



Ad Astra

# Racism, Bullying, and Discrimination in Schools in Finland

*Report for ECRI 2024*

*Prepared by NGOs Ad Astra rf and DIVa rf*

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We, NGOs Ad Astra rf and DIVa rf, have taken note of **the ECRI REPORT ON FINLAND, CRI(2019)38, (fifth monitoring cycle)**<sup>1</sup> where the problem of racism in schools is included in **paragraph 46**.

Association Ad Astra rf has been promoting inclusive cultural heritage, multicultural, and dialogue in schools since 2009. We have collaborated extensively with young people from ethnic and religious minorities, refugee youth, and youth of mixed backgrounds. Our activities with these young people include storytelling, as well as anti-discrimination and anti-racism initiatives.

In 2019, association DIVa rf was founded to support diversity in schools and promote multicultural. Its establishment was a response to families experiencing racism and bullying, compounded by schools neglecting these issues. These families most commonly reported non-intervention by schools and staff who demonstrated a lack of awareness about racism and anti-racism.

The issue of racism and discrimination based on race, religion, and ethnicity unfortunately seems to be embedded in the structure and culture of schools. In light of this, we urge ECRI to provide more specific and actionable instructions for schools in Finland. We believe ECRI's recommendations to Finland in the fifth cycle are overly general and lack the specificity required to address these systemic problems effectively.

Our organization has been assisting families affected by racism, helping them advocate for investigations and actions by schools. We have also supported families in seeking help from other authorities. Now, we are sharing the insights and experience we have gained through years of this supportive work.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://rm.coe.int/fifth-report-on-finland/1680972fa7>

To illustrate the current state of addressing reported discrimination, racism, and bullying in Finnish schools, we want to share a text that we believe accurately reflects the situation.

### **The “Do-Nothing Principal” approach<sup>2</sup>**

1. Lack of comprehensive school programs – There is an absence of universal training on bullying for students, guardians, educators, administrators, custodians, etc. Everyone connected to the school should learn to identify the indications of overt and hidden bullies. Without a comprehensive program, it's clear that school authorities don't treat bullying as a serious issue.
2. No attempt to supervise or inspect – Almost everyone is aware of where bullying typically happens within their school. School authorities won't bother to oversee those spots. They will claim unawareness and demand evidence from the bullying victim. School officials will deny looking into bullying reports.
3. Reliance on secrecy to leave you uninformed – In order to conceal inadequacy, partiality, or indolence, school officials may employ confidentiality to sidestep openness and responsibility. Often, they will request your trust as they manage the matter.
4. Understanding and kindness towards bullies – School officials are of the opinion that to effectively end bullying, the victim should demonstrate forgiveness, kindness, and understanding towards the bully. Instead of placing emphasis on halting the bullying, the attention shifts to the reasons behind the bully's behavior. These principals prioritize teaching and compassion rather than simply stopping the bully's actions.
5. Holding the target responsible – School principals may believe that the person being bullied provoked the aggressor by their own actions. They

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Dr. Ben Leichtling: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7H4r5Rq3ckI>

frequently fail to maintain the confidentiality of bullying reports and may choose to ignore the situation rather than intervene to stop the bully.

Based on our experience, children and families who report discrimination and racism are left vulnerable and unprotected. Those families who take an active stand and demand action are often labeled as problematic and face exclusion. For many families who have asked schools to investigate and address these issues, the only effective way to avoid further racism has been to change schools or opt for homeschooling.

For families who remain silent and choose not to report, the offenses persist unchecked. For those who dare to report, there is no trained person or a system within schools capable of adequately receiving reports and taking meaningful action. Intervention, investigation, and accountability are virtually nonexistent. As a result, children after reporting in vain feel worse than before, and fall into depression. They might even engage in self-harming behaviors, or, in some cases, exhibit violent tendencies after enduring prolonged exposure to racism and abuse. Parents, in turn, find themselves helpless and isolated in these situations.

