'White Flight' in Finland? A Qualitative Study into Finnish-born Families' Housing and School Choices in Turku

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'White flight' refers to a phenomenon whereby native middle class residents avoid or move away from areas with immigrant concentrations thereby contributing to ethnic and residential segregation. The recent increase in immigration into Finland has spurred public debates suggesting that white flight – in connection with school choices – might also be happening in Finland. In this article, the phenomenon is scrutinized and unravelled conceptually. The discussion draws on a recent qualitative study undertaken in Turku. The study involved 31 in-depth interviews with native Finnish parents of primary- and preschool aged children. The results indicate that neither the schools nor immigration determined families' housing decisions that were, ultimately, multifaceted and situated within specific life courses and circumstances. Mainly thematic but also discourse and life course analysis methods were employed to tease out nuances around talk and action, also helping to further understand the dynamics of 'attitudes' in this context.

Keywords: Housing and school choices, white flight, deconstruction

Introduction

In Finland, the number of immigrants is relatively low compared to other European countries. In 2011 the total population of Finland was 5 401 267 of which 183 133 (3,4%) were foreign nationals. Immigration is mostly concentrated in the major cities, such as Turku and the capital region. The total population of Turku in 2010 was 177 326 of which 8 900 (less than 8%) were foreign nationals (Turku city statistics 2011).

Despite the moderate numbers of immigrants, the so-called immigrant concentrations are evident particularly in eastern Turku where in suburban areas such as Varissuo the share of immigrant population is over 35% of the total population. There have been often quite heated public debates over immigrant concentrations both in Turku and the capital region. Media accounts over the last few years have presented scenarios of non-Finnish speaking children straining teachers' resources as well as Finnish families and teachers fleeing multiethnic schools (Grönholm 2011; Helsingin Sanomat 2009; Palttala 2012). More generally, immigration is by and large associated with neighbourhoods with long-term social deprivation.

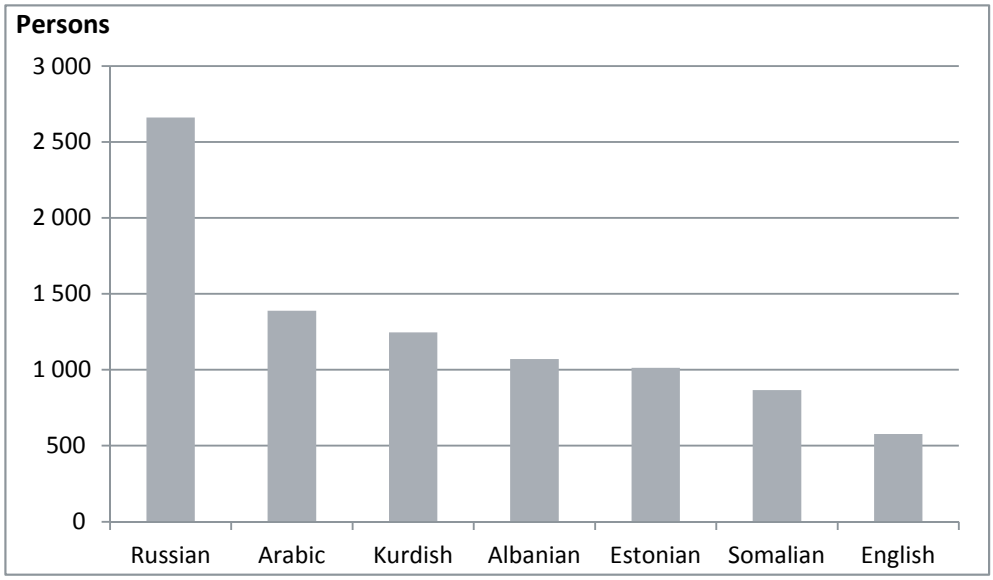

Figure 1. Immigrants by language in Turku, June 2011. Turku city statistics 2011.

