



This paper is taken from

*Creating Communities: Local, National and Global
Selected papers from the fourteenth Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2012

**edited by Peter Cunningham and Nathan Fretwell, published in London by CiCe,
ISBN 978-1-907675-19-5**

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Lestinen, L. (2012) 'Reviewing the construction of current migration discourse through the use of a multi-disciplinary mailing list', in P. Cunningham & N. Fretwell (eds.) *Creating Communities: Local, National and Global*. London: CiCe, pp. 170 - 182.

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Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a selection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

Reviewing the construction of current migration discourse through the use of a multi-disciplinary mailing list

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Abstract

Strong immigration to Finland has challenged academic and other expert communities in many fields to produce and share topical new knowledge on issues related to migration, multi-culturality and diversity. This study focuses on current migration discourse as it is shaped in an interdisciplinary manner on an electronic forum. This mailing list of nearly 900 subscribers is maintained by a multidisciplinary research society. It is considered a major forum for information dissemination and discussion concerning the issues of ethnic relations and migration in the country. The data consists of 176 messages sent via the mailing list over a nine-month period in 2011-2012. Content analysis is used in identifying from the data the major features of migration discourse. This discourse is also explored and discussed in the light of the findings of the latest Migration Integration Policy Index (MIPEX, 2011) with respect to Finland.

Keywords: *migration, research, discourse, mailing list, Finland*

Introduction

Over the past two decades Finland has experienced rapid and strong immigration that has challenged the welfare state in many ways. There has been a need to promptly evaluate policy measures and services and to develop them in order to meet the standards of equality in an increasingly multicultural, multilingual and diverse society. The production and distribution of new forms of knowledge and reforming certain modes of action has played a vital role in building capacity related to migrant integration within the state and other public authorities. This paper discusses a study that was conducted in order to gain an overview of current public migration discourse in the country. In this context, migration discourse is understood as a public construction based on research and practices produced by epistemic and practice communities (Knorr-Cetina, 1981, Lave and Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 2000 cited in Mustikkamäki, 2009). The discourse is policy-connected discussion and action within and between the participants functioning in different areas and locations in society.

Data and analysis

A national-level public forum of experts was chosen as a site for data collection in order to have an adequate overview of current migration discourse in Finland. The forum is maintained in the form of a mailing-list by a multidisciplinary research society. This forum of 890 members (2011) can be considered a major channel to disseminate migration-related information to experts and other interested parties in the country. The members of the forum are mainly researchers, officials, civil servants, and other practitioners, as well as students. The forum was considered the most relevant site for data collection with the expectation that the members, most of them representing major institutions and other actors dealing with the migration-related issues in different fields, would use it for information dissemination.

The data included 176 messages sent via the mailing list over a nine-month period, from the beginning of September 2011 to the end of May 2012. The data was selected on the basis of whether or not there was a direct connection between the content of the messages and migration issues within the specific context of Finland. Following this criterion meant that a large number of messages were excluded, even though they discussed migration issues more generally, because they only indirectly related to the issue of immigration to Finland.

Because migration discourse is an on-going process on the forum, it was only possible to capture a cross-sectional view of it from the basis of the collected data. In the first phase, the data was analysed through readings that focused on the following major features: the authors/actors, locations, forms of contributions and themes of content. In the second phase, the content themes were grouped on the basis of their focus using the following categories: migrants, original population, both migrants and original population, policy and/or politics, and academic knowledge production. In the third phase, thematic contents were examined informed by the outcomes of the latest Migration Integration Policy Index (MIPEX, 2011) on the part of Finland. The MIPEX is a practical tool that has been developed to assess how integration policies compare against the standard of equal rights and responsibilities for migrants, both in individual countries and in comparison with one another.

In Finland, the principles of equality and the shared responsibility of migrants and the original population are stated in the definition of integration by the Ministry of the Interior:

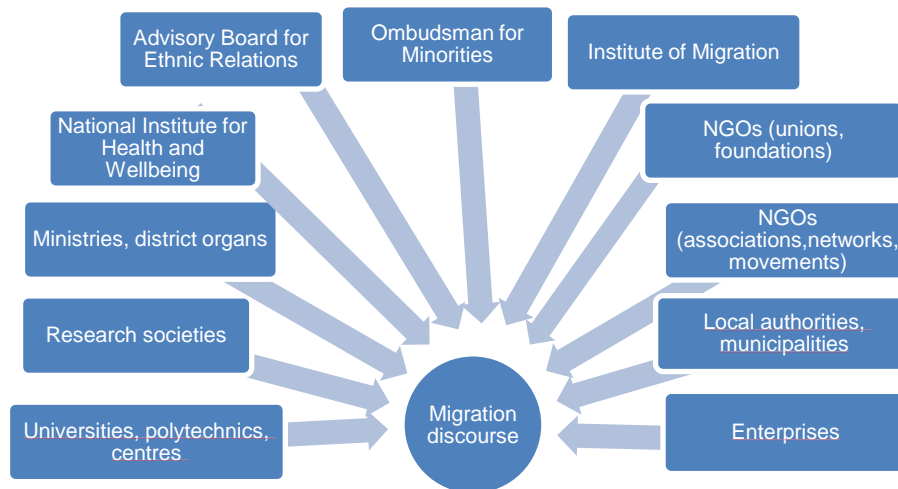
Integration means measures taken by the authorities to promote integration. The aim of integration is to ensure that immigrants can participate in Finnish society in the same way as anybody else living in the country...Integration also means the personal development of immigrants, aimed at promoting immigrants' participation in working life and Finnish society while preserving their own language and culture...The person's own motivation and active participation play a central role in integration, but the surrounding society and the attitudes of the majority population also affect how well immigrants integrate into their new country.
(Ministry of the Interior, 2012)

The results of the study are presented and discussed in this paper in the same order as the phases of the study were conducted.

Participants of migration discourse

The review showed that migration discourse in Finnish society is construed by a variety of participants that represent a wide spectrum of epistemic and practice communities. In Figure 1 there are listed the major separate contributors or groups of contributors to the discourse, as identified from the messages over a nine-month period of data collection.

Figure 1. Participants of migration discourse



The major group of most frequently contributing participants were universities. The Universities of Helsinki and Turku were especially active, but among the contributors there were also the Universities of Tampere, Jyväskylä, Eastern Finland, Lapland, Åbo Akademi as a Swedish-speaking university in Finland, and the Lappeenranta University of Technology. As participants there were traditional university departments in the fields of social and political sciences, the humanities, and education as well as institutes, research centres and networks related to migration and multiculturalism, and also continuing education centres. In addition, some universities of applied sciences participated in the discourse.

Academic circles were also represented by some research societies that discussed the issues of migration, multiculturalism and diversity in their discipline or within their fields, e.g. in ethnography, sociology, Finnish literature, women studies, or on a more multidisciplinary basis, like the society specialising in ethnic relations and migration, which also used the forum as the site for data collection.

Ministries as central government and expert organs of the state are, within their division of work, responsible for the preparation and implementation of migration and integration policies. The Ministries dealing with the issues of foreign affairs, the interior, employment and economy, as well as education and culture, however, were not themselves very active participants in the discourse, participating mainly through their subordinated or affiliated bodies. The most active participant was the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health through broad-based bodies under or in connection to the Ministry: *Tasa-arvoasiain neuvottelukunta* (Council for Gender Equality), *Terveysten- ja hyvinvoinninlaitos* (The National Institute for Health and Welfare, THL) and *Työterveyslaitos* (Institute for Occupational Health) with their regional offices.

In connection with the Ministry of the Interior there were two specialist participants in the migration discourse. These were *Etnisten suhteiden neuvottelukunta* (Advisory Board for Ethnic Relations, ETNO), an expert body set up by the Government to promote interaction between ethnic minorities and the authorities, NGOs and the political parties in Parliament, and provide the ministries with immigration policy expertise, and *Vähemmistövaltuutettu* (Ombudsman for Minorities), an authority with the basic task of advancing the status and legal protection of ethnic minorities and foreigners as well as equality, non-discrimination and good ethnic relations in Finland.

However, *Siirtolaisuusinstituutti* (Institute of Migration) with many forms of contributions was overwhelmingly the most active specialist participant in the migrant discourse. The institute is the only research institute specialising in international and internal migration in Finland. The foundation-based institute is supported by the Ministry of Education and Culture.

