Navigating the landscape of diversity leadership: Experiences of Finnish comprehensive school principals in the Helsinki area

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This study explores the landscape of diversity leadership in Finnish comprehensive schools through the experiences and reflections of principals in the Helsinki area. Employing qualitative thematic analysis of principal interviews, we identified five key categories capturing the challenges and complexities principals navigate in leading diverse school communities: supporting structures for diversity, practical arrangements in school management, social encounters in schools, managemental issues concerning teachers and staff, and principals' self-reflection. Principals emphasized the importance of establishing clear structures and practices to support diversity and inclusion, while also recognizing the need for flexibility and adaptability to meet the varied needs of diverse learners. They had to deal with practical challenges in managing certain aspect of diversity, constraints of municipal policies and resources, and the complexities of building positive relationships among diverse communities. Principals also engaged in critical self-reflection on their own identities, assumptions, and leadership practices in relation to diversity. Findings underscore the multifaceted nature of diversity leadership, encompassing structural, practical, social, professional, and personal dimensions. The study highlights the need for more systemic support, contextualized approaches, and professional development to build capacity for effective diversity leadership in increasingly diverse Finnish schools.

KEYWORDS

educational leadership, diversity leadership, comprehensive schools, principals, diversity

1 Introduction

School principals play a pivotal role in leading increasingly diverse school communities, yet they often face significant challenges in navigating this complex landscape. This study examines the specific job challenges and experiences of Finnish comprehensive school principals in the Helsinki area as they deal with growing diversity in their schools. Landscapes refer to the school environment and its people (e.g., students, teachers), challenges related to everyday school life, and the way principals see their role and themselves. That is, landscape concerns everything surrounding principals and affecting their work as a leader of a diverse school community.

Diversity as a concept is often found to be complex and vague. There is growing concern about equity and inclusion in education due to rapid, large-scale global trends (e.g., demographic change, refugee crises, climate change; OECD, 2023). Principals play vital roles in leading pedagogy, facilitating, and implementing educational policies, and developing a

positive school climate as well as collaboration between different stakeholders (OECD, 2023).

There is plenty of research focusing on diversity and culturally responsive teaching, though it is evident that further studies on leadership and diversity in schools are needed [Khalifa, 2019, p. 25; in Finnish context (Räsänen et al., 2018, p. 136)]. In this article we report our study in which through analyzing principal group interviews ($N = 5$, a total of 18 interviewees) we outlined the landscape of diversity leadership in the Finnish comprehensive schools. As different features of diversity are not equally distributed in the country, we focus on schools in Helsinki, the Finnish capital, representing what we believe is the nationwide future of education in increasingly diverse country. Examining Finnish principals' stories of diversity leadership, this study illuminates an interesting viewpoint to a post-industrial social state in which education is arranged by the society as public education and upbringing.

The Finnish education system became somewhat famous after its successes in the OECD's first PISA tests in 2001 (e.g., Thrupp et al., 2023, p. 1). Despite market liberalism's influence on the education system, Finnish comprehensive schooling is still based on the ideal of equality, and much emphasis is placed on publicly funded local schools for all (Thrupp et al., 2023, p. 4; Finnish Basic Education Act, 1998/628). Comprehensive schools composed of grades 1–9 are mainly governed by the municipalities (less than 2% of the children in Finland attend private or state schools). Every school must have a principal who is responsible for all the operations of the school (Finnish Basic Education Act, 1998/628). Principals act as the school representatives towards the local educational administration, and work under their authority. They act as mediators between school staff and families, school staff and administration, and administration and families. The power relations between these groups vary, but the National Core Curriculum sets as an objective to increase the role of students and their guardians in curriculum work, and in preparing the school year plan and planning school activities (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, p. 10; Finnish Basic Education Act [FBEA], 1998/628). Leadership positions in Finnish comprehensive schools are diverse, requiring versatile competence depending on the location of the school, the local administration, and on demographic factors.

Principals' qualification requirements include a Master's degree, a teaching qualification, adequate work experience as a teacher, and at least one set of studies in educational leadership or administration (Lahtero et al., 2019). The majority (61.7%) of principals are over 50 years old and the share of principals under 40 is rather small (under 10%; Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020, p. 10). The number of men (48%) and women (52%) working as principals is almost equal. The job description of a principal is not specifically determined, yet there are some key features that school-level leadership in Finland entails: technical leadership (e.g., general administration, schedules), direct pedagogical leadership (e.g., strategic leadership, pedagogy), and leading human resources (e.g., teachers' professional development; Fonsén and Lahtero, 2024, p. 165).