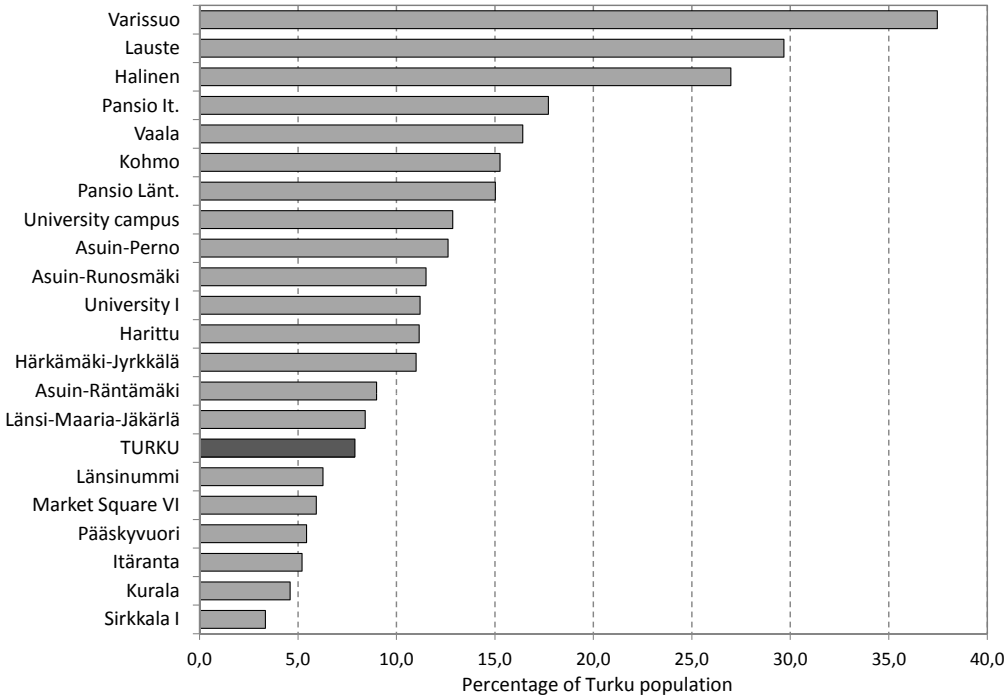

Figure 2. Immigrants by area in Turku, September 2011. Turku city statistics 2011.

In recent decades many studies have looked into the socioeconomic diversification of neighbourhoods in Finland (e.g. Dhalmann 2011; Riitaoja 2010; Kauppinen 2004; Kortteinen 1982). Similarly parental school choices have been studied in the major Finnish cities making links between parental subject positions and school choice policies (e.g. Poikolainen 2012; Klemelä et al. 2011). The majority of these studies have been conducted in the capital region.

The current qualitative study brought the aforementioned debates together in the context of Turku as a case. The research questions were the following: 1) Were housing and school choices of Finnish-born parents racially and/or culturally motivated? The question took into account the fact that most immigrants in Finland are 'white', i.e. Estonians and Russians. 2) What other possible factors were involved in families' decision-making processes? 3) Apart from immigration, did middle class parents generally avoid lower socioeconomic neighbourhoods and schools in such areas? 4) What implications might housing choices have for school choices – or the other way round? In addition, a previously less examined question was posed, i.e. 5) what were the dynamics between talk and action in terms of 'attitudes'?

In this article, these concerns are addressed and unravelled conceptually with reference to first-hand accounts of Finnish families. An approach utilizing the sociology of the everyday, i.e. focusing on the mundane – instead of the spectacular – proves useful in understanding decisions, accounts and experiences of families' over time (Smith 1987). The discussion maps out families' perceptions, talk and actions as well as the societal contexts, such as some general principles of the Finnish basic education system and discourses on immigration, within which they operate.

Drawing on qualitative interview data with families, it is therefore asked more generally: how easy is it to observe direct cause and effect relations? The question is ontological in that ideally the cause factors will be observable and researchable. The question is also ethical and epistemological in that knowledge production needs transparency. It is contended that problem-based research questions in themselves – especially when interpreted out of context and lived experiences of people – might perpetuate problem discourses. Therefore some conceptual deconstruction around the 'white flight' phenomenon is pursued. Similarly, approaches other than that of Pierre Bourdieu's (1985) theory of reproduction – despite it being a popular frame of reference in educational studies – are explored.