The most varied, but visible group of active participants in the migration discourse consisted of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Among them were NGO-type organisations, in the form of a federation, a union or a foundation, possibly functioning with a mandate and having the aims of influencing policies in their fields and providing services which may be targeting migrants as well as original population. A major representative of these NGOs was *Väestöliitto* (The Family Federation), an expert organisation acting in social and health sectors. Among the NGO-participants, *Lastensuojelun keskusliitto* (Central Union for Child Welfare), *Pelastakaa Lapset* (Save the Children) and *Suomen Lasten ja Nuorten Säätiö* (The Finnish Children and Youth Foundation) are working for the rights of children. One of the discourse participants, e.g. *Ihmisoikeusliitto* (Finnish League for Human Rights) promotes rights on a broader basis; whereas *Pakolaisneuvonta* (Refugee Advice Centre), established by other NGOs, focuses more on working with one vulnerable group of migrants.

As contributors to the migration discourse there were NGOs representing more directly civil society and acting on a more horizontal organisational basis. For example, *Auroras* is a multidisciplinary community of highly educated migrant women and native Finnish women promoting their interaction and learning from each other. Respectively *Miessakit* promotes intercommunication and co-operation between immigrant men and native Finnish men. The role of migrant organisations is considered vital in promoting integration and in making the voice of immigrants visible in order to have an influence in policy-making. The review showed that there were only a few contributions by migrant organisations based on a certain country of origin (Somalia, Philippines), religious view (Buddhism) or gender (Daisy Ladies). Among the participants acting at the grassroots level were some internationally connected or multinational 'without borders' networks of active people and volunteers in different fields, e.g. the network *Vapaa liikkuvuus* (The Free Movement) supported by the newly established society *Oikeudet ilman rajoja* (Rights without Borders).

Some local authorities contributed to the migration discourse, especially municipalities located in the southern areas of the country where the resident migrant population is quite high. In a very minor position among the participants were also some enterprises, i.e. publishers, such as *Vastapaino* and East-West Books, both of whom have published new titles on migration.

Data analysis indicates that the challenges for responding to the demands of a rapidly diversified society has already had an influence on the structures of epistemic and practice communities. New public institutions and organisations specialising in the issues of migration and diversity have been established and new structures and positions of experts or specialists have emerged within the already established institutions and organisations. For example, there are centres for multicultural expertise or excellence, and professional positions, such as Head of Multicultural Affairs, Expert of Multicultural Affairs, Cultural Diversity Adviser, or Regional Artist of Cultural Diversity.

Further, the analysis suggested that there are emerging connections and cooperation within and between epistemic and practice communities. The development of these connections are needed (Pöyhönen et al, 2010; The Government of Finland, 2012) in order to create a holistic understanding of the complex social-cultural features of immigration and to deal with them appropriately through policy measures that exploit cross-sectorial and multi-professional expertise and knowledge. Within academic communities the widest cooperation was shown by the multidisciplinary research society functioning in the areas of ethnic relations and migration. New forms of more or less loose connections were represented by thematic networks that go over the borders of the separate institutions but also create connections of experts inside the institutional units.

Locations of the discourse

Not surprisingly, the review showed that the geographical location of migration discourse was very highly concentrated in the Helsinki capital area. Typically for capitals, Helsinki has been an attractive location for the majority of NGO head offices and central state organs, as well as for the biggest university (University of Helsinki) in the country. However, the greatest numbers of immigrants (over 50 %) also reside in the Helsinki area.

The other visible geographical location of the migration discourse was Turku in the southern coastal area of the country. The Institute of Migration is situated there, one of its kind in Finland, as does the University of Turku, which was again an active contributor to the discourse.

The cities situated in the central areas of the country, Tampere, Jyväskylä, and Kuopio, in spite of their visible contributions were in a minor position compared to Helsinki and Turku as locations of the migration discourse. Oulu, a northern university city, seemed also be a less active location for the discourse. In addition, there were cities in different parts of the country that only occasionally acted as discursive locations: Kemi in the northern area, Lappeenranta and Lieksa and in the eastern area, Vaasa in the western area, Hämeenlinna, Lahti, Lohja, and Kouvola in the southern area of the country.