Diversity as a concept is often felt to be complex and vague. Because of its indefinite and limited definition(s) there is a risk of it implying exclusion with an emphasis on the differences rather than the similarities between different groups and identities (Messiou et al., 2022). The concept of *superdiversity* (Vertovec, 2007) aims to move forward from the tradition of relating diversity to race, ethnicity, a nation of origin and immigration, as they alone are not sufficient to

describe the complex nature of the phenomenon. This goes beyond *traditional multiculturalism*, which typically focuses on celebrating cultural differences. Instead, it examines how immigrants' lives are shaped by their varying experiences, opportunities, and limitations, including broader social and economic factors (Bäckman and Pöyhönen, 2020, p. 60–61; Vertovec, 2007). *Critical multiculturalism* has a more philosophical outreach to diversity, adding power, privilege and intersectionality to the discussion, and approaches identities, group positions and practices, and identities as fluid and evolving (Vavrus, 2012, pp. 669–670).

Diversity leadership in the field of education forms a part in inclusive schooling and leadership. It is closely connected to culturally responsive leadership and pedagogy, cultural, linguistic and worldview awareness, and equitable and sustainable schooling. The purpose of education, especially formal schooling, in Finland and in Europe in general, has been to strengthen the unified population of a nation-state (Johnson, 2007, pp. 14–15; Jantunen et al., 2022; Vandenbroeck, 2017, p. 40). Diversity has been seen as problematic, starting at the education policy level (Messiou et al., 2022) and as something that for a student would better be "dealt with" before school even starts (Vandenbroeck, 2017, p. 407). This applies especially to variation in socioeconomic backgrounds, different languages, behaviour, and competence (Vandenbroeck, 2017, pp. 406–407). Consequently, changes in society, population and recognition of diversity require a major cultural change to truly promote diversity as a richness and an asset in schools.

Leadership goes beyond official positions and personal traits, emerging naturally at different levels within schools and education systems. It's a shared ability that flows between people and groups, rather than being limited to those at the top (Bottery et al., 2018, p. 3). Successful school administration requires strategic thinking that connects schools with their broader community context (Fullan, 2002; Hargreaves and Fink, 2006). Research in Nordic countries (Andersen, 2014) emphasizes that school leaders must adapt to increasingly diverse student populations by implementing inclusive content, pedagogical methods, and school cultures. This includes fostering awareness of how racial and cultural biases influence knowledge construction. Effective leadership practices include challenging deficit-based perspectives, enhancing teachers' cultural responsiveness, and reforming curricula (Khalifa et al., 2016). Such inclusive leadership requires recognition of biases embedded in dominant cultural paradigms (Khalifa et al., 2016; Milner, 2010).

Principals' understanding of diversity is crucial, as they play a key role in driving school improvement and shaping organizational factors that positively influence teaching and learning (Leithwood et al., 2020). Principals are accountable for overseeing all school operations and supporting teacher growth, while also holding a distinctive role in their capacity to enhance non-instructional areas and frameworks within the school environment (Khalifa, 2019, p. 25). Most Finnish comprehensive school principals have a positive attitude towards diversity in school, but conceptions of diversity are mainly on a descriptive or ideological level and lack deeper, critical understanding and a practical dimension how to take diversity into account in everyday school life (Jantunen et al., 2022; Jantunen et al., 2023; Rissanen, 2019). As the roots of homogeneity are deep in the core of compulsory schooling, principals and other school leaders need to reform the structures with sensitivity to the community and to power relations and positions (Khalifa, 2019, p. 169).

An important notion concerning this study and its context, is that although Finnish comprehensive schools are based on the ideal of equitable schooling, segregation and school separation have increased in urban areas (Bernelius and Vaattovaara, 2016). Ethnic and socio-spatial segregation have grown significantly in Helsinki, the capital region of Finland, which is statistically a strong predictor for future development (Bernelius and Kosunen, 2023, p. 180). Certain features of diversity (e.g., immigrant backgrounds, ethnicity, linguistic) are not equally distributed in Helsinki, and this has led to social avoidance of some areas and their schools (Kosunen et al., 2020). Previous studies imply that Finnish schools and education in general seem to implement more traditional (or outdated) multicultural education (Hummelstedt et al., 2021) rather than critical multicultural education (McLaren and Ryoo, 2012) or culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018).

While prior research has examined Finnish principals' conceptions of diversity (Jantunen et al., 2021, 2022, 2023; also Rissanen, 2019), there is a need for more grounded, practice-oriented insights into how diversity leadership unfolds in the day-to-day work of leading schools. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the lived experiences and challenges of principals in the Helsinki area as they navigate the complex landscape of diversity in their schools. By examining the realities of diversity leadership in practice, this study seeks to inform efforts to prepare and support principals to lead equitable, inclusive schools in an increasingly diverse society.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Aim and research questions

This study explores the challenges and experiences of Finnish comprehensive school principals in leading diverse school communities in the Helsinki area. Specifically, we seek to understand how principals navigate the complex social, cultural, and institutional demands of diversity leadership in their everyday work. By illuminating the lived realities of principals of increasingly diverse schools, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced and grounded understanding of what effective diversity leadership entails in practice.

Our primary research question is as follows:

How do Finnish comprehensive school principals in the Helsinki area understand and navigate the challenges of leading diverse school communities in their everyday work?

