



Home–School Cooperation in Children’s Education: Narratives of South Asian Immigrant Parents in Finland

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

While extensive research on home–school cooperation has been conducted both in Nordic countries and beyond, the perspectives of immigrant parents have received little attention. To bridge the gap, this qualitative study examines the narratives of 24 South Asian immigrant parents regarding home–school cooperation in Finnish schools. The findings are diverse and include positive experiences, concerns and fear. The positive accounts include satisfaction with teachers’ skills, acknowledgement of cultural values by schools, timely feedback and schools’ efforts to support migrant families. However, the narratives also highlight practical challenges, such as segregation, bullying of children and teachers’ unequal treatment of immigrant families. The study contributes theoretically by extending discussions on home–school cooperation through a sociocultural lens, highlighting how social norms shape cooperation and inviting a re-examination of the concept across diverse cultural contexts. Besides, we offer recommendations for promoting the educational inclusion of socioculturally diverse families in Finland.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent discourses in education recognise the critical role of home–school cooperation, with schools introducing various initiatives to involve parents in their children’s learning (e.g. [Ahmed 2023](#); [Alanko 2018](#); [Goodall 2021](#); [Wilder 2014](#)). However, cooperation between parents and teachers can be challenging because of cultural differences, language barriers and ethical dissonance, potentially creating discomfort and hindering practical cooperation (e.g. [Goossens, Utlü & Bradt 2025](#); [Kuusilehto-Awale 2024](#); [Säävälä, Turjanmaa & Alitolppa-Niitamo 2017](#); [Zacheus et al. 2019](#)). Immigrant families often have a limited understanding of their host country’s language and are less aware of the school culture and prevailing norms ([Norheim & Moser 2020](#); [Triventi, Vlach & Pini 2021](#)). Moreover, schools sometimes lack the knowledge and experience to understand the families of their immigrant students. These challenges can have a profound impact on the educational journeys of immigrant children and can reduce home–school cooperation ([Van Laere & Vandenbroeck 2017](#); [Lea 2012](#)).

The increased number of families and children emigrating from the Global South to the Global North over the last few decades ([OECD 2013](#)) has raised concerns regarding their cultural integration and educational attainment ([Harju-Luukkainen & McElvany 2018](#)). Indeed, immigrant children often fall behind their native-born peers academically and ultimately fail to reach the same level ([OECD 2015](#)). According to the [National Audit Office of Finland \(2015\)](#), there is a significant learning gap between Finnish natives and immigrants; for instance, immigrant children’s performance in mathematics and reading – relative to native students – is among the weakest in Europe. Many researchers explain this gap in terms of differential treatment of immigrant children (e.g. [Helakorpi, Holm & Liu 2023](#); [Kuusilehto-Awale 2024](#); [National Audit Office of Finland 2015](#); [Säävälä, Turjanmaa & Alitolppa-Niitamo 2017](#); [Zacheus et al. 2019](#)), and issues of genuine inclusion of immigrant families and their cultures and experiences are indeed often sidelined and need to be addressed, with collective efforts by local communities and schools being particularly important (e.g. [Karimi 2019](#); [Zacheus et al. 2019](#)). This study therefore seeks to examine the narratives of immigrant parents from three South Asian countries – India, Pakistan and Bangladesh – regarding their cooperation with schools in Finland, particularly in relation to their children’s education. Twenty-four qualitative interviews with parents were conducted, and these were analysed using thematic narrative analysis to make sense of their experiences.

Immigrating to a new country and raising and educating children can be challenging for parents, especially when the host country’s sociocultural dynamics are unfamiliar ([Karimi 2019](#); [Lea 2012](#)). Active involvement in children’s education, such as attending parent–teacher meetings and school events or doing activities at home, may also not be customary for immigrant families from developing countries (e.g. [Boulaamane & Bouchamma 2021](#)). Furthermore, immigrant parents from low-income countries with lower levels of education often have unstable work routines that can hinder their cooperation with the school ([Tang 2015](#); [Zhou & Bankston 2020](#)). A detailed examination of previous studies indicates that awareness in developing countries – including India, Pakistan and Bangladesh – of home–school collaboration is relatively low and that such cooperation is less common than in developed countries, which may be one of the reasons for immigrant children’s weak academic performance (e.g. [Ahmed 2023](#); [Hasnat 2015](#); [Lea 2012](#); [Zacheus et al. 2019](#); [Zhou & Bankston 2020](#)).

