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"We got to know each other better and talked more about stuff we usually kind of do not talk about." A qualitative study of the acceptability of the Norwegian version of the Identity Project

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Introduction: Evidence is emerging in Europe of the efficiency of culturally adapted versions of the Identity Project (IP), a U.S.-developed school-based universal mental health promoting intervention. However, in depth research knowledge about the IP's user acceptability among school staff and students is lacking. User acceptability is an important factor in ensuring a successful implementation and large-scale uptake of effective interventions in educational institutions.

Methods: The present study explored interview data from teachers and diversity counselors (deliverers; $n = 10$) and upper secondary school students (receivers; $n = 16$) of the intervention in Norwegian secondary schools to get information about which aspects of the IP may enhance or reduce its acceptability. We used thematic analysis to generate themes.

Results: Three themes indicated positive changes resulting from the IP. These themes revealed that the most prominent aspects of acceptability were related to the users' perception that they got to know each other in new ways through working together on topics about their ethnicity and culture (more culturally inclusive classrooms), that the curriculum was engaging and provided important language to describe the students' minoritizing experiences (expanding one's perspectives), and to the effect the curriculum had on the users' ethnic-cultural identity exploration (coming to terms with ethnic-cultural identity). A fourth theme (challenging concepts) involved aspects that might lower acceptability, and suggested revisions needed to ensure successful future implementation of the intervention.

Discussion: The main aspect of the IP making it acceptable to deliverers and receivers is that the curriculum provides them with a safe space, and much needed strategies and tools to engage in discussions about their ethnicity and culture in the classroom. In conclusion, the user acceptability of the IP is strong and demonstrates that the curriculum has a potential of larger-scale implementation into educational institutions' multicultural education strategy.

KEYWORDS

intervention acceptability, experienced acceptability, identity project, ethnic identity development, qualitative study, thematic analysis

1 Introduction

Given the increasing culturally diversification of most European countries, and the responsibility placed on schools with respect to promoting inclusive learning environments and positive intercultural relationships (Allemann-Ghionda, 2009; Barrett, 2018), there is a need for evidence-based interventions to support such efforts. The Identity Project (IP) was developed in the United States as a universal mental health promoting classroom intervention, focused on providing youth with tools and strategies to engage in processes of ethnic-racial identity¹ formation, a main developmental task among youth in culturally diverse contexts (Umaña-Taylor and Douglass, 2017). The intervention is a manual-based curriculum that comprises eight modules, each addressing issues related to the students' ethnic-racial background and identity that is taught to the students one module a week. For example, the IP introduces the students to the idea of identity as a multidimensional and fluid construct that changes over time, and to topics of stereotyping, discrimination, and cultural expression through symbols, rituals, and traditions. An important principle underlying the IP is that the students can learn about their own ethnicity by being exposed to information about others' ethnic groups. Hence, they are provided with several opportunities to discuss their ethnic background and cultural heritage with their classmates, as they participate in small group activities, large group activities and / or complete individual work that is subsequently shared in a larger group setting (Umaña-Taylor and Douglass, 2017). The theory of change of the IP posits that the intervention promotes ethnic-racial identity exploration and subsequent resolution, with later cascading effects on global identity cohesion followed by positive psychological and academic outcomes (Umaña-Taylor, 2023; Umana-Taylor et al., 2018a; Umana-Taylor et al., 2018b).

European researchers, acknowledging ethnic identity as a developmental competency for youth growing up with the challenges of increasingly culturally diverse societies, are seeing the potential of the IP as an evidence-based intervention that may diminish socio-cultural inequality in mental health and academic outcomes. Thus, the curriculum has been culturally adapted to be relevant for secondary school students in Germany, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Greece, and the Netherlands (Juang et al., 2022). Support for its efficacy in these new cultural contexts is emerging (Abdullahi et al., 2024; Ceccon et al., 2024; Hölscher et al., 2024; Sandberg et al., 2024; Schachner et al., 2024). However, how school staff and students evaluate the acceptability of interventions is as important to the large-scale uptake in schools as the interventions' efficacy and effectiveness. Previous research has indicated that the experiences of school staff and students who have completed the IP are favorable (Juang et al., 2020;

Umaña-Taylor, 2023). However, there is a lack of in-depth knowledge about the *specific aspects* of this intervention that may enhance or reduce its acceptability. To bridge this gap, the aim of the present study is to explore interview data from deliverers (school staff) and receivers (students) gathered as part of a feasibility study of the Norwegian version of the IP to gain knowledge about their experienced acceptability of the intervention. Giving the students a voice offers an opportunity to examine the convergence of their experiences with those of the adult deliverers and get new information about aspects of acceptability of this evolving universal school-based mental health-promoting intervention. Moreover, information about the acceptability of the IP adds to the findings of previous studies demonstrating that the IP can be a tool for multicultural education and that delivering the curriculum enhances teachers' competence in supporting students' identity development (Pevce-Zimmer et al., 2024; Sladek et al., 2024; Türken et al., 2024; Ulbricht et al., 2024).

