school.

Students listed several personal strategies for succeeding in difficult tasks. These included quite specific techniques, such as re-reading instructions or using Google Translate, but also more general notions that they just knew how to do what was required of them. We interpreted some of these answers as indicators of self-efficacy and belief in oneself, which are also likely to help the students in the future [28].

In addition to school subjects, students mentioned that they faced difficulties in social interaction, which indicates challenges in building belonging and connections with new peers. Some responses related to general verbal interaction (speaking, understanding), as well as playing. The number of students who reported this as difficult is low, yet this finding is significant and in line with previous research. Migrant students enrolling in new groups need to first feel safe, build belonging and feel accepted, and only then can academic success follow [67,68]. Difficulties with language makes play and other interaction more challenging. According to our findings, this was true especially with older students. Teachers occupy a key role in facilitating supportive relationships and multilingual interaction among students [48], and feeling able to participate and belong to one's peer group has a positive impact on all students' wellbeing [39]. On the other hand, one fifth of students mentioned peers as a resource when they needed help with difficult tasks. This is also in line with previous research showing that peer support, especially from one's own language group, is important (e.g., [49]).

While the surveyed students' length of residence in Finland had no impact regarding the three questions, student age seems to have significance. Students aged 7–9 and 13–15 reported general schoolwork as challenging more often than other age groups. This may be due to the fact that 7-year-olds are still learning to read, whereas 13–15-year-olds are entering seventh grade at secondary school, during which the demands and the content of Finnish comprehensive school change quite significantly. In other words, these findings

might reveal more about how students respond to the different stages of the Finnish school system in general, than about these students' migration background.

Gender was significant in relation to how the question "What is difficult in school?" was answered, with girls responding more often than boys that "schoolwork in general" is difficult. This contradicts previous research with migrant-background students, which often highlights the fact that boys with migrant backgrounds tend to struggle in school. For example, a large quantitative study in Finnish schools in 2015 noted that Grade 9 boys with migrant backgrounds find schoolwork more difficult than other groups [69]. The same study showed that migrant-background boys also struggle more than girls in secondary school, although the experience of difficulty decreased slightly [69]. More generally, in Finland, girls seem to outperform boys in their school success, even though there is variation within groups based, for example, on socioeconomic backgrounds [70]. Girls seem to have better innate verbal abilities [71] and more motivation to learn language [72] compared with boys. However, our findings here suggest that girls who participated in this study find schoolwork in general more challenging than boys. On the other hand, our findings may also suggest that girls find it more difficult to specify what is difficult in school, or that girls are motivated to learn and, therefore, find it challenging. Interpreting the reason for this is not possible from the limited data available, but this finding suggests that gendered aspects of migrant-learner school experiences require more research, including further studies using qualitative methods. Another unclear finding related to student background information was the difference between students who lived with or without their families. The differences between the groups were small, but it seems that the students living outside of home, mostly as unaccompanied minors, gave more uninterpretable responses than those living with their families. This finding, too, needs further qualitative research to be fully understood.

The most significant limitation of this study is the comparison of different types of datasets. As noted in the methodology, the surveys were conducted differently, first using pen and paper in 2016 and then moving online in 2021. Moreover, the composition of the respondent groups, consisting of all Finnish-as-a-second-language learners in the participating schools, differed. Thirdly, the paper-based survey was modified and its completion was instructed more by teachers in the schools. Because of these changes, it can be argued that the answers are not directly comparable. However, these adaptations were necessary to realise the study. The changes in the technology made the online survey the most practical choice. The change in the student groups of 2016 and 2021 represented the change that took place in many Finnish schools during those years. Finally, more so than external researchers, teachers place the needs of students above the requirements of research and have a realistic understanding of the skills of their students. The survey used for this study was developed with teachers, yet other teachers in a different school still found it too difficult. Consequently, we understand that our findings based on a comparative analysis are tentative. In future research, a closer and continuing collaboration with teachers from all participating schools could result in better and more easily adaptable research instruments.

A further significant limitation, relevant for all quantitative research, is that while surveys are a quick way to obtain responses from a large group of students, their full meaning can at times be hard to interpret and contextualise. Therefore, online surveys cannot provide a clear or deep understanding of children's thinking and experiences, especially the children's language skills are limited. A key implication related to this limitation is that we need to develop research methods to better capture the voices of multilingual, migrant-background students. When students work independently online, it is difficult for teachers or other adults to ensure that they understand the task. In other words, technology might hide the fact that questions may be misunderstood. This applies to research and schoolwork alike. Therefore, qualitative methods, such as critical incident interviews children and interviews with teachers, were used in these same schools to obtain a more elaborated picture of some of the issues (see [13]), but more qualitative research

about what migrant students find difficult, and how they overcome difficulties, is also needed.

Finally, more reassuring is the key finding that, despite the changes in Finnish schools and society between 2016 and 2021, there seem to be no significant differences in the findings. The 2016 group included many asylum-seeking students who had arrived in Finland very recently. As asylum seekers, their status in Finland was precarious and, as they had arrived from crisis areas, many came from disrupted school backgrounds. Moreover, they arrived just as student cohorts of Finnish schools were becoming more multicultural. We would have expected to see differences in students' responses in relation to the length of stay in Finland and to how experienced the school is in relation to working with large numbers of migrants, but this was not the case in this study.

At the time of finalising this article, Finnish schools are experiencing yet another rapid increase in the numbers of newly arrived students with a refugee background. The war in Ukraine has brought a new cohort of students to Finnish schools, and the background and educational histories of these students differ from the group that came in 2015. However, they all share an experience of forced migration and arrive in Finnish schools at short notice. The findings of our study suggest that although Finnish schools are designed to serve rather homogenous groups of students, the experiences of newly arrived students do not differ from those who have been in a country for a longer period of time. More resources are needed for schools, but panic about increasing numbers of migrant students is unnecessary.

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