A study conducted by [Hadjar and Scharf \(2018\)](#) in four European countries – Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and England – found that immigrant parents strongly

emphasise education and strive for better academic outcomes for their children. However, these high aspirations may be hindered when parents feel excluded by teachers or lack a basic understanding of the education system (Ismail 2019; Tang 2015); immigrants are therefore sometimes more likely to pass on disadvantages to the next generation than native-born parents (OECD 2017). Nevertheless, a strong trust-based relationship between teachers and parents can unlock numerous positive outcomes for children, including socio-emotional development, successful adjustment to the new cultural environment and school readiness (e.g. Prokic 2024). Different events and programmes for immigrant families arranged by the school can also help maintain contact and empower parents to observe their child's learning progress, making them better able to assist their children with school-related activities (OECD 2021: 32–35).

HOME–SCHOOL COOPERATION

Different concepts are used to describe the roles of families in children's education and their interactions with teachers, including parental involvement (Ahmed et al. 2024; Wilder 2014), parental engagement (Goodall 2021) and home–school cooperation (Paccaud et al. 2021). In this study, the concept of home–school cooperation is employed because it is often used in the Finnish context to describe parents' relationships with teachers and their roles in children's school-related activities (e.g. Lea 2012; Perälä-Littunen & Böök 2019). Home–school cooperation refers to a mutually beneficial working relationship based on the willingness of both parents and teachers to support children and to share equal responsibility for their learning and development (Alanko 2018; Paccaud et al. 2021; Perälä-Littunen & Böök 2019). In Finland, the role of parents has become increasingly emphasised with a rise in awareness of the importance for child education of parent–teacher relationships (e.g. Lea 2012; Perälä-Littunen & Böök 2019) and with the revised National Core Curriculum of Basic Education (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014).

However, in many developed countries, such cooperation can easily fail for immigrant families, both at home and at school (Goossens, Utlu & Bradt 2025; Taylor et al. 2023). For instance, a lack of awareness about cultural differences, insufficient knowledge about children's domestic environments and inadequate information-sharing between home and school can lead to misunderstandings and negative impressions (Säävälä, Turjanmaa & Alitolppa-Niitamo 2017; Vigren et al. 2022). Schools that deal with all children – including immigrants – in the same way without knowing their backgrounds, cultures, domestic environments and psychological conditions may also not appreciate their unique needs and potential and may thus harm immigrant children's academic interest and motivation (Lea 2012; Zacheus et al. 2019).

No school can work well when parents and teachers do not cooperate (e.g. Ahmed 2023), and information-sharing is one of the fundamental dimensions of active home–school cooperation, especially for immigrant families (Ismail 2019). Information related to children's countries of origin, domestic environments and psychological conditions can thus help teachers understand children, their backgrounds and their cultures in a more concrete way (Manzoni & Rolfe 2019). Therefore, parents – especially those from immigrant backgrounds – should inform teachers about their child's living conditions to help them understand the child's behaviour and develop appropriate educational strategies (Säävälä, Turjanmaa & Alitolppa-Niitamo 2017). For instance, if a teacher is unaware of a child's complex or disturbing family situation, the child may

be seen simply as less interested in learning, and the lack of information-sharing may thus negatively affect the child's emotional well-being (Ismail 2019). Similarly, parents are entitled to know what is happening with their children at school, and teachers are obligated to provide all information to parents impartially (e.g. Ahmed et al. 2024). Existing research emphasises that children who are supported by vigorous home-school cooperation and who receive consistent support and resources from both sides to address their academic and social needs can quickly realise their potential (Manzoni & Rolfe 2019; Wilder 2014). Of course, there can always be gaps or differences of opinion between parents and teachers regarding a child's education; however, a degree of teacher-parent coordination can fill these vacuums and result in positive academic outcomes (Ahmed 2023).

STUDY CONTEXT

Finland has consistently attracted immigrant families and is considered one of the best places to live (Sahlberg 2021), having recently been ranked as the happiest country in the world for the eighth time (Fernandez 2025). High-quality and free comprehensive public schooling is one of the cornerstones of Finland's success and is intended to provide equal opportunities by eliminating the socioeconomic barriers that can impede children's socio-educational and material needs (e.g. Sahlberg 2021). However, the inclusion of migrant families brings a unique amalgamation of complexities and opportunities into Finnish schools (Harju-Luukkainen & McElvany 2018), which are undergoing significant transformation, cultural diversification and multiculturalisation (Rissanen & Kuusisto 2023). The challenges and opportunities for progress are being influenced and shaped by diverse backgrounds, varied cultures, different languages and alternative approaches to understanding Finland as a host country for migrant families (Kuusilehto-Awale 2024).

