The impact of immigration on Finnish parents’ school choices in Turku

Sirkka Komulainen, PhD
Senior Researcher
Institute of Migration 17.4.2012

Siirtolaisuusinstituutti
Migrationsinstitutet
Institute of Migration
www.migrationinstitute.fi
Research topic

- Finnish families’ school choices in Turku; funded by the Ministry for Education and culture
- Is there white flight from multicultural neighbourhoods and schools?
- Urban segregation
- Educational equality
- A qualitative interview study with Finnish families in Turku involving 3 primary schools
Turku population statistics 2011

- Turku population by nationality in September 2011: **178448**
  - Finnish: **169095**
  - Other: **9353**

- Turku population by language in June 2011
  - Finnish: **154612**
  - Other than Finnish, Swedish, Sami: **14069 (7.9%)**

- Largest groups: Russian, arabic, kurdish, albanian, estonian, somali, english
Non-Finnish speakers by neighbourhood in Turku, September 2010
Turku schools: the nearest school is designated to every child

SCHOOLS TO CHOOSE FROM:
43 State schools (city council funding)
- 38 Finnish-language schools
- 4 Swedish-language schools
- 1 English-language school (Turku International School)
- Norssi comprehensive school – Teacher training school (University of Turku)
- 1 Steiner-school
- Northern, eastern and southern school districts that are divided into catchment areas. Class sizes are moderated between schools.
Multicultural education in Finland

- A school is considered as multicultural when it is culturally diverse, i.e. pupils and teachers have a diverse cultural or ethnic backgrounds.
- Ministry for Education and Culture: Aims to foster good ethnic relations, equality and integration of immigrants.
- Educating global awareness and intercultural dialogue objectives also in Turku.
Neoliberalism vs Nordic welfare state?

- Families have the right to choose schools
- **White flight** - white middle class families flee multiethnic neighbourhoods and schools (Seppänen, 2006)
- Education system exacerbates social class divisions (Bourdieu, 1985)
- Alternatives to Bourdie-type theories: There are market-oriented, market-sceptic and market-ambivalent position (Bunar, 2009); counterintuitive school choice (James et al, 2010)
Any alternatives to ‘white flight’?

- Anglo-American ‘white flight’ research traditions from the 1920s: how do they apply in today’s Nordic countries?

- **Neighbourhood effect:** social norms and the socioeconomic structure of the population

- **What about generation and family?** Ageing population, life course events, diminishing family sizes, retirement etc. affect neighbourhoods (Rasinkangas, 2006).

- **Alternative perspectives:** Social constructionist theories on housing (Clapham, 2011)
Interviews with parents

Parents were asked about:

- Reasons for school choices and satisfaction
- What ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘immigrant’ mean
- Housing opportunities and choices
- Life course events – recollections
- The ‘ordinariness’ of the everyday

Methods:

- A listening approach
- Thematic, discourse and life course data analysis
- Combining urban, cultural and educational studies as well as postmodern perspectives in social sciences
Participating schools and families

- 3 primary schools with a varying numbers of non-Finnish speaking immigrants
- 28 + 3 interviews, native Finns
- 4 expert interviews for background information on practical arrangements in schools
All chose the nearest schools

Reasons for school choices:

- Safe walk to school, friends, no school run, nearest school was good enough, children still young so no rush to choose, older siblings in the same school
- Families did not move houses because of particular schools
- Schools’ pull factors, child’s needs and talents
- The number of immigrants mattered in a few cases
- Active choice making re e.g. language classes
Persistent beliefs among parents

- Terms used: bourgeoisie idyll vs Little Moscow, ‘elite schools’ vs schools for the common people
- Belief in the so-called ‘tipping point’ phenomenon (whites leave as soon as the percentage of immigrants rises above 30% in a neighbourhood)
- Belief that immigrant children behave badly in classrooms due to lack of Finnish language
- Media accounts affect parental speech and sometimes behaviour (media creates panic scenarios)
Neighbourhoods

- In Finland schools are not necessarily deprived even if neighbourhoods are.
- Rational choice alone does not explain housing decisions.
- Families’ life and housing histories as well as housing provision mattered.
- Images and rumours become self-fulfilling prophecies.
- For many, eastern Turku is characterised by immigration and social deprivation.
Persistent worries

- SK: Is the Finnish child’s Finnish language and learning adversely affected by the presence of other languages in a multiethnic classroom? **No**
- Do teachers flee schools simply because of immigrants? **No**
Bourdieu – an old hat?

- Although reproductionist theory is a popular and influential one, it is not the only way for looking at the phenomenon.
- Expert opinion: mother’s educational background does not outright determine the child’s academic success at school.
- Children today need also social skills, not merely cognitive.
Hate speech?

How parents spoke:

- I’m not a racist, but...
- ‘White resentment’; bad experiences
- Being polite but reserved, having no need or opportunity to meet immigrants, or avoiding immigrants
- Hypothetical talk due to little opportunities for intercultural contacts overall
Conclusions

- Immigration has little impact on school choices at primary school level – but there are issues beneath the surface
- Parallel lives
- Simple cause and effect relations do not explain housing behaviour
- Appraising families’ decision making in their personal and social context: not only a matter of economics
- Things change when children grow
- No counterintuitive school choices
- Experts: All schools in Turku are good, but immigrant and rental housing provision needs improvement
Messages to decision makers

- Parents and the general public need more information on how immigrant education is organised in schools and classes on day-to-day basis.
- What are the most acute problems in schools? E.g. bullying or deprivation are much wider issues than recent immigration to Finland.
- Some neighbourhoods in Turku are more deprived than others and need more resources.
- Labour migration is needed in Finland, but we only ever hear discourses on migrants as ‘threats’.
- Intercultural dialogue does not simply ‘happen’ – how could it be helped at a neighbourhood level?
Viittaukset:

- Lemmetyinen, K. (2011) Turun kaupungin väestötilastoja