Schools, health professionals, and social workers tend to individualize cases of abuse, racism, and trauma, failing to address the broader discriminatory school culture that perpetuates these issues. A troubling new phenomenon has also emerged: individuals who immigrated as children in the 1990s, now parents themselves, are opting for homeschooling to protect their children from the same negative experiences they endured in Finnish schools.

Many children from minority groups whose families have reported racism recount that, despite their efforts, racist offenses have persisted for years. These have often been punctuated by meaningless discussions with headmasters and perpetrators, during which victims felt vulnerable, unsupported, and alone.

## There are holes in the system

1. Safe schooling should be a guaranteed right for all students, but in practice, it remains an unfulfilled promise. The responsibility for addressing racism and bullying is left solely to individual education providers and schools because the state does fails to give clear guidelines and rules. Finnish National Agency for Education writes<sup>3</sup>: “The participation of children, pupils, and students in building community and the learning/study environment promotes safety and well-being. The education provider shall shape the rules that promote the internal order of the school or educational institution, undisturbed studies and the safety and well-being of the community. [...] The education provider must draw up a plan for the use of disciplinary measures and educational dialogue and the related procedures.” The educational providers lack motivation, interest and expertise to do this.
2. Children are encouraged to report abuse to adults at school, but in many cases, speaking out leads to the child being unfairly labeled as the problem. The procedures employed by schools often re-traumatize the child rather than provide support. Schools lack effective methods and protocols for intervention, resulting in reporter being seen as a disruption. There are no clear guidelines, standardized methods, or instructions at the national level, and this results in the municipal level feeling free to ignore or diminish offences, harassment, hate and discrimination. Within individual schools there is of course the same lack of methods to address these issues effectively.
3. The curriculum guidelines and related texts from the Finnish National Agency for Education fail to address intervention measures following violations, leaving a significant gap. Responsibility for handling these issues

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<sup>3</sup> Swedish original: “Att barn, elever och studerande deltar i att bygga upp gemenskapen och lär-/studiemiljön främjar säkerheten och välbefinnandet. Utbildningsanordnaren ska definiera ordningsregler (eller tillämpliga ordningsbestämmelser) som främjar skolans eller läroanstaltens interna ordning, ostörda studier samt tryggheten och trivseln i gemenskapen. [...] Utbildningsanordnaren ska utarbeta en plan för användningen av disciplinära åtgärder och fostrande samtal samt för förfaringssätten i anslutning till dessa.” <https://www.oph.fi/sv/utbildning-och-examina/definition-av-mobbning-och-lagstiftning>

is delegated to municipalities, whose equal treatment plans are often inadequate. When addressing offenses such as racism, hate crimes, or discrimination, these plans frequently defer to the school's anti-bullying policies. However, existing anti-bullying plans focus primarily on prevention and offer little to no guidance on intervention. They are often vague and useless in protecting the victim when violations happen.

The national curriculum is similarly vague, placing the burden of intervention and remediation on municipalities and individual schools. The primary disciplinary approach currently available—"educational conversations" with perpetrators—is insufficient for addressing incidents of racism and discrimination against children from racialized or vulnerable groups. Research indicates that bullying disproportionately targets migrant and economically disadvantaged children. Unfortunately, national minorities are often excluded from such studies, rendering them invisible in the education system.

This invisibility reflects a broader pattern in Finland, where historical minorities are often ignored in favor of framing the population as divided into two groups: "kantaväestö" ("natives") and "maahanmuuttajat" ("migrants"). This oversimplification erases the historical context of racism, racialization, and discrimination in Finland.

Racist offenses and discrimination do not occur in isolation but are rooted in classroom and school power structures within a culture that perpetuates these dynamics. As a result, "educative conversations" are largely ineffective and can even lead to further harm, with victims being punished or retaliated against by perpetrators for reporting incidents. Alarming, many cases involve teachers or staff making abusive or racist statements. These incidents are typically concealed to protect the school's reputation, perpetuating a lack of accountability.

4. School staff often lack the ability to recognize racism and have limited understanding of the Non-discrimination Act (1325/2014) or its implications. When racist incidents are reported, it is common for headteachers to claim that such matters cannot be discussed publicly. Schools frequently

justify their inaction by stating that they “do not talk about individual students’ experiences” (a quote from a principal responding to a racism allegation, though not publicly documented).