However, despite equal access to school education, immigrant youth in Finland achieve relatively poor educational outcomes (Harju-Luukkainen & McElvany 2018; Hummelstedt 2022). The 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results raised particular concerns about the poor performance of immigrants in schools, and the National Audit Agency of Finland therefore tasked the Ministry of Education and Culture with improving the school performance of immigrant children. Nevertheless, according to the latest PISA results in 2022, a significant portion of immigrant children in Finland still underperform in schools (Pulkkinen et al. 2024), with bullying, language barriers and inadequate interaction between parents and teachers being some of the key contributors to migrant children's weak performance (Helakorpi, Holm & Liu 2023; Zacheus et al. 2019). Hence, obstacles still remain to integrating migrant families into the country's mainstream (Kuusilehto-Awale 2024).

The social and educational integration of many immigrant communities in Finland has previously been studied (e.g. Helakorpi, Holm & Liu 2023; Kuusilehto-Awale 2024); however, families from South Asia – particularly India, Pakistan and Bangladesh – have received little research attention, especially regarding home-school cooperation, despite sociocultural dynamics and approaches to childrearing and education that are different from those in Finland (e.g. Aleksi 2023; Ullah & Azizuddin 2018). There are a few key differences between the Finnish and South Asian contexts relevant to home-school cooperation. For instance, in Finland, educational policy and curricula

explicitly emphasise home-school partnership (Paccaud et al. 2021; Perälä-Littunen & Böök 2019). In contrast, in many South Asian contexts, home-school cooperation is less formally embedded in policy and is shaped more by teacher-centred educational philosophies and hierarchical relationships (Ahmed 2023; Hasnat 2015). Moreover, Finnish schools typically encourage open dialogue between parents and teachers, whereas stronger norms of respect for authority in South Asia may constrain parental engagement. By studying the views of parents from such distinct cultural backgrounds, the home-school cooperation practices of the Finnish education system could thus be understood in a new way. This study, therefore, seeks to examine and understand, through a narrative approach, the perspectives of immigrant parents from three developing South Asian countries on cooperation with schools in Finland regarding their children's education.

METHODS

This qualitative study focused on the experiences of immigrant parents. We employed a narrative approach, as outlined by Riessman (2008), to understand the stories of immigrant parents and how their cultural backgrounds and the context of the Finnish education system are reflected in their views on home-school cooperation.

DATA COLLECTION

Interviews were conducted with 24 immigrant parents whose children were studying in Finnish schools and who were from India (mothers = 3, fathers = 4), Pakistan (mothers = 5, fathers = 4) or Bangladesh (mothers = 4, fathers = 4).

Individual interviews were conducted by the first author of this study; one parent from each household was interviewed to obtain opinions about the phenomena under investigation. The participants were balanced by gender and diverse in educational background and socioeconomic status, and they were recruited through personal referrals and community networks within immigrant communities in Finland. Most interviews with fathers were conducted face-to-face, while most interviews with mothers were conducted online or by phone. Given the cultural norms in South Asian countries – specifically, less interaction between males and females (Ahmed 2023) – the mothers were asked how comfortable they would be being interviewed by a male interviewer; remote interviews were usually considered more appropriate by the female participants. This approach facilitated a comfortable environment in which the mothers were able to openly express their views.

The interviews lasted between 31 min and slightly over an hour and were conducted at times and places of the participants' choosing. Most of the interviews were conducted in English because the participants were educated (graduate or undergraduate students or working people), had come to Finland to study or work and were fluent in English. However, some interviews were conducted in Urdu or Hindi – languages in which the interviewer was fluent – if the participant was not fluent in English and came as a dependant spouse. The participants had lived in Finland for between 2 and 13 years, were aged from 30–46 years and had between one and four children. Their educational backgrounds varied from university degrees (PhDs, MAs, BAs) to upper secondary education. Some held professional occupations while others were engaged in irregular or low-skilled employment, such as newspaper delivery, food delivery or cleaning. A few were outside the labour force, such as homemakers. They lived in

either the capital region of Finland or in regional centres where most schools have experience working with immigrant families.