1.1 Intervention acceptability

The definitions and descriptions of user acceptability vary across studies, however, the concept typically implies an *intention to implement an intervention*, or a *subjective evaluation of the intervention as agreeable, satisfactory, effective, and appropriate for the problem* (Eckert et al., 2006; Somefun et al., 2021). From an implementation research perspective it is increasingly acknowledged that researchers should consider intervention acceptability in the development, implementation, and evaluation of health-promoting interventions (Tilley and Montreuil, 2023). It is a precondition for an intervention to be successfully implemented that it is assessed as acceptable by both its deliverers (e.g., teachers) and its receivers (e.g., students) (Pearson et al., 2020; Tilley and Montreuil, 2023). Intervention acceptability is also a necessary condition for its future large-scale uptake by educational institutions (Harrison et al., 2016). Having the target population and organizational settings involved in the process of assessing the acceptability of an intervention is therefore considered a critical component in intervention development research (Eckert et al., 2006). Moreover, a sufficient understanding of how the target population will receive intervention activities is needed to avoid implementation of interventions that do not work well and enhance the possibility of continuing promising interventions in school settings (Ayala and Elder, 2011). While acceptability may promote the willingness to employ school-based interventions, many other factors may affect the quality of intervention implementation, of intervention success in terms of obtaining the intended changes in student outcomes, and of the sustainability of the intervention (Fixen et al., 2005; Han and Weiss, 2005). Among such factors are the deliverers' fidelity to the program, training of deliverers, and school leaders' support in providing the necessary resources for the realization of the intervention (Durlak and DuPre, 2008; Forman et al., 2009; Han and Weiss, 2005).

Acceptability may be assessed at different stages in the implementation process. *Anticipated* or *prospective* acceptability is

¹ Please note that we use "ethnic-racial identity" when referring to literature from the United States we use "ethnic identity" when discussing studies from Europe, taking into account socio-cultural variations in the understanding of ethnicity, race, and culture.

measured among users who have not (yet) received the intervention (Eckert et al., 2006; Stok et al., 2016). Information about anticipated acceptability may be valuable when multiple interventions are available for the same problem behavior (Eckert et al., 2006), or to determine how well an intervention will be received by the target population (Ayala and Elder, 2011). *Concurrent* acceptability is measured during the delivery of the intervention (Russell et al., 2023; Tilley and Montreuil, 2023), e.g., to make continuous refinements of the intervention (Russell et al., 2023) or to ensure engagement in training to deliver an intervention (Renko et al., 2020). *Experienced* acceptability is assessed retrospectively post-intervention, typically to get information about deliverers and / or receivers' satisfaction with the intervention (Jagiello et al., 2022; Proctor et al., 2011; Renko et al., 2020; Somefun et al., 2021). Such information may also indicate if changes are necessary to enhance the intervention's acceptability.

Acceptability is influenced by several factors such as the characteristics of the intervention, the context in which it is implemented, in addition to the perceptions and attitudes of the stakeholders involved. Interventions that are perceived as intrusive or time demanding have lower acceptability than those that are perceived as fair, appropriate, and easy to use (Eckert et al., 2006; Somefun et al., 2021; State et al., 2017). Quantitative methods to assess acceptability, such as self-report questionnaires (e.g., Harrison et al., 2016; Martens et al., 1985; Sekhon et al., 2022) are cost-effective and provide data from many informants that are rather undemanding to analyze to report on the relative level of satisfaction or to produce profiles of acceptability. However, when an intervention is in the making or, like the IP, is being culturally adapted to new contexts, it may be valuable to gain knowledge about *which aspects* of the intervention the informants perceive as suitable or why it is rated as convenient / burdensome (Nabors et al., 2000). Such considerations can inform revisions and accommodations of the intervention, and contribute information about the informants' engagement with it (Pearson et al., 2020). Hence, we chose a qualitative approach based on in-depth interview data from deliverers and receivers of the first Norwegian version of the IP manual.

1.2 The Norwegian cultural diversity school context

Norway is commonly known for its egalitarian welfare state, liberal welfare policies, and an open education system that extends to tertiary (university) levels (Midtbøen and Nadim, 2022). However, in 2019 Norway dropped out of the top ten countries with the most comprehensive integration policies on the Migrant Integration Policy Index, MIPEX (Solano and Huddleston, 2020). This decline, from a score of 72 to 69 out of 100, resulted from changes in policies that made it more *difficult for immigrants to attain permanent residence and citizenship*. Notably, new more restrictive family reunification regulations also played a role in this shift. While education policies received generally positive assessments in MIPEX, there were calls for a more robust incorporation of *multicultural* approaches reflecting intercultural and diversity education in the curriculum, extracurricular activities, as well as in postsecondary education (Solano and Huddleston, 2020). Multicultural pedagogical practices that are inclusive of the students' ethnic, cultural, racial, and religious diversity, are associated with a social context that supports a positive identity