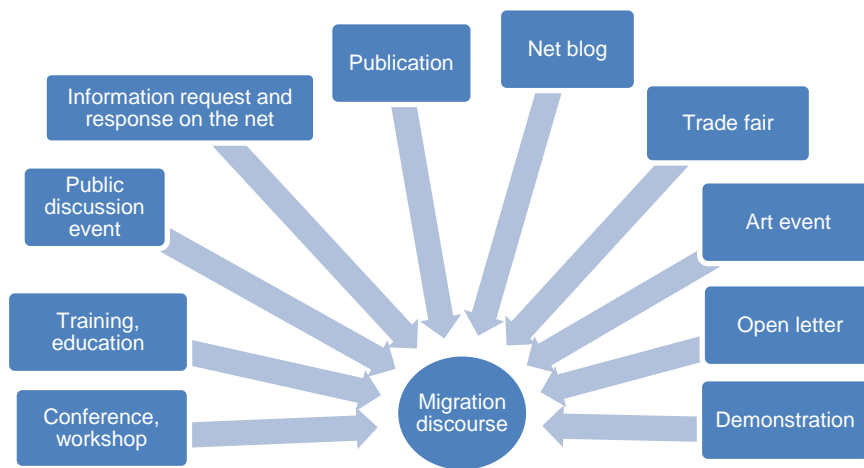
In sum, the general discursive pattern seemed to be that the majority of public events, widely informed through the forum, were arranged in Helsinki, but also in Turku. The events act as active learning environments of the issues related to migration, multiculturalism and diversity through live discussion, educational and other exchange. However, there is a question as to whether there are sufficient possibilities and opportunities for access to topical discussion and knowledge among those persons working with ethnic and cultural minorities, and on migration-related issues, in other parts of the country.

Forms of discourse contributions

In Figure 2, the different forms that contributions to the migration discourse took are shown, as identified from the collected data. The major part of the discourse was constructed in conferences, seminars, workshops and other similar meetings arranged mainly by epistemic communities but also practice communities separately or in cooperation in different fields. In addition, there were various events for training and education arranged mainly for people working in migration work or for larger audiences (e.g. *Studia Generalia* lectures). Some of the training events were offered especially to migrants. In addition to the opportunities for formal learning, some learning groups were also available on the basis of non-formal learning (arranged e.g. by *Miessakit*). Migrant discourse was also constructed in the form of public discussion events on topical issues, concerning e.g. public discussion on and criticism of immigration. A traditional form that contributions took consisted in published literature, mainly research reports and journal articles. Here, the Internet offered the possibility of making published contributions available to large audiences in the form of net publications. The net was also used for blogging and for contacting experts in search of information and

advice as well as for responses to requests. Quite rare discursive contributions were trade fairs used by a few publishers and art events that were arranged mainly by migrant organisations or groups. Discourse contribution as activist action was represented by an open letter to a local authority and an invitation to join a demonstration camp.

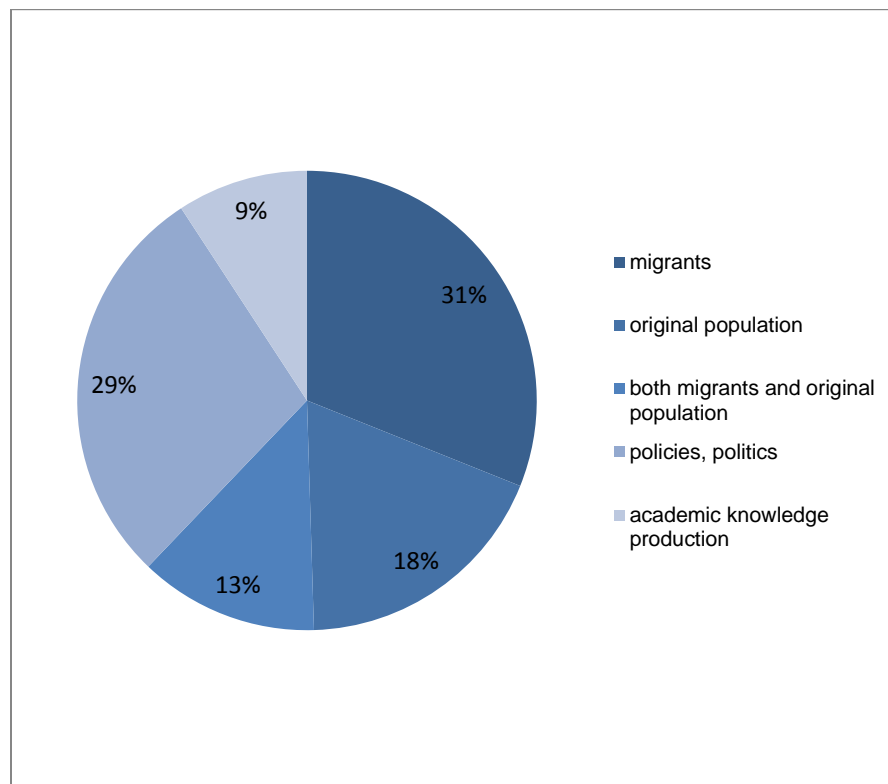
Figure 2. Forms of discourse contributions



Thematic contents by their focus

Analysis of the collected data showed that the migration discourse consisted of a great variety of themes. In order to extract some useful information from that variety it was considered helpful to reorganise the data by grouping the themes on the basis of the focus of their contents. The focus of each theme was examined by differentiating whether it concerned the level of individuals or the level of policy/politics and academic knowledge production. Further, at the individual level it was examined whether the focus of a thematic content was on the lived experience of migrants or the original population or on both migrants and original population. The themes falling into these categories are presented in the following sections.