This research was conducted at a Finnish university and followed the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity and the Responsible Conduct of Research and Research Ethics. An information sheet was provided and explained to each participant; this sheet described the purpose of the research and the participants' roles and rights. Before the interviews, each participant provided signed consent, and all participants were assured that their interviews would be handled confidentially and that their anonymity would be preserved. The thematic interviews began with general and demographic questions to build rapport and help participants feel comfortable. An interview guide had been developed based on existing literature (e.g. [Lea 2012](#); [McWayne, Melzi & Mistry 2022](#); [Norheim & Moser 2020](#); [Paccaud et al. 2021](#); [Perälä-Littunen & Böök 2019](#)) and addressed various aspects of cooperation, such as parents' interactions with teachers, parents' participation in schools, support from teachers, feedback from teachers, challenges as immigrants and challenges from cultural integration. All the interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants.

THEMATIC NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Data-driven thematic narrative analysis ([Riessman 2008](#)) was used to examine the narratives of immigrant parents regarding home-school cooperation in Finnish schools. The aim of this form of analysis is to understand human experiences and sociocultural phenomena in a specific context by focusing on what is conveyed in narratives. The process started with transcribing the recorded interviews; those conducted in English were transcribed using the University of Jyväskylä's data-secure artificial intelligence-assisted ResearchVideo software, while those conducted in Hindi and Urdu were transcribed manually. The audio recordings were then compared to the transcripts to confirm their accuracy.

The primary analysis was conducted by the first author, who first reviewed the dataset several times to become familiar with it. Data coding started by identifying and highlighting the ideas (codes) across the interviews ([Naeem et al. 2023](#); [Riessman 2008](#)). These topics were then grouped, resulting in three main narratives and several sub-narratives. The data were then revisited to confirm the relevance of the emerging narratives and sub-narratives to the aims of the study. The co-authors supported the analytical process by discussing and reflecting on the emerging results until a consensus on the narratives and sub-narratives was reached. Since the data were collected in English, Urdu and Hindi, some excerpts presented in the findings have been translated from Urdu or Hindi into English.

FINDINGS

The three narratives identified were *narrative of success and cooperation*, *narrative of the role of communication* and *narrative of challenges to educational inclusion* (see [Table 1](#)). The narratives are understood to be broad, simultaneous, overlapping and intersecting; indeed, most of the interviewees expressed all three narratives during their interviews. These narratives contained multifaceted perspectives of immigrant parents, which highlight both the opportunities and diverse challenges of home-school cooperation in Finland.

NARRATIVES	SUB-NARRATIVES
Success and cooperation	Immigrant families' positive experiences Mutual efforts by family and school
The role of communication	Access to information Communication challenges
Challenges to educational inclusion	Bullying and segregation Precarious work conditions

Table 1 Narratives and sub-narratives emerging from the data analysis.

NARRATIVE OF SUCCESS AND COOPERATION

In this narrative, the participants explained how they engage with and contribute to their children’s education and how Finnish teachers support and facilitate it.

The sub-narrative *immigrant families’ positive experiences* encompasses the participants’ accounts of their cooperative interactions with Finnish educators. Many parents described smooth correspondence and interactions because of the teachers’ supportive and helpful attitudes. The participants also described how Finnish teachers actively listen and make efforts to make the children and their families feel at home. Some participants shared stories of emigrating to Finland for a better education and brighter future for their children, having heard about Finnish teachers’ professionalism and caring attitudes. One mother described how a teacher helped her and her son to adapt to the new environment:

I remember that, initially, my son struggled to concentrate and follow the lessons. The teachers asked him several times about the reason, but he was shy. The teacher then invited me to discuss the matter, and I informed her that my son misses his friends and family back home and often asks me to return. The teacher, after that, provided extra support for my son, which helped him make new friends, and you know, within a month, he adjusted, and he is very happy now. (Mother)

The participants also described experiences in which teachers and the school administration provided their children with an atmosphere that supports their own cultural values within the host community. They indicated that they were encouraged by teachers to express their concerns and feedback through platforms such as Wilma (Visma Aquila Oy, Helsinki, Finland), an online tool for parent–teacher interaction, and at parent–teacher meetings. Most were happy with the services provided by the schools, including the teachers’ promptness in resolving issues:

I must say ... hats off to the teachers, they are very nice. For example, my son did not know how to swim when we arrived initially because he was afraid of water back home, and I never wanted him to swim. One of his teachers contacted me, saying that [my son] wanted to come, and [the teacher] assured me that she would take care of him. She was not the class teacher, but she always, you know, helped him if he wanted to do something. (Mother)

In the second sub-narrative, the participants related how Finnish teachers emphasise and prioritise the *mutual efforts by family and school*. They described how the schools encouraged and supported them in helping their children at home with assigned tasks and homework. Several participants commended Finnish teachers for their professionalism, for paying close attention to the learning environment and for actively engaging with families. They also stated that they were well informed by teachers regarding their children's behaviour, learning and results. In addition, some parents reported that, as immigrants from a different culture, it took them some time to learn that Finnish teachers do not pressure children to pass exams but instead focus on learning, with teachers emphasising academic and extracurricular activities equally. One of the participants mentioned the teachers' caring attitudes and described the collective effort of the family and the school:

The main discussion was that the teacher was kind of requesting that, okay, 'we are here, we know what to do and all, but the home also supports a lot', and they were pretty open about it. They were saying that, at home, 'it would be nice if you could tell the same concept to the child in your own language'. So, in that way, the cooperation is very good. Even today, there was a Wilma message about my first grader that 'the reading homework is going very well, and thanks for the cooperation at home'. (Father)

Most of the participants described how, back home, they were very concerned about their children's academic results and frequently pressured their children to study hard and follow parental advice and direction. However, in Finland, children learn in a pressure-free environment and choose their educational paths freely. Furthermore, parents from all three nationalities mentioned that there is very little or sometimes no homework assigned to their children, which initially worried and surprised them. However, after discussions with the teachers, they realised that the learning process in Finnish schools is different to schools in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. One of the interviewed mothers shared her views about Finnish schools:

It is not like in our country, where we worry a lot and pressure our children all the time to complete homework, and if the child does not complete [it], we have to hear from the teacher that we are careless. In Finland, teachers mainly take care of the learning, and they give very little homework. When I came initially, I went to school and asked the teacher how [she] wanted me to help, and she said, 'we [will] take care of the learning; you only facilitate your child at home with Finnish cartoons so he can improve [his] Finnish skills quickly'. (Mother)

This narrative illustrates how the parents value the respect and attention they receive from Finnish teachers. They believe that collaboration with teachers and involvement in their children's education in Finnish schools enhances learning and helps to promote their children's inclusion.

NARRATIVE OF THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION

This narrative highlights the dual role of communication. The participants' stories reveal both the extent of the support and information access that schools provide and the challenges that immigrant families face when communicating with schools and supporting their children at home.

Within the first sub-narrative, the parents described how, even as non-Finnish speakers, they often have good access to information about their children's learning and access to their teachers through emails, personal meetings and the digital application (Wilma) used for communication. They described how, at the beginning, the schools provided special classes (preparatory sessions) for their children, and the teachers communicated in their native language through translation in the classroom, providing the parents with translated materials to support their children's learning at home. Some of the participants appreciated the presence of interpreters or multilingual staff when communicating with the teachers because of their own limited understanding and proficiency in Finnish:

Whenever it is urgent or serious, the teacher sends us a message in English. For example, recently, something unpleasant happened near school, so the first information came in Finnish, and it took me some time because I was driving. I did not understand it fully. I did not have time to translate it, but after 10 or 15 minutes, they sent it in English. (Father)

Additionally, the parents appreciated the linguistic support provided by the school, in which their native languages are taught to their children on a weekly basis; most expressed how learning their native language helps the children to maintain a connection to their roots. The participants also shared how Finnish teachers show considerable respect for their religious beliefs and provide their children with separate classes on their faiths – taught by knowledgeable followers – so the children can remain connected to their religious creeds. Similarly, they described how the schools consider the children's dietary rules, which were discussed at the outset, such that the parents can exclude certain foods from their children's meals. One of the participants shared how the schools help immigrants stay connected with their backgrounds:

Schools also focus on the native language and religion, and, for this, I would give full credit to Finnish schools, that our children can learn their mother tongue. I remember that, in the beginning, the teacher wanted to know our mother tongue and our religion and said that they would try to teach them in school. Now, once a week, children attend their native language and religion classes at school, which I think is good. (Mother)