development among them (Aldridge et al., 2016; Baysu et al., 2021; Schachner et al., 2016). However, research has shown that Norwegian pre- and in-service teachers lack the necessary competence and tools to implement such practices (Lund, 2018; Thomassen and Munthe, 2021). Moreover, education and integration policies lean toward assimilation, emphasizing learning Norwegian language and cultural values (Garthus-Niegel et al., 2016; Martiny et al., 2020). Such policies are, however, not in accordance with the primary and secondary schools' mission statement, which in its core curriculum declares that “*educational institutions shall provide an inclusive and diverse community in which the students can maintain and develop their identities*” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2017). This involves addressing students' ethnic-cultural identities as an important aspect of their overall identity formation (Umaña-Taylor, 2023). However, Norwegian assimilation policies (Martiny et al., 2020) and emphasis on values of equity and everybody's equal worth (Social Policy Archive for Share, 2016), counteract multicultural teaching approaches that purposefully address issues of ethnic and cultural variation among students. Many teachers argue that ethnic background is irrelevant in education and instead adopt a color-evasive approach to cultural diversity (Herzog-Punzenberger et al., 2020). For instance, Gullestad (2004) pointed to a so-called ‘blindness’ of ethnic Norwegians with regards to understanding racism and racialization experiences of ethnic minorities in Norway. Hence, ethnic group differences are de-emphasized, based on beliefs that prejudice and discrimination may occur if group differences are discussed and highlighted (Schachner et al., 2021). Alternatively, teachers may treat topics of cultural diversity in indirect ways implying that students may miss the opportunity to acquire a vocabulary that represents this important aspect of their identity and intercultural relations (Herzog-Punzenberger et al., 2020).

1.3 Majoritized and minoritized populations of Norway

The ethnic Norwegian majority population consists of individuals who are Norwegian- or foreign-born, with two Norwegian-born parents and four Norwegian-born grandparents. This group also includes the indigenous Sami people and five groups that have received status as *national* ethnic minorities, i.e., Kvens/Norwegian Finns, Jews, Forest Finns, Roma, and Romani people/Tatars, based on their historical roots in Norway. In contrast, *the immigrant population* comprises people who are foreign- or Norwegian-born to two foreign-born parents or four foreign-born grandparents (The Norwegian Government, 2024). In everyday discourse not only these groups but also their further descendants are typically referred to as immigrants or (ethnic) minorities, especially based on markers such as darker skin tone.

Immigrants and their Norwegian-born children currently make up 19.9% of the population (Steinkellner et al., 2023). They originate from approximately 220 countries world-wide, but the largest groups have backgrounds from Poland, Ukraine, and Lithuania. However, there is also a substantial number of refugees from Syria, Somalia, Eritrea, Iraq, and Afghanistan (Statistics Norway, 2023). Rather than distinct ethnic enclaves as in the United States and more populous European countries, larger cities have sections where ethnic minorities with a variety of national origins predominate. Consequently, in local

school classrooms, students with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds may outnumber ethnic Norwegian students.

On a group level, most immigrants and their descendants contribute to the society, demonstrate upward social mobility over time and from one generation to the next, and make efforts to adapt to the resettlement society (Midtbøen and Nadim, 2022). However, some parents are struggling to accommodate their parenting practices to new and unfamiliar cultural settings (Västhagen et al., 2022) and there is variation in level of literacy among them (UNESCO, 2023). Of concern to Norwegian authorities, however, have been the harmful cultural practices associated with authoritarian parenting strategies (Gershoff et al., 2010) such as negative social control (Friberg and Bjørnset, 2019). While the prevalence of such practices is low (Friberg and Bjørnset, 2019), the risk for negative psychological and health consequences among the affected children is substantial (Barber and Harmon, 2002; Gele et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2009; Aakvaag et al., 2016). Thus, to promote information about the harmful sequels of these practices and prevent their further enactment, the Directorate of Integration and Diversity has employed *diversity counselors* in culturally diverse lower and upper secondary schools across the country. They are integrated into the schools' psychosocial services with a particular responsibility to assist students who are at risk for or exposed to harmful parenting practices. Despite positive intentions, their official mandate runs the risk of reinforcing deficit-based perspectives and may perhaps be experienced as stigmatizing and reduce the willingness of minoritized students to ask for counseling (Proba Samfunnsanalyse, 2023; Aarset et al., 2024). However, in an evaluation of how diversity counselors work, Aarset et al. (2024) pointed out that they often perform counseling sessions with students on general topics related to being young, rather than simply focusing on negative social control or similarly negative issues, and even play a positive role in strengthening school-parents cooperation.

1.4 Conceptualization of Norwegianness

Despite the ongoing ethnic-cultural diversification of the population, the Norwegian ethnic majority tend to perceive "Norwegianness" as having a shared ethnic and cultural background over centuries, with light skin color as an important marker (Führer, 2021; Gullestad, 2004). Additionally, anti-immigration rhetoric of representatives of the populist right-wing party and other anti-immigration groups, increasingly spreads throughout social media, often in terms of racist and discrimination comments (Ali, 2023). Against this backdrop of minoritizing and racializing experiences, many youth with an ethnic minority backgrounds, struggle with defining themselves as part of the Norwegian population, resulting in recurrent public debates about the meaning of being a Norwegian (Naveen, 2022; Phelps and Nadim, 2010). In response to the perception that the concepts of *ethnic minority* and *immigrant* often are used in derogatory and insulting ways, ethnic minority background youth tend to refer to themselves as *foreigners*.