This approach shifts the focus away from the incident itself and reframes racism and discrimination as merely the victim’s subjective perception. By doing so, schools effectively deny that racist statements were made, or discriminatory actions occurred. This response not only minimizes the seriousness of the issue but also perpetuates a culture of silence and inaction, leaving victims unsupported and racism unaddressed. By staying silent the school support racism going on. When no official statement against racism is made, this normalizes racism and discrimination within the community.

5. The victim is often offered psychological services, but the psychologist or counselor frequently lacks an understanding of racism, leading to the victim being re-traumatized. Instead of addressing the issue, the psychologist or counselor may minimize the racism and advise the student to “not be so sensitive.” Even in cases where the healthcare professional genuinely wants to help, schools often fail to listen.

Healthcare professionals are frequently hesitant to speak out about racism, describing it as hopeless and noting that headteachers are unwilling to acknowledge such issues. Schools are mostly reluctant to recognize larger patterns of racism and bullying, preferring instead to treat each incident as an isolated exception. The prevailing mindset seems to be that the solution lies in treating the victim through counseling or therapy to “change” them, rather than addressing the systemic problem.

This pattern is not limited to individual cases but is consistently repeated across municipalities, reflecting a systemic issue rather than isolated incidents.

6. The Non-Discrimination Ombudsman is the only authority with expertise in addressing these issues, but their mandate is weak. Families facing challenges may also submit complaints to the Regional State Administrative Agency; however, it typically takes 8–12 months to receive a

response, which often does not require the school to take any action. The only exception is when a written decision, such as a school expulsion, is overturned. For example, in one case, a child expelled from school appealed to the agency and received a decision after eight months, forcing the school to reverse its action. Shortly afterward, the school expelled the child again.

The Regional State Administrative Agencies is not required to consider the Non-discrimination Act (1325/2014) and generally focuses on administrative laws related to education. As a result, children or families who report racism or discrimination rarely receive meaningful support from this authority.

7. Schools are often unsafe environments for racialized and minoritized children. These children are particularly vulnerable because they are minors and unable to protect themselves. They often feel unable to ask for help, either due to shame about being targeted or fear of being labeled as the problem for exposing an issue that is typically ignored. Furthermore, teachers often lack the knowledge and training to recognize or address racism and discrimination effectively.
8. Minority families value access to education in their own religion and mother tongue, as it provides children with a sense of security and belonging in their group, supported by teachers who understand their needs (Metso, 2019; Parland, 2023). By law, minorities are entitled to education in their own religion if there are at least three children in the municipality; in such cases, the municipality is required to offer religious education in their own faith. However, information about this right is often unclear, and some children do not receive this education. Teaching in one's own mother tongue, on the other hand, is not legally mandated and is only available in municipalities that choose to apply for specific city subsidies. This practice discriminates against children based on their place of residence and deprives many of the benefits of mother-tongue education. For minority children, access to education in their own religion and mother tongue fosters confidence and security (Alisaari et al., 2019;



Cummins et al., 2005). These lessons often serve as a much-needed respite for vulnerable children. For instance, a Black girl who was systematically excluded by teachers and peers was often found by her father sitting alone in the corridor during lessons. The teacher claimed the child could “probably hear and see” from the hallway. She was also denied promised access to a “rest corner” and additional support teaching (*stödundervisning/tukiopetus*), even though several White children received both. The only supportive educator was the Catholic religion teacher, who visited the school once a week. Out of fear of reprisals, the family never reported the case, and the issue was ultimately resolved by transferring the child to a different school.

Teachers of minority religions and mother tongues are crucial for the well-being and development of minority children (Alisaari et al., 2019; Cummins et al., 2005), but Finland has failed to adequately organize academic training of such educators. Even when some sort of training is provided, it might be insufficient to meet the needs of the students and communities (Aksinovits & Verschik, 2024). White majority teachers are often prioritized and given permanent contracts. Meanwhile, student teachers from religious minorities report being singled out, exoticized, and subjected to condescending comments during their teacher training. They also face a lack of opportunities for training in their own religion.