To address this overarching question, we explore the following sub-questions:

- What specific challenges do principals encounter in leading schools with diverse student populations?
- How do principals conceptualize their role as diversity leaders, and what strategies do they employ to foster inclusive and equitable learning environments?

By examining these questions through the lens of principals' own reflections and experiences, we aim to outline the complex landscape of diversity leadership in Finnish comprehensive schools. Ultimately, our goal is to generate insights that can inform efforts to prepare and support principals to work in ways that promote educational equity

and inclusion in school and, further, respond to an increasingly diverse society.

2.2 Study context

In 2022, there were a total of 100 comprehensive schools in Helsinki with approximately 46,000 students. A total of 14 schools arranged teaching in Swedish (the other official language in Finland), and the rest of the schools were Finnish-speaking (City of Helsinki, 2023a). Almost one-fifth (18%) of the population in Helsinki speaks another language than Finnish, Swedish, or Sámi as their native language, whereas the average in Finland is 9% (Official Statistics in Finland, 2022b). There are a total of 140 registered native languages spoken in Helsinki. The share of foreign citizens in Helsinki is 11%, which has almost tripled during the past 20 years (City of Helsinki, 2023b) In the Helsinki capital area, one student in 10 (10.2%) has a foreign nationality, and in Finland, in general, the percentage is 6.5% (Vipunen, 2023). Approximately 65% of Finns are members of the largest religious community (the Evangelical Lutheran Church), and the corresponding number in Helsinki in 2022 was a little over 47% (Official Statistics in Finland, 2022a). Accordingly, there is a significant difference in the number of students participating in different worldview education classes. In Helsinki, 61% of the elementary school students participated in Evangelical Lutheran worldview education, whereas the percentage for the whole country was 86% (Vipunen, 2018). Concerning ethics classes in Helsinki, 22.5% of the students participated, while generally, in Finland, the figure is only 8.5% (Vipunen, 2018). Additionally, the percentage of participating students in Islam classes is almost three times higher in Helsinki (10%) than in the rest of the country (2.5%; Vipunen, 2018). Due to Helsinki's rapidly diversified nature, The Finish National Agency for Education has financially supported several diversity-related projects in Helsinki schools (City of Helsinki, 2023c).

2.3 Participants and data

The participants were recruited from seven school districts in Helsinki with the help of the city's education division. The heads of the district informed the principals about the research initiative and the call for participants. Principals from six administrative districts informed that they were interested in participating in the study, and the heads collected their contact information and delivered it to the research group. Finally, the research group formed groups of principals from five administrative districts, contacted the participants, and agreed on the interview schedule. The interviews took place at the university premises. The group size varied from two to six participants.

We employed a qualitative attitude approach (QAA) in which the interviewees commented on 10 claims (i.e., statements) given one at a time in written form (Autonen-Vaaraniemi, 2022; Vesala and Rantanen, 2007). The claims were read out loud and placed in front of the interviewees (e.g., In our school, we are aware of different forms of diversity). The participants had the opportunity to discuss the claim until they felt ready for the next one. The purpose was to elicit attitudes toward the theme at hand. We understand an attitude to be a person's inner construction and that it is possible to describe the relationship between an individual

and the social dimension. Spoken attitudes are also connected to the institutional position the interviewees represent. The total word count of the interview data was 11,950 (in Finnish). On average, an individual principal used approximately 664 words (range of variation 146–1,618).

To protect the interviewees' anonymity and avoid making assumptions about their gender identities, research participants are referred to by using gender-neutral pronouns (they, them, their). To make the results easier to read and follow, the quoted principals (N = 14) were given pseudonyms: Moss, Lichen, Tree, Leaf, Clover, Root, Conifer, Pine, Branch, Creek, Pond, Squirrel, Woodpecker and Juniper. A total of 18 principals participated in the interviews, but only those principals who are quoted in the results were given a pseudonym.

2.4 Analysis methods

This study was conducted using qualitative thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2012) to find the features related to diversity leadership that Finnish principals face in daily school life and to form the landscape of diversity leadership in a comprehensive school context. First, we read the data and listened to the original interview audio recordings many times while searching for patterns and repeated 'pre-themes'. We used the data set from the data corpus that consisted of claims that precisely focused on diversity in schools. As the data consisted of group interviews, the interviewees' speech was interrupted occasionally, and the focus was sidetracked. This is why we decided that an exact delimitation of the data set would be required. The group interviews served the purpose of the study, as through the discussion, the principals could both seek validation and challenge their beliefs. We find, that the discussion made the principals justify their attitudes, views and beliefs in a way that may not have happened if they were interviewed individually.

Second, we coded the selected data set utilizing Atlas TI software and an inductive approach. We were looking for primarily semantic repetitiveness from the data without strict theoretical guidance (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This approach was selected because diversity leadership in Finnish comprehensive schools has been studied very little, and our study aimed to outline how such leadership is formed in everyday school life without prior knowledge of the topic. International literature guided the coding to the extent that attention was drawn to meaningful concepts and wordings throughout the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2012).