For these youth the resistance of ethnic Norwegians to accept them as (legally) Norwegians, the derogatory immigration discourse of some politicians, and the racism and discrimination they are exposed to, may interfere with their ethnic-cultural identity development. Research has shown a consistent positive association between perceived ethnic discrimination and stronger heritage culture

identification (Meca et al., 2020; Umaña-Taylor, 2016), in addition to lower levels of majority culture identification and more negative attitudes toward the ethnic majority (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2018; Martiny et al., 2020). If the developmental context of immigrant background and ethnic minority youth promotes a combination of strong heritage and weak majority culture identification, this may affect the society's cohesion and result in groups of people living "parallel lives" which in the worst case may result in intolerance, discrimination and, in extreme cases, violence (Home Office, 2004). Hence, interventions like the IP are needed to present ethnic minority and majority youth alike with a safe space, tools and strategies to discuss and share issues related to their ethnic and cultural backgrounds and identities, and to learn about the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of others (Juang et al., 2020; Umaña-Taylor, 2023). If successful, such universal interventions might contribute to reducing polarization in society, radicalization of minority as well as majority youth, right-wing extremism and violent nationalism.

Based on the need for interventions that may promote multicultural teaching practices focusing on equity and positive intercultural relations, the overall aim of the present study is to explore post-intervention experienced user acceptability of the Norwegian version of the IP. More precisely, the study seeks to identify the central components of the IP that make the intervention acceptable to the users and if there are aspects of the intervention that need to be revised or accommodated. To ensure that perspectives from both deliverers and receivers are represented, individual interview data from the school staff facilitators are triangulated with similar interview data from the students who received the intervention.

2 Methods and materials

2.1 The Norwegian IP manual

Considering the Norwegian context with its woven tapestry of demographic factors, attitudes, policies, and values, the IP (Umaña-Taylor and Douglass, 2017) was culturally adapted to be relevant for students in Norwegian culturally diverse secondary schools (Juang et al., 2022).

The Norwegian research team established a work-group in collaboration with the Directorate of Integration and Diversity in this endeavor, via the diversity counselors of three schools in the metropolitan region (Juang et al., 2022). The work-group met regularly over the course of one year. Both surface and deep structure adaptations were made (Knight et al., 2009). Surface structure changes involved, e.g., substituting stories of discrimination of various U. S. ethnic-racial groups with discrimination of indigenous and national ethnic minorities and immigrant background groups in Norway. An example of deep structure changes is the conceptualization of ethnic-racial minorities. Within the context of the historical trauma that Sami and national ethnic minorities were exposed to from 1850 to 1950, because of the Norwegian governments' assimilation policies, and the racially motivated genocide of Jews during World War II, the use of "race" in public discourse is strongly contested (Kyllingstad, 2017). While "racism" is dealt with in public documents and everyday discourse, "race" has been substituted by *ethnicity*, *background*, and *skin color* in Norwegian

laws, and racial categories are never used in statistics (Kyllingstad, 2017). Based on focus group interviews we conducted with students, the experiences of the German IP team members, and careful reflections and discussions among the work-group members, we agreed on applying “ethnic-cultural” group or identity in the Norwegian manual. This was because (1) many youth associated *ethnicity* only with geographical origin, (2) many adults were unclear about the concept, or (3) reluctant to use it in their teaching for sensitivity reasons. Thus, we wanted to highlight that the IP focuses on the close relations between ethnicity and culture and minimize the discomfort many associated with the use of ethnicity. To acknowledge the racialized experiences of many ethnic minority youth, we nevertheless included an activity about race in the manual about race and its history as a socially constructed concept.

In September 2021 the research team trained seven teachers and the five diversity counselors who were part of the work-group, to facilitate the Norwegian version of the IP during three consecutive days. The training gave the trainees first-hand experience with the IP as the researchers administered all eight sessions of the curriculum, including individual and group activities that they subsequently shared with the larger group, to the trainees as if they were students in the classroom. One week later they started implementing the intervention in six classrooms of three multicultural upper secondary schools. The current study is part of a larger project. We have reported elsewhere how the IP can stimulate and help teachers embrace diversity topics, use cultural background as a learning/teaching tool, and hence enhances teachers’ competence in supporting students’ identity development (Türken et al., 2024).

2.2 Recruitment

The research team conducted a privacy impact assessment according to the General data protection regulation (GDPR) that was approved by the Data Protection Officer of the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (30.09.2021). Participation was conditioned on written consent from youth and school staff.