Figure 3. Thematic contents by focus



Migrants: Figure 3 indicates that the thematic contents focused mostly on migrants. The contents of the themes displayed the experiences and life of migrants in their new home country from many points of view. The thematic contents included the issues of identity and identity constructions and negotiations, features of family life as well as learning within the family, wellbeing and health issues, traditions in migrant communities (incl. dysfunctional traditions), religious issues in integration, peer support and the role of migrant associations in the integration of individuals, learning (e.g. second language and literacy acquisition) and experiences in different study environments, training for working life, e.g. of teachers, nurses or academically educated migrants, experiences from labour integration, unemployment, recruitment and working life environments, and from the government of one's leisure self-formation and sports as a hobby. The conditions, experiences and views of female migrants and young, second generation migrants, were a thematic focus, as well as

migrants with Somali or Russian backgrounds, which represent the largest groups of third-country migrants in the country.

Original population: Theme contents focusing on original population displayed, on one hand, current views and attitudes to migrants in working life (among employers or peers) and experiences from training migrants, working with them, or from the diversity in working environments. On the other hand, the theme contents highlighted that the migrant discourse is responding to the need among the original population to acquire more basic knowledge about migrants, their backgrounds and issues of migration. This includes providing the original population with the means to enhance their capacity with cultural and gender awareness in order to provide them with the skills of intercultural communication. The discourse also promoted learning from the experiences of others regarding good working practices. The discourse also discussed possible discriminative attitudes in working life and measures to abolish them. The attitudinal climate that is reflected in public discussion has given impetus to conduct research on the influence of immigration on the position of the original population in working life and on the choice of school among the original population. The themes of the discourse suggested that there is topical work going on, and to be done, against everyday racism and stereotyping (e.g. of Romani people), and suspicion (of Islam) and feelings of threat (concerning migrants with a Russian background). Some public discussion events have been arranged to examine the controversial question of drawing the line between the freedom of expression and hate speech. However, the migrant discourse also included positive points of view and possibilities for citizens to become active for the rights of migrants in the weakest position (asylum seekers, paperless, Romani people).

Both migrants and original population: The migrant discourse included some themes that were construed by focusing on both migrants and original population. Among them was the theme of multicultural marriages as bridge-builders between cultures. There were also thematic issues related to living together (in cities) and intercultural interaction, as well as art performances for both groups. For example, the experiences of migrant pupils, teachers and parents were gathered concerning student welfare services in school and the realisation of bilinguality among young people with a migrant background. Experiences from conciliation and perspectives to child welfare were also gathered from both groups. In addition, both groups of population were focused on in relation to the discussion on the meaning of social networks in becoming employed and the issues of mentoring and sharing within the communities of migrant women and native Finnish women.

Policy and politics: The migration discourse focusing on the policy level indicated the close connection of policy and research on migration. Participation is a central concept in Finnish migration policy and it framed the expert discussion on policy models and their implementation in the practises of migration work and in the other activities and services provided by the welfare state. Among the policy themes discussed were: the Diversity charter, pre-migration intervention, 'Equality in the fore-front' in working life, 'How fair is Finland?', migrant inclusion by e-participation, CLIL education, and the guardians of unaccompanied minors. On the other hand, the discourse included also critical views on state

policies by questioning the framework of the nation-state, and the adequacy of the interpretation of the concept of multiculturalism for policy-related decision-making. Themes of migration-related legislation and procedures, such as non-state actors in refugee law, asylum procedures, and the premises of family reunion, were discussed in this specific policy sector.

The contributions of expert bodies reflected, and were responsive to, the issues around public migration that have been discussed in the political arena. Representatives of so-called right-wing populism have gained political success with their nationalistic and anti-migration views. The response of the expert communities introduced the conceptions of xenophobia and otherism which might be helpful in the exploration of public views.