As the third step, we formed themes and subthemes from the initial codes. The data set was then reorganized according to these themes to form 'type stories' and was reread again to confirm that the selected themes formed consistent 'stories.' However, the interviewees provided multiple viewpoints on each topic. We then selected a data extract that consisted of the codes of the theme 'leadership' and its sub-themes to focus on the features of diversity leadership in schools. Finally, after a final review of these sub-themes, five thematic categories were selected to present the landscape of diversity leadership of Finnish comprehensive schools: supporting structures for diversity in school, practical arrangements in school management, social encounters in school, management issues concerning teachers and staff members, and principals' self-reflection. During each step, the first author made a preliminary analysis, which we discussed further and refined in regular meetings.

Because this study aimed to outline the landscape of diversity leadership through the principals' stories and descriptions, we have presented the results with more extended narrative quotes to highlight the essence of each thematic category. The authors translated the quotes from Finnish to English.

2.5 Ethical considerations

This study was conducted at the University of Helsinki, where researchers follow the ethical principles of research in the humanities and social and behavioral sciences issued by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK; http://www.tenk.fi/en). A statement of the ethics of a research design must be requested from the University of Helsinki ethical review board if a study features any of the following items specified by the TENK: participants under the age of 15; exposure of participants to exceptionally strong stimuli; or research involving a risk of causing mental harm or involving a threat to the safety of participants or researchers or their family members or others closest to them. This study did not include any of these items. We followed the process of informed consent, meaning that all the interviewees were provided with information concerning their rights as research participants, and they had the right to withdraw at any point from the research. In addition, the data was pseudonymized.

3 Results

Through our thematic analysis of the principal interviews, we identified five key categories that capture the landscape of diversity leadership in Helsinki comprehensive schools: (1) supporting structures for diversity, (2) practical arrangements in school management, (3) social encounters in schools, (4) managemental issues concerning teachers and staff, and (5) principals' self-reflection. These categories represent the primary domains in which principals navigate the challenges and complexities of leading diverse school communities daily.

3.1 Supporting structures for diversity

Structures and their importance or their problematic and sometimes outdated nature was noted in all the interviews. Principal Moss talked about the meaning of structures as a crucial part of diversity leadership in their school setting:

> We are always being asked [by principals and teachers outside the school], "how do you have the time to do all that?" We have structures for that. We have action plans for all our traditions and activities. We just keep updating [them]. We always have Friday as a community day. As the principal I have considered these co-teaching, co-planning, co-lessons, community days and so on. Everything has to be strongly structured to ensure that procedures are smooth and do not create problematic situations in everyday life. Our structure ensures diversity, because otherwise it would be like constantly putting out fires. But the structures are also diverse. It is very important. Diversity must be considered in the design, in everything. Action is automatically taken when a need is noticed. If

our gender equality plan needs to be developed, it will be developed. Then the principal and the management team truly take these things seriously. [Faced needs] come into the structure and they are taken care of and are included in the structure.

Principals emphasized the importance of establishing clear structures and practices to support diversity and inclusion in their schools. As Principal Moss explained, the structures in their school were the key element that took the diversity of the school community into account. These structures were realized through continuing practices throughout the years. From their point of view, the structures made it possible to use the time at school efficiently on matters requiring attention, rather than starting from scratch and trying to gather a new set of teachers to take action every year. Moss also emphasized their personal role as a leader in making these structures possible through the curriculum, e.g., how the weekly schedules were planned and implemented. They stated that the structures needed to be flexible and multifaceted to be changed or developed further when something new came to light or a need for change was identified. By institutionalizing diversity-responsive practices, principals sought to create a foundation for student equity and belonging.

However, some principals cautioned against rigid, one-size-fits-all approaches, noting the need for flexibility to accommodate individual needs. Principal Tree questioned whether structures truly were a shortcut to a happy school life. They criticized approaches that presented "a certain chosen policy as the only appropriate and effective one for all situations." "I have learned the hard way that ready-made solutions or certain policies have not proven to be effective, but individual situations require individual solutions," reflected Principal Tree. Principal Leaf supported this by saying:" We have nine special education classes, centralised and then local services, many [school] buildings and students from grade 1 to 9. So yes, I would say that I fully endorse completely different solutions to diversity." This tension between structure and adaptability emerged as one of the key challenges in leading diverse schools.

3.2 Practical arrangements in school management

According to the principals we interviewed, diversity leadership in schools is currently firmly tied to practical arrangements in school. These practical arrangements include, for example, general weekly schedules for different grades, arrangements for different worldview education classes, physical education and Finnish language classes, and arrangements concerning the school building and how the spaces there are used and categorized. Principal Branch described these practical aspects of diversity leadership in their work:

I think we need to make sure that there are unisex toilets and unisex physical education. And, for example, an after-school care, the only after-school care offered to our second graders [by the municipal educational administration], is organized by the parish. I have tried to explain that although it is not spiritual and it has nothing to do with religion, but it will be a problem for Muslim parents.