9. The University of Helsinki’s teacher training program does not equip student teachers with the skills to address racism, discrimination, or human rights issues. It follows the same unclear paradigm found in the Finnish National Agency for Education and municipalities, where no clear guidelines, methods, protocols, or instructions are provided. These shortcomings are often overlooked and silenced.
10. The Kiva School program<sup>4</sup> has significant limitations, particularly in addressing racism. According to the young people, children, and families we have spoken to, the program is widely dismissed. It operates on the

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.kivaprogram.net/>

assumption that all children are equal and share the same status in school. While the program may be effective for general conflict resolution, it is inadequate for tackling racism and discrimination, as it fails to account for the inherent power imbalances and historical context that weaken the racialized or minoritized victim's position.

The program requires victims to sit face-to-face with their perpetrators to "make a deal." This approach is entirely ineffective for children who have experienced racism and highlights the school's lack of understanding of the profound impact discrimination and racism have on victims. Additionally, school staff often force victims to participate in these processes, which can further traumatize them. Furthermore, the words "racism" and "discrimination" are not even mentioned on the program's website.

Children, youth, and families affected by racism are highly critical of the Kiva School program. What is urgently needed are specific, clear protocols and methods for intervening in and addressing racism and discrimination. Schools must also be obligated to make immediate, official statements against racism when incidents occur.

11. Education providers are legally required to ensure safe schooling for all pupils. However, in practice, there are no incentives for municipalities to enforce this obligation, nor are there penalties when schools and municipalities fail to comply. As a result, it is often easier, more convenient, and less costly for schools/municipalities to treat the victim as the problem rather than addressing the root causes of the issue.

Conducting a proper investigation and taking meaningful action would require engaging the entire school community, including pupils, caretakers, teachers, headteachers, and families. The real problem lies in the broader school culture, which is often shaped by authoritarian, rigid, and hierarchical local authority administrations that show little concern for inclusion, education, children, minorities or human rights.

Additionally, the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman lacks adequate resources, and there is insufficient legal protection for school children.

These factors create an environment where schools become "black

holes” where racism and other offenses persist unchecked, especially if there is no proactive and committed headmaster to lead change. There are no training programs in antidiscrimination, equality, equity and anti-racism. The government seem to count on NGO´s to do this work, but NGO´s lack real mandate and authority.

### **State responsibility must be greater and the DO stronger**

The Non-Discrimination Ombudsman is currently the only authority with expertise in addressing these issues, but both the Ombudsman and the National Non-Discrimination and Equality Tribunal require significantly more resources to handle cases involving schools and children effectively. At present, the processes are exceedingly slow from a child’s perspective, often taking up to a year. During this time, children and their families are left unsupported and vulnerable.

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the best interests of the child must be prioritized. To achieve this, the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman needs additional resources, and more information about their work should be made accessible to families.

A low-threshold reporting system for discrimination and racism in schools could be implemented as a transitional measure. This system could involve counselors from the Ombudsman’s office or another organization who could support the child, provide guidance to school principals, and offer advice to health professionals as quickly as possible.

### **On systemic discrimination and racism affecting minorities:**

1. Tuition in pupils’ own mother tongue is not provided equally across the country. It is only available in municipalities that have specifically

applied for state support<sup>5</sup>, meaning this right is not guaranteed at the national level. This inequality violates the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Furthermore, there is still no established training program for teachers of minority languages. As a result, many teachers work without proper qualifications, contracts, or adequate support—a situation that has persisted for decades for example for the Sami (Lehtola, 2022). Access to mother tongue education and support for bilingualism is crucial for academic success and the overall well-being of minority pupils (Nichols & Colon, 2000)., yet these needs remain largely unmet.

2. Education in one's own religion is a statutory right and is valued by both minority families and pupils, similar to mother tongue education. Municipalities are required to provide religious education for minority groups if at least three pupils in the municipality request it. This policy is minority-friendly and important. There is a clear need for improved teacher training programs for religion teachers in minority religions, as well as greater awareness among general classroom teachers about this training and the significance of these rights. Currently, the majority population often lacks understanding of the importance of providing dedicated lessons in minority religions and mother tongues.