Background to the research problem

Public discourses on the Finnish education system are typically twofold. On the one hand, there are the discourses where the Finns pride themselves on their children's good Pisa-results and the education system with equal opportunities. Officially, Finnish basic education system is guided by the basic education legislation that applies to all pupils nationwide (Niemi et al. 2010). Local public authorities must secure equal

opportunities for every resident in Finland, including education also after compulsory schooling and irrespective of the person's financial standing. The education legislation provides for compulsory schooling and the right to free pre-, primary and basic education (Ministry of Education and Culture 2012).

In the context of immigration, The Ministry for Education and Culture is responsible for immigrant basic education, vocational training, higher education and non-formal adult education. The Ministry promotes good ethnic relations, ethnic equality and integration. The advancing of international mobility and multiculturalism is one of the aims of the Ministry's Strategy 2020. Integration policies are not merely targeted at immigrants, but also at the majority population in Finland. Integration is seen as a two-way process that affects the whole society (Ministry of Education and Culture 2009, 12).

On the other hand, debates about school choices and the rise of neoliberalism have become more prominent in Finland since the 1990s. For Seppänen (2006), these debates have revolved around the impact of school choices on social, and more recently on ethnic segregation. In such conversations, Pierre Bourdieu's (1985) theory of reproduction has been a very popular frame of reference, i.e. school systems themselves are seen as reproducing differential social capital, favouring white middle class families. In educational research the attention has often been steered to the educational level of parents and how the different forms of capital they possess carry on to the next generation. Neoliberal parental praxis, such as choosing other than the local school for the child, is thus feared to undermine the ideal of equal opportunities.

Residential segregation and the spirit of multiculturalism

In a similar vein to school choices, Finnish and international research on housing choices in particular has typically looked into its potentially segregating effect, many particularly addressing white flight (Betts and Fairlie 2003; Bråmå 2006; Denessen et al. 2005; Rasinkangas 2010; Sandström and Bergström 2005; Schindler Rangvid 2010; Vilkama 2011). Most research on residential segregation in Finland has concerned itself with the capital region, particularly Helsinki. It is known that the socio-economic structure of Helsinki population correlates with the housing structure (Ala-Outinen 2010). Due to the high cost of living in the capital region, those within the lower income brackets cannot make housing choices as such. Despite the socio-economic differences being moderate in comparison to European countries more generally, the welfare differences between neighbourhoods are notable. Immigrants in Helsinki are known to have lower educational levels than the native population as a whole. Immigrant concentrations are also associated with suburban areas of lower socio-economic strata (ibid).

In Turku, public discourses to do with the socio-economic disadvantages of immigrant families have been similar to those in the capital region. At the same time, a keen spirit of multiculturalism and diversity is upheld as the city's image. Turku was one of the

European capitals of culture in 2011, boasting a commitment to multicultural education and ethnic diversity. The city thus made an interesting, contemporary context for a case study of parental views on multicultural neighbourhoods and education.

Methods and ethics

The aim of the study was to map out families' views on immigration as well as experiences of both school and housing choices made. Finnish-born families were invited to participate in a qualitative interview study that was undertaken at the Institute of Migration, Turku in 2010–2012, and funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The families were recruited through three primary schools in Turku. The schools were invited to help on the basis that the number of immigrants varied between their respective catchment areas.

Twenty-eight parents of primary school aged children and three parents of pre-school aged children consented and participated. The participants were given thorough information about the study prior to the interviews. The interviews were confidential. The participants could choose the setting for the interviews and also telephone interviews were conducted for the participants' convenience. The participants could attend the interviews individually or jointly with their spouses. The interviews lasted up to two hours each, which allowed for the gathering of detailed data. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy.