Principals described a range of practical considerations in managing diverse school communities, from physical spaces to scheduling to curricular offerings. Ensuring access to gender-neutral facilities, accommodating different dietary needs, and navigating the logistics of multi-lingual instruction were among the everyday issues principals dealt with. As Principal Branch noted on the difficult position between the school administration and everyday school life and students' families, the only after-school care offered to a particular grade next school year would be organized by a religious organization. They felt that did not reflect the entire school community. Even though the principal is responsible for all the activities at school, they are not always able to make the arrangements in a way they would see as the best fit for the school community.

The majority of the principals supported the idea of more gender-neutral solutions. Several of them mentioned that the initiative came originally from the students. Principal Root gave an example: "One time I was walking, and they came to me saying "How can we have such old-fashioned signs that there are boys' and girls' toilets. In which millennium are we living in this school?" Similarly, Principal Lichen felt that separating students depending on their gender "is not the present day."

Worldview education at school was seen as a major challenge by several interviewees. Principal Lichen felt that "the teaching of religions, in my personal opinion, should not be a part of the school world." They pointed out that challenges are mainly related to organizing the different worldview classes and celebrating religious holidays at school. In Finland, where approximately 65% of the population are Lutheran Christians, Christmas celebration in school might not be considered a religious celebration and the religious aspects of school celebrations have been widely culturalised during the past couple of decades.

However, principals sometimes felt constrained by external factors beyond their control, such as municipal policies or resource limitations. "Certain services and support measures lag behind, and structures also lag behind," observed Principal Clover. Negotiating these practical challenges within broader institutional constraints became a central theme in principals' experiences.

3.3 Social encounters in schools

From the leadership perspective, the social encounters at school occur with and between students, teachers and other staff members, students' families, upper-level administration, and other stakeholders (e.g., youth workers providing services at school). In the principals' group discussions, the social encounters focused on students, teachers, staff members and families. In our closer examination, we look at Principal Conifer, whose analysis of social encounters and their meaning pointed in many directions:

With those who are at school on a day-to-day basis, the staff and the students, creating a relationship with them is somehow very natural. But then again the parents and guardians are their own [matter]. It is very time-consuming to work with them. Their expectations, ideas, even their ability to communicate, varies. That is something you have to remind yourself from time to time. The idea of being heard at least in some way, that's what we have been discussing with our special education teachers, so that everyone will be heard in everyday life. But an appreciative encounter does not mean that you immediately go and do [what is asked] in some other way. That's

what we have to live with all the time here [at school]. Perhaps the fact that there is room for conversation. Or if the teacher does not connect with the family, I think about those families considerably. If there is no common language, no connection, no common values, then that is what happens. I have come across racist families too. I really have to keep myself together with them, because I know when I send a message or a teacher does, then they will often send me back a really contemptuous message.

Building positive relationships among students, staff, families, and communities was seen as essential to effective diversity leadership. Principal Conifer considered that building a relationship with students, teachers and staff members, those who participate in everyday school life, felt natural and easy. However, connecting with families, parents and guardians was more difficult. Conifer said they found it time-consuming, but they wanted to make sure that the families felt heard and appreciated. Additionally, Principal Conifer brought to attention the connection between teachers and families, which they have sometimes found to be difficult.

Overall, the principals emphasized the importance of open communication, active listening, and creating spaces for diverse voices to be heard. As Principal Pine stated, "There are staff matters, or students' issues, and usually dialogue is the solution to a lot of things. Whether they are children or adults, there are different, very different people." Principal Leaf concluded with what they found to be the most important part of communication in school: "Listening [to students] and trying to understand their diversity is extremely important," they reflected.

At the same time, principals acknowledged the challenges of bridging cultural and linguistic differences, particularly in engaging with families. Principal Clover's description of their role as a principal in an area with a significant number of families with an immigrant background showed how much the principal's role depends on the school they are working at. Clover said that at school" we do not just do the teaching and educational work. But we are often an [general] information centre for the families." Navigating these complex social dynamics emerged as a key dimension of diversity leadership.

3.4 Managemental issues concerning teachers and staff

A frequently discussed theme was teachers and staff members' diversity and the leaders' role in taking that into account. Principal Pine told about the adults in school and shared their vision of how to enhance the current situation as well as some of the challenges they had faced:

I would like to see a lot more of that kind of diversity in schools. To have people from other professions than the traditional school teacher and assistant. Now we have multilingual instructors or cultural interpreters, or whatever you call them. But we are missing social and health services. We have a school counsellor, and we have a psychologist, if we get one. We should have youth workers and that kind of diversity, and a certain kind of third sector involvement, or perhaps guardians somehow volunteering. I think it would expand [understanding] in a certain way, but it would also require either me to be the one who coordinates it there in the school, and whether

to invite others to participate, or I could be there to initiate everything. It requires a change in thinking, but that's what I'd like to see more of in the school. Because if we have different kinds of people, I think diversity includes that too, then we should have more different professions and so on under the school roof.