While the participants acknowledged the access to information provided by the schools, the second sub-narrative encompassed the *communication challenges* they experience as non-natives in Finland. For example, they described how the schools encourage them to monitor their children's homework and sign it; however, the assignments are often in Finnish, and, because of their limited Finnish skills, it can be challenging for them to help their children with homework. For the same reason, the participants reported misunderstandings over written communications sent by the schools in Finnish, resulting in delays in responding. They described the language challenges when helping their children at home and when communicating with the school:

In the beginning, they gave homework to my son in Finnish, and my son was not able to understand. He asked me to explain, and I also do not know Finnish. I [told] him ... 'you should ask your teacher, and they are supposed to tell you'. The next day, I went to school and asked the

teacher not to give him homework right away in Finnish when he does not understand it well; also, I cannot help my son in Finnish. (Mother)

We have informed the teacher that we are uncomfortable discussing matters in Finnish, yet whenever she sends us a message or calls, she speaks Finnish, and we have to tell her to please switch to English. (Father)

Most participants noted that big events, such as annual parents' meetings at school, are predominantly conducted and corresponded about in Finnish, which prevents their active participation and leaves their queries unaddressed. They reported that some teachers repeatedly communicate in Finnish despite being proficient in English. Some also said that they occasionally see teachers as obstacles to their family's integration into Finnish society, as the teachers had asked them several times to move their children from a Finnish-speaking school to an international school, despite the parents not indicating any interest in doing so:

When the school arranged a big gathering for the parents, it was in Finnish, and I heard the same idea from most of the parents that, whenever it is a big meeting for all the parents, including the immigrants, the central language is always Finnish, and we are not able to ask any questions. Teachers know that we are immigrants; we just feel excluded because we can neither understand Finnish nor ask for anything in Finnish. (Father)

This narrative suggests that, although communication connects immigrant parents and Finnish teachers through the exchange of information, issues related to social isolation and cultural differences can still leave families and children feeling disconnected and struggling to integrate.

NARRATIVE OF CHALLENGES TO EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION

Despite positive experiences, the parents also described systemic challenges to cooperation between home and school. Within this narrative, the participants shared their experiences of bullying, segregation and teachers' unequal treatment; they also highlighted how their own precarious work conditions can hinder participation.

In the first sub-narrative, the parents expressed serious concerns about *bullying and segregation* and the consequences for the learning and mental health of their children. Several participants angrily explained that their children had returned home in tears, having been insulted, bullied or physically harmed by Finnish children. They explained that, when they raised these concerns with the teachers, the issue was often not managed effectively, even though it occurred repeatedly; the children sometimes even avoided attending school because of these experiences. One mother expressed her discontent with the unequal treatment of her son at school:

In the beginning, it was very hard for my son to go to school because he was bullied many times by Finnish children. We did not send our child to school for a few days because he was so upset. Although I spoke to his schoolteacher, they did not take any action or give me a satisfactory answer. What I felt was that they cannot take action for immigrants who are facing bullying from Finnish children. I would say they are not welcoming to immigrants, especially those from our country. (Mother)

Some parents also voiced concerns about teachers' behaviour towards immigrant families that had created dissatisfaction and misunderstandings. They described how they were reluctant to complain about segregation and the biased attitudes of Finnish teachers – whether to the teachers themselves or the school principal – fearing it would lead to further discrimination against their children. Likewise, some participants expressed unhappiness with the school because of their own negative past experiences or those of the people around them. One of the interviewed fathers revealed how his daughter had cancelled extracurricular activities because of the teacher's inadequate attention to issues at school:

As I mentioned, we leave no stone unturned here to integrate into Finnish society. We sent our daughter to an acrobatics class. What happened? One day, she came back home, and she was very depressed. So, after some discussion with her, she told us that someone asked her 'why [is] your skin colour so dark?'. You know, kids keep these kinds of things in their minds. I tried to calm her and discussed this matter with the acrobatics teacher, but she did not try to fix this thing or discuss it with my daughter. Maybe if she had discussed it with my daughter, like, 'this is a normal thing, you do not have anything different', she might have shown her interest in going again, but now my daughter has stopped going there. (Father)

The stories also reflected frustration, as the parents felt that their children are ignored by teachers because they are perceived as different from Finnish children. They reported often raising such concerns with teachers and having those concerns ignored, which increased their disappointment and helplessness. One mother expressed her thoughts on the challenges her child faces in an environment in which cultural differences can hinder receiving adequate support from the school:

My son shared with me several times that, when something happened in class or school and he went to express it to the teacher, the teacher was not as attentive to him as to Finnish children. I discussed many things with the teacher, but now I am tired; I do not have energy. (Mother)

Similarly, a father described his reluctance to speak out against discrimination in the school, fearing that the teacher might become biased against his child:

The teacher told my son that his handwriting was too bad, very bad, like, in front of the whole class, and my son felt insulted. When he wanted to talk in class, the teacher stopped him, shut him up, and, when he raised his hand, the teacher asked him to stop. It was not only with my son; it happened to many other immigrants. My son insisted that I complain to the principal, and I once thought I would make a complaint. Then I realised that, if I made this complaint, there would be a conflict with the teacher, and my two kids are there [in the same school], so it could affect their education. So, I tried to convince my son just to let it go. (Father)

In the second sub-narrative, a few of the participants mentioned *precarious work conditions* as a barrier to their active involvement in their children's education. They felt that their insecure work could create difficulties in paying sufficient attention to their children's education and cooperating with the school. Some mentioned being

occupied with working long hours in physically demanding jobs, such as delivering newspapers or food, limiting their time for family and sometimes not providing sufficient income for their needs:

You know, my work routine is very hard. I sometimes cannot see my daughter's homework or ask about her school activities because I am often busy with work, and I work until late at night or the whole night. (Father)

In line with this, one of the parents described his challenging working routine, through which he barely manages to earn sufficient income for his family's needs.

I am a food courier, and I deliver food to homes from the restaurant. It's not easy work; sometimes, I work for 10 hours or even more, and because of less work, I am not able to earn the required money. (Father)

Some parents explicitly mentioned that they think about and care for their children's futures, having moved to Finland to find better educational opportunities for their children. However, they stated that their work situations often hinder their involvement in their children's school-related activities. They explained that their unstable work and concerns about paying essential bills sometimes compel them to work longer hours. One of the parents described how his challenging work routine reduces the time he can spend helping his children or attending school meetings.

It is not always easy for me to visit my child's school or spend enough time at home with him because of my work. Finding a job here as a foreigner is challenging, especially when you don't speak Finnish. I worked overnight shifts and weekends in cleaning and restaurant jobs to cover the rent and food for my family. You know, at one point, I was doing two jobs every day, and when I finally reached home, I felt exhausted. (Father)

This narrative highlights the challenges and concerns faced by immigrant families in Finnish schools, including bullying, segregation, teachers' indifference and work-related issues, which can hinder effective cooperation between home and school.

DISCUSSION

Centring on narratives from South Asian immigrants – a community with little representation in educational research within the Finnish and Nordic contexts – this study contributes to the literature by exploring the views of socioculturally diverse parents who are educating their children in Finnish schools. The results illustrate their emotions and experiences, which range from positivity to frustration to fear. The narratives feature schools that succeed in fostering a supportive environment for immigrants alongside children who face bullying and social exclusion that impede smooth cooperation between the schools and immigrant families. The study identified three main narratives: *success and collaboration*, *the role of communication* and *challenges to educational inclusion*. These contain both positive factors and barriers to home-school cooperation. The theoretical contribution of this study is to extend the discussion on home-school cooperation with an understanding of sociocultural norms in shaping the cooperation. Adding the sociocultural surface to the discussion offers

an opportunity to review the definition of the concept of home-school cooperation in diverse cultural contexts.

The Finnish education system is considered one of the most socially sustainable learning models in the world (e.g. [Sahlberg, 2021](#)), and many of the participants mentioned this as a reason for emigrating to Finland. The positive experiences that the parents had with Finnish teachers included trust; satisfaction; timely feedback; and, importantly, the recognition of the immigrant families' cultural values by the schools and their efforts to include migrants. However, their experiences also revealed some areas in which the system did not meet their expectations. While they appreciated the support they received from the schools and teachers, their stories highlighted the homogeneity and monolithic structure of Finnish school education, in which appropriate facilitation, accommodations and communication seem to be inadequate. The use of only the Finnish language in annual parents' meetings, personal correspondence and other big gatherings can create challenges and give immigrant families feelings of isolation and indifferent treatment. This is consistent with earlier research indicating that a lack of understanding and communication gaps can obstruct the exchange of concerns between teachers and parents ([Helakorpi, Holm & Liu, 2023](#); [Säävälä, Turjanmaa & Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2017](#)). Developing an understanding and openness to sharing concerns between teachers and immigrant families during the initial phase of schooling can therefore help to create a cooperative learning environment ([Kuusilehto-Awale, 2024](#); [Paccaud et al., 2021](#)).