The diversity counsellors who collaborated with the research team on adapting the IP to the Norwegian multi-cultural context invited the three upper secondary schools they worked in to implement the intervention and participate in the feasibility study. Subsequently the research team met with the schools’ teachers to inform them about the intervention and the study. In collaboration with the principals, the main teachers of two classrooms at each school agreed to team up with the diversity counsellors in facilitating the IP and participate in the study, while another two main teachers accepted to let their students participate as a control group. All intervention classrooms represented health or childcare vocational tracks where the majority of the students, 84%, had an ethnic minority background. The research team met with the students of these classrooms to inform them about, and invite them to participate in, the feasibility study. As they were all 16 years or older, the students themselves could consent to participate by filling in a questionnaire before and after the IP was carried out. Students in the intervention classroom were also asked if they were willing to be interviewed after completing the intervention.

2.3 Sample

The target group for the interviews was 12 school staff deliverers of the Norwegian IP, seven teachers and five diversity counsellors, and 26 student receivers who had consented to participate in interviews after they had completed the intervention.

Two facilitators, one female teacher and one female diversity counsellor could not be reached. Of the remaining 10, nine were female. Five had an ethnic Norwegian background, including one Sami, four originated from India, Morocco, Sweden, or Kenya, and one had a multi-cultural heritage (Table 1). They all had extensive professional experience, their vocational practices ranging from three to 30 years.

Of the 26 ethnic majority and minority students who had agreed to be interviewed after they had finished the IP, 16 (61.5%) were present at the schools² on the day the research team visited to conduct the interviews. They all had an immigrant background. They were between 16 and 18 years old, and most of them, 13 (81.25%), were female, reflecting the gender distribution of the vocational tracks they attended. We did not ask them directly about their national origins or ethnicity, however, most participants talked about their backgrounds during the interviews, which revealed that there was substantial ethnic-cultural diversity among them. They represented six different national origins and (semi) autonomous areas, namely Pakistan, Somalia, Colombia, Poland, Bosnia, Kurdistan, and Chechnya (Table 1). Three of them were born in Norway, one was adopted by ethnic Norwegian parents, and one of them came to Norway as a one-year-old baby.

2.4 Procedures

Four members of the research team, of which three are authors of the present manuscript, carried out the semi-structured interviews. They worked pairwise, one interviewer taking the lead, while the other added follow-up questions when necessary, and at least one of them had an immigrant background. The interviews lasted from 45 to 60 min. The facilitator interviews took place on the digital platform Teams, while the students were interviewed face-to-face, individually at their respective schools, except for four students who wanted to attend two-by-two. The interview protocol was developed by the research team and addressed students’ and facilitators’ general experiences with the intervention and more specifically what they perceived as positive and negative aspects with it. The protocol was similar for, but adjusted to, the two groups. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim in the Norwegian language.

² The interviews were conducted while the schools were still implementing restrictions due to Covid-19, with implications for the number of students present in the classrooms.

TABLE 1 Participant characteristics.

Informant group	Gender	Ethnicity/Parents' background
Teachers		
Teacher 1	Female	India
Teacher 2	Female	Morocco
Teacher 3	Female	Kenya
Teacher 4	Male	Sweden
Teacher 5	Female	Norway
Teacher 6	Female	Norway
Teacher 7	Female	Norway
Diversity counselors		
DC 1	Female	Netherlands, Sweden, Austria
DC 2	Female	Sami
DC 3	Female	Norway
DC 4	Female	Norway
Students		
S 1	Female	NA
S 2	Female	Chechnya
S 3	Female	Somalia
S 4	Female	NA
S 5	Female	Columbia
S 6	Female	Somalia
S 7	Female	Poland
S 8	Female	NA
S 9	Female	Bosnia-Herzegovina
S 10	Male	Kurdistan
S 11	Female	Kurdistan
S 12	Female	Somalia
S 13	Male	Pakistan
S 14	Female	Pakistan
S 15	Female	Somalia
S 16	Male	Pakistan

2.5 Data analysis

We employed a reflexive thematic analytical approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2019), taking into account best-practice suggestions for conducting thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2021) to generate themes from the interviews. Acknowledging the researcher's role in knowledge production in performing thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021), we adopted a constructionist epistemological position. To enhance rigor, we held discussions on how our methodological decision making and epistemological understandings (Dowling, 2008), and how our positionality (i.e., being advocates for the rights of minorities in multicultural societies, with three authors having immigrant background in Norway) might inform the study and provide insights to analyzing the data (Willig, 2013). While the first author was the Principal Investigator, and the third and fourth authors who performed the interviews were empathetic to the overall project, the second author who

was not involved in the data collection, played the role of devils' advocate throughout the analysis. Hence, every initial assumption and interpretation was questioned and challenged, and we as a team actively engaged in negative case analysis, considering alternative interpretations based on deviant cases (see Willig, 2013). Three of the authors had conducted the interviews, having thus a large degree of familiarization with the data. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) suggestion of a stepwise procedure, we performed a latent level analysis with an inductive approach, using each separate utterance by the participants as the unit of analysis. The analysis process began by reading the interviews to get to know the data material, looking for initial patterns, making notes for the discussions. Two interviews were coded collectively to establish a common understanding of the coding process. Then, the interviews were divided equally, each co-author coding 6 interviews. Despite the aim of performing an inductive analysis, "researchers cannot free themselves of their theoretical and epistemological commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 84). Subsequently, research meetings were held as an iterative interpretative process to refine the codes from the initial stage and to generate themes based on these codes, all the while discussing how our reflexivity (both epistemological and positional) might inform the analysis until we reached a consensus about the common themes.