A combination of three different approaches was applied to data analysis aiming at a holistic utilization of the data. First, a basic grounded theory approach was used to identify main themes in the entire data. Second, a very detailed discourse analytic approach was applied to parts of the data to tease out nuances in the interview talk, including contradictions and variations over the course of individual interviews. Third, a number of interviews were scrutinized by way of life course analysis to understand how parents' views had changed over time (according to their reflections whilst interviewed) (Pietikäinen and Mäntynen 2009; Roberts and Kyllönen 2006). Guidelines for good ethical research practice were applied throughout the research process, highlighting informed consent, confidentiality, reflexive interpretation of the data, and transparency of the research conduct (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000; Finnish Social Science Data Archive 2012).

Main results

The thematic analysis of the interview data suggested that:

a) Immigration had little impact on school choices for primary school aged children. All interviewees had chosen the nearest school designated for the child to which there was usually a walking distance. Parents were neither keen on the 'school run' nor the child travelling to school by bus on their own. Generally the families regarded their local schools as 'good enough'. According to one parent: *"Other options are possible*

just as well, but the nearest school is good enough. It is the easiest option for my child, because she can walk to school by herself." Apart from the proximity of the school, friends and specific subjects, such as languages or arts were mentioned as important factors. In addition, many of the participating families had several children, and the experiences of the older siblings tended to affect choices for the younger ones. These findings were similar to those in other recent Finnish studies on school choices both in Turku and the capital region (Poikolainen 2012; Klemelä et al. 2011).

In the current study, none of the families whose child's school was multicultural considered changing the school due to immigration. A number of parents had been worried about multicultural schools and nurseries, the worries having gained impetus on negative news stories in the media. For example, the presence of immigrant children with little Finnish language ability in the classroom was feared to affect Finnish-speaking children's learning. One parent reflected on this: *"I was thinking about this, because I knew that some of our neighbours had chosen another school for their child because in our nearest school there are a lot of immigrant children, the reason being that they were worried that the immigrant children will slow down the pace of teaching, because they do not have as good Finnish as the native Finnish children."*

b) Immigration had little absolute impact on Finnish families' housing choices. Finding a suitable home determined the choice of school. In other words, none of the participants aspired to live within a particular school catchment area. Some families had several schools close to their homes, and had chosen the one with the lowest number of immigrant pupils. A number of parents had avoided neighbourhoods with a presumably bad reputation. Most participants agreed that neighbourhoods in eastern Turku were the most disadvantaged and some suggested positive discrimination policies should be enforced.

Some parents identified problems in their neighbourhoods but they were not necessarily associated with immigrants. One parent described their living in a multicultural neighbourhood as follows: "*Father: Yes, admittedly one occasionally longs for a chance to live in more Finnish a milieu. But then again, I don't know, it (immigration) has not been the main issue at all. One hasn't considered it as such big a problem that one has to move out. The foreigners have really not affected our living here at all, instead it's (been affected by) the neighbours who are totally Finnish and cannot cope with children making noise. And I believe that foreign families with children have faced this same issue just as often as we have, it's been a kind of pensioners versus young families scenario".*

Several parents felt their children did not have enough opportunities for multicultural encounters for Turku being predominantly 'mono-cultural'. Such parents would have hoped for more 'mixing' so that it would *"increase tolerance and decrease prejudice"* amongst children, and that a *"cotton wool culture"* is not good for them. Yet none of such parents had exercised the so-called 'counterintuitive school choice' (James et al.

2010), i.e. deliberately chosen a multicultural school for their child. One parent felt that even if he did not have anything particular against multicultural schools, yet he did not see any compelling reason for actively choosing one either.

c) Parents described the concepts of ”diversity’ and ’immigrant’ from many different angles.

Families had an awareness of the many reasons for immigration to Finland; however, diversity and immigration were primarily associated with ‘difference’. For example, several parents expressed their concerns over islamic practices, such as praying at school, or muslim head coverings for women. It was feared that the increasing number of muslim children will lead to the abandoning of Christian traditions in Finnish schools, such as singing religious hymns at end-of-school parties. Then again, some parents particularly welcomed non-religious school festivities in schools, pointing out that they themselves were not members of any religious denomination.