Despite its statutory nature, the provision of religious education for minorities is under threat. The Ombudsman for Children in Finland has published texts that demonstrate a lack of understanding of the lived realities of minority children<sup>6</sup>. Research also highlights that teachers and pupils from religious minorities frequently face exclusion, patronizing remarks, and other forms of discrimination. For example, Muslim pupils have reportedly been referred to as “pikku-isikset” (“little ISIS members”) by a school principal. Similarly, Jewish, Orthodox, Catholic, and Muslim

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.oph.fi/sv/funding/statsunderstod-undervisning-i-svenskafinska-som-andrasprak-och-stod-i-ovrig-undervisning>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.hs.fi/mielipide/art-2000010807392.html>

pupils have shared experiences of exclusion and derogatory comments. Furthermore, religious and cultural holidays such as Ramadan and Pesach are often not treated with equal respect as the “Finnish ones”, reflecting a broader lack of knowledge and sensitivity (Parland & Kwazema, 2023). Finnish cultural heritage encompasses much more than just Lutheran Christmas. However, stereotypical views held by the majority about the intersection of religion, ethnicity, and race often lead to intersectional oppression of minority children.

3. The existence of national minorities in Finland and in Finnish schools is often overlooked, despite Finland being a signatory to the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Ethnic groups such as the Sami, Roma, Karelians, Jews, Tatars, and (old) Russians, as well as Finnish-Swedes, are supposed to receive protection under this framework. However, all these groups, except for the Finnish-Swedes, have been racialized as a consequence of the nation-state project and the Westphalian paradigm, which continue to dominate societal and educational norms. These norms tend to exclude minorities, promoting assimilation and blending in rather than celebrating diversity.
4. Racism and victimization cannot be eradicated from schools unless the school community—both staff and pupils—feels supported and well. Here’s some simple yet critically important advice:

- a. Teach children and adults to greet each other! Immigrants frequently complain about the lack of greetings, and native Finns also raise this issue. Inclusion and improvement cannot happen if people cannot even say hello or introduce themselves to one another.
- b. Be group-specific. Stop dividing people into a binary of “Finns” and “migrants/immigrants.” Recognize the diversity of interesting groups and minorities (e.g., Savolaksians, Karelians).
- c. Train healthcare workers, principals, teachers, and school directors in anti-discrimination and anti-racism. Develop a training program that leads to a state diploma, for example, from the Finnish National Agency for Education. Those who complete the training

could then take charge of investigating and addressing racism in schools. There should be a mandatory requirement for a trained individual to lead such investigations.

## **ODIHR**

We would also like to inform that in 2019, our association submitted a complaint to ODIHR<sup>7</sup> regarding a total lack of monitoring and that the Ministry is now preparing a legislative amendment that will improve Regional State Administrative Agency's ability to monitor the school as the authority will be able to be proactive and to sanction schools, after an investigation was carried out in 2020-21 (Mäntylä et al., 2021). However, we know that the Regional State Administrative Agency currently lacks expertise in the Non-discrimination Act (1325/2014) and that there is a shortage of lawyers with this specialized knowledge across Finland. Additionally, the agency lacks an understanding of racism and anti-racism. In several cases, the authority has chosen not to consider the Non-discrimination Act (1325/2014) at all, instead addressing only administrative violations when schools have also breached other laws. According to the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman, this approach is legally permissible when multiple laws are violated simultaneously.

This creates a significant risk that incidents involving racism and hate crimes will be ignored or inadequately addressed by the agency. To effectively handle such cases, the agency—or any authority that may replace it in the near future—must develop expertise in anti-discrimination law and anti-racism practices. Without this, systemic issues of discrimination are likely to remain unresolved.

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<sup>7</sup> [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-1Ntk4\\_7eEBvwqErXln1xahE8SjmjyuB/](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-1Ntk4_7eEBvwqErXln1xahE8SjmjyuB/)

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