3 Results

Our analysis yielded four overarching themes, each comprising two subthemes³: (1) More culturally inclusive classrooms, (2) Expanding one's perspectives, (3) Coming to terms with ethnic-cultural identity, (4) Challenging concepts.

Table 2 gives an overview of the overarching themes and their connected subthemes.

3.1 Theme 1: more culturally inclusive classrooms

All interviewees, both students and facilitators, talked about the IP in positive ways and addressed the IP as a means to get to know each other in safe and positive ways, with the overall experience of a more inclusive classroom milieu. They pointed out that (a) talking about "unusual stuff" promotes positive relationships as they got to know each other better and highlighted that (b) a better understanding of each other's ethnic-cultural background resulted in increased acceptance and respect for each other.

3.1.1 Subtheme 1: talking about 'unusual stuff' promotes positive relationships⁴

Engaging in activities where students talked about 'unusual stuff' (compared to the regular curriculum) such as culture, identity, and

³ Please note that in the following "DC (1–4)" indicates a diversity counselor, "T (1–6)" a teacher, and "S (1–16)" are students (See Table 1).

⁴ The quotations are not always direct translations of the Norwegian text, especially slang and mispronunciations have been accommodated to be reader-friendly.

TABLE 2 Overview of themes and subthemes resulting from the inductive thematic analysis with example quotations.

Themes	1. More Culturally Inclusive Classrooms	2. Expanding One's Perspectives	3. Coming to Terms with Ethnic-cultural Identity	4. Challenging Concepts
Subthemes	1.1 Talking about unusual stuff promotes positive relationships <i>"We got to know each other better and talked more about stuff we usually kind of do not talk about."</i> 1.2 Increasing acceptance and respect for each other through increased understanding of cultural background <i>"...what I have learned from the Identity Project is that it is not important what one looks like, you should respect others' cultures."</i>	2.1 Increased student motivation for learning as the IP is different from other subjects <i>"I was just excited all the time. To find out "what are we going to do today"? It was so much better than the ordinary classes."</i> 2.2 Learning the language of minoritized experiences <i>"And then I learnt a little bit more what prejudice is, and how it is defined, and what it is and so on. And yes, stereotypes and so on. We had never heard that word before so."</i>	3.1 Exploring and finding out new things about one's background <i>"That was like very interesting, because I got insight into where my family come from, and how it was and how many they were, and that they came from different countries too. That was very interesting."</i> 3.2 Negotiating belongingness & identity <i>"Because I grew up in another country... How can I say this? I am, like, not ethnic- Norwegian, I am ethnic- Norwegian, but I am not ethnic- Norwegian."</i>	4.1 Difficult concepts – adjusting the language <i>"We used time on the definitions, sort of rephrasing...and repeating, often repeating sentences by changing the words and repeating the message."</i> 4.2 Racism without race <i>"... I am very used to talking about discrimination and racism, race as a concept...the historical meaning of the word in Norway compared to abroad... the handling of the concept in the manual did not quite make sense to me or to the students... we need to focus on both racism and discrimination ..."</i>

discrimination seems to have created more positive relationships and stronger bonds within the classroom. S2 explains:

"We got to know each other better and talked more about stuff we usually kind of do not talk about."

The facilitators similarly liked the opportunity to discuss unusual topics in class:

T1: *"We touched upon stuff we otherwise would perhaps not particularly talk about out loud."*

Some students stated that it was difficult to share sensitive topics regarding their family background (e.g., having family members in war zones, exposure to discrimination) with others, but as the IP progressed over the weeks, they became more confident that sharing things with their classmates was safe:

S12: *"...I had never spoken to so many people before, and the fact that I did it without anybody judging me or whispering, or in a way I could talk and say exactly what I wanted..., while the teachers were standing there, and I could share who I am ..."*

Both the students and the facilitators underscored the fact that without the safe space, as the one the IP provided, issues such as culture, ethnicity, race etc. would not be part of the daily talk in the classroom. Overall, the relationships among students and between students and teachers improved.

S13: *"...before IP, I feel it was like, that no one knew each other. But now, as it [IP] has had its effect, so I feel that it is better, people know each other, it is easier to talk to others in the classroom. You know a little bit more...it is like, I feel we are like friends all of us."*

Even though students might still hang out with their usual social networks and friends after completing the IP, as DC4 points out, *"they have learnt about the others in the class"* and such a way of engaging with each other may result in a more

inclusive classroom environment and closeness, as exemplified by the following quotations:

DC1: *"Across the different ... ehm ... ethnicities and cultures ... ehm ... backgrounds. So it was like ... yeah, we could kind of create a space to talk about a lot of stuff... ehm ..[which] we had in common."*

S14: *"I feel more like close then, when I kind of know a little bit more about them. ... 'Cause I'd never think that an Identity Project could make me understand, or learn more about a person and their background. Because when you think about getting to know each other, it's more about yourself. But when you think about culture and all that's in it, and what they like to do. Then there is a lot more to it"*