Principal Pine illustrated how the school community could be expanded with local stakeholders as an important next phase in diversity leadership in schools. Pine had a wide understanding of diversity, stating that all the teachers and the students in the school are different. Pine saw it as a challenge to invite new agents or volunteers to become involved in the school, because they felt nobody knew who should be the one to facilitate the process and invite people to participate. Pine wondered if as principal they should make themselves accountable as a leader. Pine spoke about having different professions under a school roof and about having different kinds of adults participating in school life because for diversity leadership in schools, these actions would promote community building and could enhance a sense of belonging.

In Principal Pine's description, the focus is mainly on community building and how to enhance diversity through diversifying the community in multiple ways. In other principals' reflections, this was problematized. Principals recognized the critical role of teachers and staff in creating inclusive learning environments and sought to support their professional development around diversity. Principal Creek said that their school is located in an area where the socioeconomic status was below average with a significant amount of subsidized housing. Creek assumed that those who apply for a position at their school would be aware of this, and their attitudes would be directed towards working in that context and with all kinds of families but that is not always the case. "Staff need to be constantly trained," observed Principal Creek. Some principals also grappled with the challenges of diversifying the teaching workforce itself. "They [applicants with an immigrant background] have a poor command of the Finnish language," noted Principal Branch, highlighting the barriers to recruiting diverse educators.

Principals also emphasized the importance of modeling inclusive practices and challenging bias among staff. "In relation to these ethnic and sexual orientations, which we do not even know about, it is important and worth being quite sensitive, even if the students are not present, in teachers' lounge discussions," reflected Principal Lichen. Cultivating a shared commitment to diversity among educators emerged as a key leadership priority.

3.5 Principals' self-reflection

Principals' self-reflections included descriptions of how they personally understood diversity, aspects they personally found challenging, and considerations of their own self and position in relation to their role at school, as well in relation to their school community. Principal Conifer reflected on their position as follows:

I probably do not know all kinds [of diversity], no. Of course, [every activity in school] should take diversity into account so that people feel that this is right for them too. But do we need that understanding in leadership, for example? Do we understand the low-income [families], for example? If we think of many other kinds of premises.

Perhaps it is that there is naturally room for them to be there too. And their thoughts. I have been in many different situations myself where you have to think about how you meet these people.

Conifer's reflection as a school leader was to consider diversity in the school culture to create an environment that would feel inclusive to all students. Still, Conifer wondered if, as a leader, they actually needed a perhaps deeper understanding of diversity and its aspects, and they argued that understanding what it is like to come from a low-income family or some other premises was not necessarily familiar to oneself. After this, Conifer said the possible solution could be that there is a place for them and their thoughts in school as well. Conifer stated that they have personally been in situations as a principal where they have had to consider approaching people they find different from themselves.

Principals engaged in critical self-reflection about their identities, assumptions, and leadership practices concerning diversity.

Some principals also wrestled with the complexities of naming and addressing different dimensions of diversity. "Is it awareness to put in a box that I am aware that you now belong to this kind of thing, your mother tongue is Albanian, and you are a Muslim," wondered Principal Branch. Principal Juniper reflected on what they find challenging in diversity leadership at school and questioned whether "we really need to know what their sexual orientation is, or take a race or an identity or something else, do we need that information, as there's such an awful lot of diversity." Juniper raised the question whether diversity could be replaced with "just humanity" and "is the combination of letters or something now so essential?" These reflections highlighted the ongoing work of developing cultural responsiveness as a leader.

Principal Woodpecker reflected on their personal position and how it affected their leadership in their school context:

Here's the danger that I, a white, middle-aged heterosexual [gender], am the wrong person to define what a gay adolescent with an immigrant background needs. A young person who is struggling with their sexual identity. And then maybe it's necessary to discuss at least that diversity, if not taught on a tablet. I think that perspective matters quite a lot. I think we are all human beings, and we value each other, take each other into account, and trust that others will do the same. But I do recognize that I have a very middle-class and middle-aged perspective on the matter. This is not my reality. I see it at work. Even though I consider myself terribly liberal, am I really? What is my tolerance in relation to everyone else?

Principal Woodpecker's observations of themselves in relation to the reality they were dealing with at school demonstrate critical self-reflection, the ability to view one's personal position and the possible advantages of it. Woodpecker made a justified claim that from their advantaged position, they were not the right person to evaluate what a person, possibly facing explicit or implicit discrimination, needs. Additionally, Principal Pond reflected that they were able to relate to the issues that many of the students were facing because "I have quite a variety of multiculturalism and diversity at school," but they and other adults in school were in such different positions and shared a similarly privileged background as "middle class, white and well-off" people. Principal Squirrel also thought about their own position and said: "We [adults at school] are prejudiced. From the time they are

small children, they already sense that they do not belong to this group."