A number of parents wondered if large immigrant families were able to find suitable housing or support their children academically. Immigrant families with not so many children were not referred to as ‘problems’. When it came to problematizing any ethnic groups, Somalians and muslims were typically mentioned: *“Father: Yeah, so there’s a difference… I said to you on the phone earlier that I am not a racist, but I am though; it is the Somalians that are the worst (ethnic group) at school as well. Mother: There sure are differences. Father: Yes, there really are differences between populations”.*

Another key message arising from the study is the lack of opportunities for naturally occurring intercultural encounters in neighbourhoods whether there were immigrant concentrations or not. A number of parents wondered how such encounters could be facilitated as they would hardly be ’naturally occurring’ if too heavily promoted by, say, municipal immigration officials or teachers. Recognising the difficulties involved the willingness to be part of such encounters varied amongst the families interviewed.

At the same time, many trusted that their children’s futures would necessarily be more intercultural in the continually globalising world. For some, however, intercultural encounters were already everyday reality: *“Yes, we are really happy to learn more about other cultures and mix with different kinds of people. Like our workplace is quite multicultural. I am so accustomed to it that I don’t tend to think that they (immigrants) are particularly different (from us). Occasionally someone might take their prayer mat and go praying in the silent room, or they might go fasting”.*

Discourse analysis on some of the interview data indicated that:

d) The impact of negative media discourses is salient in interview talk; yet simple cause and effect relations cannot be drawn between parental ‘attitudes’ and school choices.

Although some of the interviews featured sceptical talk regarding immigration similar to tabloid headlines, no hate speech as such was used. Instead, the three-dimensional data analysis method revealed a range of discourses – sometimes contradictory – being used over the course of the interviews.

For example, one parent first said: *"Mother: So there were quite a few of those (children in the nursery) where either their mum or dad were Finnish but our child was the only one with both her parents being Finnish. So in that situation one begins to wonder if she's ever gonna make friends with fair hair..."*. Later on in the interview she then contradicted the previous, a somewhat discriminating statement by saying: *"Well, I've never looked down upon people dressed in different ways or being of a different colour (from us), and whatever religions and festivities there are, so at my child's birthday parties there's always been friends of all kinds of nationalities"*.

Furthermore, in a number of interviews a life course perspective to the data analysis showed changes in parents' perceptions of schools and immigration over time. Several parents reflected on their experiences on living in a multicultural area in the past or at the time of the interviews. Both positive and negative remarks were made in such recollections and the change in the opinions itself was reflected upon by parents.

Discussion

Finnish discourses on school choices, ethnic segregation and neoliberalism reflect angloamerican and western European trends, including countries such as the Great Britain, Sweden and Denmark (Bunar 2008; Bråmå 2006; Denessen et al. 2005; Sandström and Bergström 2005; Schindler Rangvid 2010). One of the striking issues around such discourses are the implicit or explicit assumptions made of *attitudes* as observably tied to one's educational level and social class position, or, as within the Bourdieusian (1985) framework, to one's habitus. Can it indeed be argued that working class and/or less educated parents have certain perspectives to education based on lack of opportunities and choices, lesser educational aspirations, mere ignorance or outright racist tendencies? The so-called *white resentment* of the working class has routinely been associated with discourses on race, immigration and multiculturalism (Ware 2008; Papageorgiou 2010).

Apart from racial matters, in everyday British discourses, for instance, families are rather often categorised by their social class-related accent and demeanour; i.e. whether they are articulate and well-spoken (Weekes-Bernard 2007). In such context school choices are not only about school rankings and the quality of education but about parents wanting to control whom their children spend time with. Upper and middle class discourses of the 'dangerous classes' (Morris 2002) – namely the poor – today involve not only a racial but also a cultural dimension (notably language and religion). The

very same discourses are somewhat 'hegemonic' also in Finland even if in different cultural and historical a context (McHoul and Grace 1997).

Problematising 'attitudes'
Finnish attitudes to immigrants and stereotypical discourses used are well documented in the recent Finnish research literature (e.g. Jaakkola 2009; Puuronen 2011; Keskinen 2009; Rastas 2009). In the current research it came clear from the parent interviews that everyday talk about immigration is indeed affected by media discourses, and dominant discourses on negative effects of immigration are easily reproduced.