3.1.2 Subtheme 2: increasing acceptance and respect for each other through increased understanding of cultural background

Most students reported a better understanding of how everyone has a cultural background. Not only is there an increased awareness of the *"many cultural differences"* (S1) among the students and teachers, but there is also the *"feeling that the class[mates] understand each other better because we have been talking about our [ethnic-cultural] background"* (S4). As another student (S2) explains:

"...for instance, it was a sensitive issue for some to talk about their home country. Because they had family there in a war zone or had parents and grandparents growing up in war. There were a lot of stuff we learnt from the class. Like cultures are very different"

Students consequently have the experience that *"...perhaps, we accept each other more than we used to"* (S15). The account of S12, illustrates this point well. S12 stated that she usually refrained from sharing her exposure to discrimination and stereotypes as these were intimate details for her. Yet, she was for the first time able to *"talk in front of so many people...without anyone judging me. I got to share who*

I am.” The facilitators’ accounts support this development, as exemplified by DC2:

“I experience that many are open and share stuff about themselves... with a couple of exceptions...when they decide to be forthcoming and disclose, then I think they have become friendlier to each other...and a little more tolerant.”

According to the students’ accounts, such acceptance is to a larger degree accompanied by increased respect. S6 says:

“...what I have learned from the Identity Project is that it is not important what one looks like, you should respect others’ cultures.”

Another student suggests that the increased understanding is also visible among the teachers:

S2: *“They [teachers] were also interested in listening to us. About our culture, and I feel they believe it is easier to understand the students when they know how they think about culture and stuff like that.”*

DC4: *“...much of this is personal stuff, which shows ... that we are interested in them, sort of, on several levels that have something to do with their identity.”*

Although all the teachers reported having already a good relationship with their students, there seems to be a more positive atmosphere after the IP. As exemplified by T3, the IP provided the class with an alternative way of connecting:

“...I think that we got to know each other in a totally different way... And I felt that I could use my own ethnic identity to get to know better and get closer to my students.”

DC2 corroborated this idea, indicating that everyone over the course of the IP experienced *“being seen and heard”*. Given the overall message by the students and teachers, engaging with each other through the IP may create a more inclusive classroom environment.

3.2 Theme 2: expanding one’s perspectives

This theme involves students’ and facilitators’ reports on the positive, motivating pedagogical aspects of the IP, and implicates a positive change following the implementation of the IP, that appears important to the deliverers and receivers’ perception of the intervention as acceptable. The two sub-themes, *Increased student motivation as the Identity Project is different from other subjects* and *Learning the ‘language’ of minoritized experiences*, should illustrate important learning that resulted from going through the curriculum. While each subtheme explicates distinct pedagogical activities and gained insights, they both highlight the effect that students and facilitators broadened their perspectives. Arguably, the two subthemes are closely intertwined and presuppose each other. Engaging with the

curriculum and activities in the IP, which differ largely from other school subjects, seems to have increased students’ motivation. Increased motivation and engagement with the IP curriculum seem to have led to increased conceptual insight.

3.2.1 Subtheme 1: increased student motivation for learning as the identity project is different from other subjects

The facilitators and most students reported increasing student motivation and engagement as the curriculum progressed over the weeks. Despite some variation in interest and ambivalent attitudes toward parts of the curriculum among some students, the fact that they perceived the content, the teaching methods, and the organization of the IP to differ from the regular curriculum and classroom education seems to play a positive role in keeping most of the students engaged and motivated to learn:

S13: *“...(I learnt) who I really am. Like, because there are different ways to learn this. Some (teachers) just tell you who you are, but we learnt this in a more practical way, we learnt this in a very cool way. We learnt by talking, thinking, drawing, the ways we learnt it then”.*

Many students said that they looked forward to every new session, that they would show up for every IP class with excitement, wondering what they were going to learn about that day:

S15: *“I was just excited all the time. To find out “what are we going to do today”? It was so much better than the ordinary classes”.*

Several facilitators also pointed out how enthusiastic the students were about the IP:

DC1: *“... students would come to me [in the break] and ask when the next session was. ...it is their way of saying that they were looking forward to the next session.”*

3.2.2 Subtheme 2: learning the ‘language’ of minoritized experiences

The motivation to learn seems to be accompanied by increased awareness, a form of conscientization, for the students engaging in the activities of the IP. This involves, more specifically for the students with immigrant backgrounds, learning the language which helps them comprehend and convey especially the negative experiences they have as minorities. One teacher (T3), referring to a specific module of the IP, put it this way:

“When we had those [stereotype] activities, for instance “I am..., but I am not...”, it was one of the greatest activities that I have experienced in the classroom. Like “wow, there, they become more aware of both their own stereotypes toward others and others’ stereotypes against themselves.”

Some students were honest and forthcoming about *“not knowing what prejudices really are”* (S3). However, through participation in the

IP, they reported having developed an understanding of such central concepts. Student S4 illustrates this point:

“And then I learnt a little bit more what prejudice is, and how it is defined, and what it is and so on. And yes, stereotypes and so on. We had never heard that word before so.”