4 Discussion

In this study we have outlined the landscape of diversity leadership in the Finnish comprehensive schools through Helsinki-based principals' interviews. As a result of the analysis, we argue that the landscape of diversity leadership in this context consists of five thematic categories: supporting structures for diversity in school, practical arrangements in school management, social encounters in schools, managerial issues concerning teachers and staff members, and principals' self-reflection. Taken together, these thematic categories illustrate the multifaceted nature of diversity leadership in practice, encompassing structural, practical, social, professional, and personal dimensions. While principals demonstrated a commitment to inclusive and equitable schooling, they also confronted significant challenges and tensions in their efforts to lead increasingly diverse schools. Their experiences underscore the need for ongoing support, resources, and professional development to build capacity for effective diversity leadership in Finnish schools.

Principals' efforts to establish structures and practices to support diversity align with research emphasizing the importance of institutionalizing culturally responsive policies and routines (Khalifa, 2019, also Khalifa et al., 2016). However, our findings also underscore the need for flexibility and adaptability to meet the varied needs of diverse learners and communities. The complexity of our age sets the need for accepting or even appreciating complexity and strategies other than offering one-fits-all solutions (Bottery et al., 2018, p. 15). The tension between structure and responsiveness emerged as a key challenge for principals, suggesting the need for more dynamic and contextualized approaches to diversity leadership.

The practical arrangements involved in managing diverse schools, from ensuring equitable access to facilities to accommodating linguistic and cultural differences, also posed challenges for principals. These findings echo prior the previous findings that principals' approach towards diversity is still very practical (Jantunen et al., 2021, 2022) and would benefit from the enhanced consciousness of diversity that, for example, specialized professional training would provide. Interestingly, the practical arrangements were mainly brought to attention when discussing the challenges that diversity brings or causes at school. Worldview education and gender diversity seemed most challenging, requiring additional work from the principals. It must be granted, that knowledge about gender diversity has developed rather rapidly during the past few years, and the principals told many stories about how their students "have been educating them," helping them to keep up to date. The Finnish Basic Education Act (1998/628) is very clear about actively promoting equity in teaching, which requires keeping principals' and teachers' knowledge up to date. Good relations with students and dialogue with the community are crucial and needs to be supported, but ensuring a safe and equitable school environment should not be the students' responsibility. What comes to worldview diversity, it has been argued that the superficial understanding of diversity in schools, along with supporting universalism and monoculturalism, has led to a situation where different worldviews in schools are experienced as problematic (Rissanen and Poulter, 2023, 395). In the interview data, the principals

refer to worldviews is school mainly as a negative aspect, saying that they should be entirely removed from school. However, the Nordic culture is deeply rooted in the Lutheran Christian worldview, which can be the key to why diverse worldviews are experienced as problematic. This is tied to the outdated multiculturalist approach, in which other than the culture and the majority's beliefs are seen as separate and coming from the outside (Hummelstedt et al., 2021). However, our study also revealed how broader institutional factors, such as municipal policies or resource limitations sometimes constrained principals' efforts to address many practical issues. This emphasizes the need for more systemic supports and resources to enable principals to effectively lead for diversity and inclusion.

Building positive relationships among diverse students, staff, families, and communities emerged as another central dimension of diversity leadership in our study. Principals emphasized the importance of open communication, active listening, and creating spaces for diverse voices to be heard, echoing principles of culturally responsive and inclusive leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016; 2019; Scanlan and Johnson, 2015; also Gichiru, 2019). However, they also struggled with bridging cultural and linguistic differences, particularly in engaging with families. The conflict of values between white, Finnish-speaking, middle-class, Christian tradition-based schools, and families with low-income, diverse worldviews, multilingual and ethnic backgrounds may be too great. The socio-spatial status of the school area affects greatly how the school community is constructed. The principals were very attuned to this, as some had been working as principals in differently segregated areas. Some had observed that for families with immigrant backgrounds, school was an important gateway to society in general. Adults at school were trusted helpers on several matters unrelated to school or learning. Therefore, the principals hoped for more diverse teachers and other staff, not only those with personally diverse backgrounds, to provide representation for all students but also professionally diverse to address and support students in a variety of individual situations. Together with the wish for more communication, connection, and school personnel to offer a variety of representations for the students, these aspects form an idea of building a more inclusive and participatory school community. This is yet somewhat missing in Finland, but co-design with parents for more equitable schooling have been empirically studied in the US (Ishimaru and Bang, 2022). Communal thinking could reduce the possible assimilative and othering demands that all students should adjust to middle-class norms (Huilla et al., 2021). The principals' stories suggest that they seem somewhat clueless about arranging opportunities and events for families to be more involved, though even supporting the idea of more comprehensive community building is a step to the right direction that could be supported through principals' professional training or peer group work. These findings suggest the need for more targeted support and professional development to help principals cultivate cultural competence and build authentic partnerships with diverse communities.

Our findings also highlighted the critical role of teachers and staff in creating inclusive learning environments and the challenges principals faced in diversifying the educator workforce. These issues align with research emphasizing the importance of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018) and the need for more diverse representation in schools (Gershenson et al., 2021). Principals' efforts to model inclusive practices and challenge bias among staff also reflect key tenets of culturally responsive school leadership

(Khalifa et al., 2016). Additionally, a shared vision with teachers and other staff members involved in the decision-making process is connected to creating a more positive school culture (Morris et al., 2020). However, our findings suggest that more systemic efforts may be needed to build educators' capacity for diversity-responsive practice and to address barriers to recruiting and retaining diverse educators.