Academic knowledge production: Those thematic contents that focused on academic knowledge production were in a minor position in the migrant discourse (see Figure 3). However, analysis of the collected data showed that research paradigms are currently being reconsidered. New conceptualisations of social-cultural phenomena related to migration were presented, such as multi-linguality and the super-diversity discussed within academic circles. Methodological approaches should be informed by the concepts of intersectionality and inter-/transdisciplinarity. Transnationalisation was an emerging concept in contributions to the discourse. It transcends and questions the borders of many categorisations and frameworks, including the nation-state.

Matching with MIPEX outcomes

The migration discourse, examined and discussed in this paper, is a construction of research and actions by epistemic and practice communities. It represents views and concerns based on research-based knowledge that have been produced by examining social-cultural phenomena emerging from a diversified society. The focus of research and actions varies depending on the interests of the participants and their epistemic and practice communities, as well as on the interests of the public authorities that are planning integration policy and policy measures and implementing them in different sectors of the welfare state.

In the following there is an attempt to extract and discuss some themes of the migration discourse in the light of the outcomes of the MIPEX - an international tool used to view integration policy based on laws and their implementation in Finland and in other countries. The index, based on the work of the British Council and Migrant Policy Group, includes over 200 policy indicators for assessing migrated people's opportunities to participate in society in different areas of life. The indicators measure the successfulness of integration policy against the highest standards drawn from Council of Europe Conventions and European Union Directives or European-wide recommendations. (MIPEX, 2011)

Within the MIPEX framework, Finland shows up as a country with a slightly favourable integration policy. Finland scored quite well in international comparison, being in the fourth

position (69/100 points) behind Sweden, Portugal and Canada. Even the weaknesses of Finnish integration policy were not generally below the average level in international comparison. (MIPEX, 2011)

The strongest strength of Finnish integration policy was in political participation. The former strength reflects the idea of participation of all citizens in society and societal decision-making. The framework of legislation is supportive to equal political participation of all residents at local and regional levels. However, the overview of the migrant discourse, for example, would suggest that the contribution of migrant organisations to the discussion on migration issues was not very active. On the other hand, the discourse showed some developments going on to promote inclusion of migrants through e-participation.

At the level of legislation and policy measures, the policy area related to anti-discrimination was also assessed as a particular strength. An important authority in this regard is the Ombudsman for Minorities. Among the NGOs that are supposed to support the migrants in their possible cases, the discourse was contributed by Refugee Advice Centre and Freedom of Movement network. However, according to the contributions to the migrant discourse attention has already been paid to the prevention and abolishment of discrimination in the working life.

In the policy area of education the strengths were in an inclusive education and in addressing the academic needs of pupils with migrant backgrounds. However, the weaknesses were identified in the area of intercultural education and that schools do not do enough to harness the opportunities offered by diversity (see also Graeffe and Lestinen, 2011; Lestinen, 2011). The overview of the discourse showed that attention is paid to the academic support of the pupils and on the development of language teaching and learning. However, in addition to training of teachers with a migrant background to support their recruitment in schools, the challenges of intercultural education in practice or harnessing new opportunities in schools were still not visible in the discourse. Vice versa, there was a theme focusing on the influence of immigration on the choice of schools among original population.

The weaknesses of Finnish integrations policy were found in the policy concerning eligibility for long-term residence, equal residence rights of family members of migrant workers and access to nationality. The issues raised by these precisely defined challenges in policy areas that were pointed out by the MIPEX were not visible in the contributions to the migration discourse to any notable extent.

Concluding remarks

The study has a number of limitations. The data collected using the specific site over a 9-month period of time may not cover the whole spectrum of relevant migrant discourse. The contents of the data were limited to the information that was available in the email messages and their attachments sent via the mailing list.

Participative integration is a major idea of integration policy in Finland. Although the migrants participated as experience experts of many events in the construction of the discourse, their voices were not exposed in the discourse through the participation of migrant organisations. The role of these NGOs might be vital in questioning and raising topical policy issues to be further explored and discussed.

The review suggested that the migration discourse is constructed both by the separate contribution of participants and by the joint contributions of epistemic and practice communities. However, the discourse might benefit from exploiting the emerging ideas of intersectionality and trans- and interdisciplinarity.

Migration policy is shaped according to societal and cultural contexts of each country. However, using the MIPEx index based on the highest standards of the Council of Europe and the EU it was possible to point out weaknesses in some areas of Finnish integration policy. These areas would need more attention in research and discussion, but the overview showed that the issues related to them are not quite visible in the migrant discourse.

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