Nevertheless a discourse analytic approach to the interviews also showed that straightforward connections between talk and actions – housing and school choices – are difficult to make. In parents' views on social class and ethnicity issues conservative, liberal, essential and anti-essential elements became mixed and matched during any one interview and sometimes inconsistently. On the one hand, such inconsistencies result from the dynamics of talk in an interview situation; on the other, they illuminate the rather elastic nature of 'attitudes'.

The socioeconomic profiles of the interviewees were not gathered as the participant sample was too small to facilitate broad generalisations between socioeconomic status and attitudes. The participants' educational and occupational profiles were mapped out primarily to understand whether the sample was internally homogenic or heterogenic.

Most participants had higher degrees and were employed full-time. Were their school and housing choices tied to their social class positions? The same can be asked regarding neighbourhoods: are people living in a particular neighbourhood exactly the same in terms of their income, personality, behaviour and the way in which they express themselves? One might also ask as to how far career success and satisfaction in life is determined by choices made during one's childhood? Further, what does it mean to be successful? What are the most important skills that one needs in the globalising world – cognitive or social perhaps? What else affects a person's life after the educational career is 'finished'? Can/should life in its entirety be pre-planned, controlled and follow a predictable path? Questions of this kind arose from the data, from conversations with education professionals and some recent trends in international housing research (e.g. Clapham 2010; Marsh and Gibb 2011).

If white flight does not explain things, what does?

Once families' housing and life histories were delved into in the interviews, each participant depicted their family's unique story highlighting significant events, circumstances, wishes and feelings as well as how earlier experiences affect thoughts and choices later in life. What, then, can be stated about housing and school choices

as results of 'attitudes' and in terms of observable cause and effect relations? It is suggested that individual actions *in situ* and over longer periods of time might prove useful in further analysis of the subject matter.

As for Ruonavaara (2011, 262), apart from the motives and situational judgments of actors also the mechanisms affecting their actions should be theorised. In addition, it could be asked what else there are to such 'mechanisms' than the actor's social class position and habitus. For example, despite being widely used, theoretical models developed in angloamerican contexts might not be applicable in Finland, where immigrant housing is far more controlled by authorities (Dhalmann 2011). Further, a life course approach recognises the *meanings* of the moves in light of the person's or family's lives over time (Mayer 2009; Roberts and Kyllönen 2006).

Wilkinson and Pickett (2011) have questioned such market theories that explain human behaviour by individuals always acting so as to maximise one's own good. Such an assumption, they argue, is far from the truth. They suggest that the best way to reduce inequalities in societies is to improve the genuine quality of life for all. The issue about intended and unintended consequences of action – irrespective of good will – however, come into play here. In the current study choices, it seemed, were made *in situ* where they made sense at the time. None of the families engaged in 'white flight' behaviour in its extreme form; neither did they make 'counterintuitive school choices'. Decision making in families was affected by everyday practicalities. At the same time, alternative, multicultural futures for children were envisaged by many.

Conclusion

Thus there appear to be both modern and postmodern views equally useful for understanding families' housing and school choices. In terms of the research questions, this study suggests that although some 'white avoidance' is apparent at a primary school level, 'white flight' as such is not. The nearest schools were seen as good enough and it was clear that choices on specific classes or schools could be made at a later stage. Some recent research on school choices in Finland more widely indicates that some schools are more popular than others, and that school choices more of an issue when the child grows and is also able to travel to school by public transport (Klemelä et al. 2011).

In terms of the research problem, however, the current research suggests that housing and school choices involve a range of multifaceted considerations beyond the 'white flight' -scenario (Clapham 2010; James et al. 2010). Indeed it has been argued that there is no international consensus on white flight occurring anywhere despite the perpetual interest in the matter (Rasinkangas 2010). The everyday choice making by families comprise financial, emotional as well as time- and context-bound reasoning.

When it comes to the attitudes of the 'white' Finns or any other social group, it is suggested the statements be situated in the wider contexts of families' lives. This is important in the current discursive climate where there is a tendency to focus on the spectacular instead of the 'mundane'. Yet it is at the very everyday level that the children's' lives and futures are negotiated.

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