Finally, principals' critical self-reflections on their own identities, assumptions, and leadership practices in relation to diversity underscore the ongoing work of developing cultural responsiveness as a leader. These findings resonate with research emphasizing the importance of self-awareness, cultural responsiveness, and a willingness to confront one's biases as essential to effective diversity leadership (Khalifa, 2019; Khalifa et al., 2016). Principals' reflections also highlight the complexities of naming and addressing different dimensions of diversity, suggesting the need for more nuanced and intersectional approaches, such as *superdiversity*, that recognize students' and families' multiple, overlapping identities and experiences (Vertovec, 2007). As an example, simplifying diversity to "humanity" is tempting and may seem appropriate at first, but it can be harmful to the extent that it could lead to discrimination and structural racism. Schools expose hidden social inequalities when they label some students as different from what's considered "normal" through "othering" and practices of categorization (Abacioglu et al., 2020; Dervin, 2016, p. 45). This concept of "othering," first explored in Said's (1978) work on Orientalism, appears in various forms of discrimination based on race, gender, religion, and disability, involving stereotypes, exclusion, and power imbalances (Dervin, 2012). While othering helps maintain social hierarchies, it's important to understand that these divisions aren't natural but are created by society over time (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2006; Holliday, 2006). Understanding how these differences are constructed and used is crucial for addressing inequality in education.

The principals describe the leadership practices related to diversity but they also mirror the sociocultural status of Finnish comprehensive schools. Schools are an integral part of society and historically in Finland, comprehensive schooling has had a role in maintaining 'Finnish culture' rather than trying to renew it. In addition, supporting diversity in schools is often focused on ethnic, gender, worldview and linguistic diversity, and neurodiversity, a significant minority, receives less attention (Doyle, 2020). Constructing the landscape for diversity leadership through Helsinki-based principals' reflections and experiences offers an interesting perspective on rapidly changing societies and the challenges, adjustments, and the need for new practices that school leaders face. These developments also place further demands on principals' competence and further professional development.

This study set out to explore the landscape of diversity leadership in Finnish comprehensive schools through the experiences and reflections of principals in the Helsinki area. Our findings illuminate the complex challenges and tensions principals navigate as they strive to foster inclusive and equitable learning environments in increasingly diverse school communities. The five thematic categories that emerged from our analysis—supporting structures for diversity, practical arrangements in school management, social encounters in schools, management issues concerning teachers and staff, and principals' self-reflection—offer a nuanced portrait of the multifaceted work of diversity leadership in practice.

4.1 Limitations and future directions

While this study offers valuable insights into the landscape of diversity leadership in Finnish comprehensive schools, it is not without limitations. Our sample was limited to principals in the Helsinki area, and may not fully capture leaders' experiences in other parts of Finland. Future research should explore how the challenges and opportunities of diversity leadership vary across different geographic and demographic contexts.

Additionally, our study relied on principals' self-reports and reflections, which may be subject to social desirability bias or limited by individual perspectives. Future research could incorporate observations of leadership practices or perspectives from other stakeholders, such as teachers, students, and families, to provide a more comprehensive view of diversity leadership in action.

Finally, while our study identified key challenges and tensions in diversity leadership, more research is needed to identify effective strategies and practices for navigating these complexities. Future studies could examine promising approaches to building capacity for culturally responsive leadership, diversifying the educator workforce, and fostering authentic partnerships with diverse communities.

This study offers a nuanced portrait of the complex landscape of diversity leadership in Finnish comprehensive schools, illuminating the challenges and tensions principals navigate as they strive to foster inclusive and equitable learning environments. Our findings underscore the need for more systemic support, resources, and professional development to build capacity for effective diversity leadership, as well as more dynamic and contextualized approaches that recognize the varied needs of diverse learners and communities. By shedding light on the everyday realities of leading diverse schools, this study contributes to a more grounded understanding of what it takes to lead for educational equity and inclusion in an increasingly diverse society.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

This study was conducted at the University of Helsinki, where researchers follow the ethical principles of research in the humanities and social and behavioral sciences issued by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK; http://www.tenk.fi/en). A statement of the ethics of a research design must be requested from the University of Helsinki ethical review board if a study features any of the following items specified by the TENK: participants under the age of 15; exposure of participants to exceptionally strong stimuli; or research involving a risk of causing mental harm or involving a threat to the safety of participants or researchers or their family members or others closest to them. This study did not include any of these items. We followed the process of informed consent, meaning that all the interviewees were provided with information concerning their rights as research participants, and they had the right to withdraw at any point from the research. In addition, the data was pseudonymized. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

AJ: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft. KS: Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Methodology. AL: Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Project administration. AK: Writing – review & editing. RA: Supervision, Writing – review & editing, Investigation.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2024.1405481/full#supplementary-material

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