The participants were also found to be reluctant to report their children's concerns or issues with teachers to the principal. One reason may be cultural; in developing South Asian countries – particularly India, Pakistan and Bangladesh – there is a pronounced and unbalanced power relationship in schools and a likelihood of experiencing or being impacted by power relations issues at any level of education ([Ahmed et al., 2024](#); [Hasnat, 2015](#)). Immigrant parents may therefore have experienced or been influenced by prior experiences of such power dynamics in their homeland, and they may therefore fear discrimination if teachers are questioned or complaints made. The participants' experiences of inaction by Finnish teachers when concerns are reported may also contribute to their fear and disappointment. Although the parents acknowledged Finnish teachers' professionalism, the support structures in practice sometimes fell short when dealing with recurring issues of educational inclusion. Existing research indicates that, although Finnish teachers have an excellent reputation worldwide for professionalism and caring, they often lack adequate training to effectively handle cultural diversity and a multicultural environment (e.g. [Harju-Luukkainen & McElvany, 2018](#); [Säävälä, Turjanmaa & Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2017](#)). Therefore, a greater emphasis on cultural diversity in teaching practice is needed to address issues that are primarily based on cultural differences.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The narratives show that dealing with cultural diversity and families with diverse backgrounds is not yet a solid strength of the Finnish education system; instead, there seems to be a shallow inclusivity with several weaknesses. The issues raised, such as linguistic gaps, bullying, segregation and teachers' passivity in resolving concerns, may hinder home-school cooperation. We therefore recommend greater efforts towards multicultural inclusion to effectively accommodate and integrate immigrant families – particularly those from non-Western backgrounds – into Finnish education.

For example, while the narratives highlight the efforts of Finnish teachers to support migrant families, they also indicate that Finnish is often used in annual parent–teacher meetings and home–school correspondence. This presents challenges because Finnish teachers may be unable to communicate or understand the language and cultural backgrounds of immigrant families and the families may be unable to express their concerns to schoolteachers. Thus, for effective cooperation and meaningful dialogue, it is important to invest in tools for multilingual communication and ways to develop cultural understanding. Previous research also emphasises that language for immigrants should be viewed as a bridge to foster cooperation, trust and inclusion rather than merely as a task of translation (e.g. [Nshom, Sadaf & Khalimzoda 2022](#); [Säävälä, Turjanmaa & Alitolppa-Niitamo 2017](#)).

The current study also suggests that Finnish teachers need the ability to recognise and understand the diverse views of immigrant families to help promote diversity and internationalisation in schools, underlining the need for teacher training in cultural diversity and socially receptive approaches in order to address issues such as segregation and bullying. Existing research describes how teachers with multicultural knowledge can both ensure equitable participation by children and help care for the social and emotional well-being of immigrant families (e.g. [Lea 2012](#); [Podadera & González-Jimenez 2023](#)). It is also important to empower immigrant parents, particularly those from developing countries, by supporting them in individual meetings so that they may express their concerns without fear. The findings of this study are relevant not only to the Finnish context but also to other Nordic and European countries with similar social welfare and educational settings that accommodate immigrant families who have had similar experiences, especially those from South Asian countries.

LIMITATIONS

Although the findings of this qualitative study on immigrant parents' experiences of home–school cooperation represent a valuable contribution to the literature, they may not be generalisable to immigrant communities with dissimilar origins. Additionally, the sample in this study comprises parents who migrated to Finland with their families primarily for study or work purposes. It has been well documented that parents' educational backgrounds can influence their willingness and ability to cooperate with schools (e.g. [Ahmed 2023](#); [Martin et al. 2025](#)), which may have influenced the parents' views, particularly when compared to those with different educational backgrounds or reasons for migration. To gain a broader understanding of the perspectives of immigrant families with school-age children in Finland, future research could therefore examine the viewpoints of immigrant parents from a wider range of socioeconomic backgrounds. The current study also addressed only the parents' perspectives, providing a view of only one side of the cooperation. Thus, for a holistic understanding, the viewpoints of Finnish teachers regarding home–school cooperation with socioculturally diverse immigrant families should also be investigated, alongside the views of the children themselves.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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