Another student (S2) explained how meaningful learning such concepts had been for their understanding when it comes to group dynamics, especially for some minority cultures:

“...because one hears a lot, people do comparisons. If one person from a particular culture does something..., so everyone will think that they all do this kind of stuff, so it becomes a sort of rumor about that culture...[they] either harass you with that or tell it directly to you.”

Understanding such *rumors* and *harassment* as prejudice and discrimination might then provide students of minority background with the right tools to engage with and better understand their experiences. S5 underscored the point that the youth did not usually use concepts such as ‘ethnic-cultural’ which “*is more like what my father could say.*” DC1 argued that “*students sort of gained a language*” through participation in the IP. She provided an example of how the concept of identity came to be understood by the students:

“That it [ethnic-cultural identity] sort of was given a content...ehm ... so what it encompasses, what this overarching concept may mean. ... I think the students were a little surprised by the fact that there is so much variation, yet at the same time there is so much commonality, but, but that everything is done not necessarily in the same way.”

According to DC1, students had developed an awareness that concepts such as ethnic-cultural identity might be used in imprecise and often vague ways. She argued that given that students understood these concepts better and developed a language to discuss the content of these concepts, they might be able to resist “*calling oneself foreigner*” as is common among many ethnic minority group members in Norway. Use of concepts such as ‘foreigner’ in Norwegian society might undoubtedly be a barrier for ethnic minority youth to perceive themselves as included in the Norwegian population. Hence, the IP provided students with a conceptual framework to distinguish between ethnic-cultural groups, rather than between “Norwegians” and “foreigners.”

3.3 Theme 3: coming to terms with ethnic-cultural identity

The third theme also involves positive changes following the IP, that impact the facilitators and students’ acceptability of the curriculum. The students talked about how they came to understand their families in new ways during the IP, as they learnt new things both about their families and relatives, and their ethnic and cultural background. This makes up the first subtheme, namely *exploring and*

finding out new things about one’s background. For many of them, such exploration seemed to lead to reflections on their ethnic-cultural identity as they related to attitudes and discourses both by their teachers and the ethnic Norwegian majority. For several students the IP set into motion an *identity negotiation* (second subtheme), whereby they dealt with attitudes and expectations of the Norwegian society and that of their parents.

3.3.1 Subtheme 1: exploring and finding out new things about one’s background

Most students reported that throughout the IP they engaged in different activities through which they explored their ethnic-cultural identities. Some reported learning new things while others reported gaining a deeper insight regarding who they are. Such exploration took the form of talking to parents and/or relatives, searching the internet or reading about their parents’ country of origin, culture, and religion.

S13: “*That was like very interesting, because I got insight into where my family come from, and how it was and how many they were, and that they came from different countries too. That was very interesting.*”

S7: “*There were some questions about family and such things, so I had to find answers... the answers I got from my mother and grandmother who taught me about my values and cultures. So, I had to dig even deeper, and I found out a lot more than I had known.*”

The IP stimulated students to spend time together with their parents who were pleased by the interest in their background and heritage culture, and apparently took the opportunity to further stimulate their children to explore and learn more about their identities. S14 who, describing a conversation she had with her father, reported:

“*...[he told me about] people in the family I had not even thought about being part of it... And he thought this was ... a little funny that I did not know certain things about myself ... he was like “how come you did not know that these things are part of you?”*”

3.3.2 Subtheme 2: negotiating belongingness and identity

The stimulation to explore one’s ethnic-cultural background and the discussions with classmates and facilitators seemed to lead to a process of identity negotiation for students who inevitably had to relate to, on the one hand, what the ethnic Norwegian majority thinks of them (e.g., their perceptions of the majority’s attitudes toward immigrants) and, on the other hand, the expectations and beliefs of their parents. This negotiation, informed to a larger degree by new positions made available to them by their teachers as the IP progressed, apparently led to three different identity positions for these students: Norwegian, ambivalent, and bicultural. For some, it seemed to be a straightforward negotiation with a clear result.

S8: “*I certainly learnt that I am certainly Norwegian because I am born here, and as you know that means that I’m considered Norwegian, I learnt that. Something I have never believed, in a way.*”

The engagement in the IP had seemingly led S8 to position herself now as Norwegian, broadening her understanding of where she might belong. Being presumably aware of how most ethnic Norwegians might think about this, she underscored that she had not ever considered this possibility. In this negotiation, being born in Norway is construed as a deciding factor; an understanding she has developed through taking part in the IP. Several facilitators indeed reported having made such a position available to the students in their discussions. For instance, T1 said:

“...they are not sure who they are. So, Pakistanis say very often “I am a Pakistani”, then I say “but where were you born?” Yes, at Ullevål [hospital in Oslo]. “What passport do you have?” Yes, that is Norwegian. Yes, but you are Norwegian then. “No, I am a Pakistani”. So, that’s the dialog and the rhetoric they hear and base themselves on, and a good deal of loyalty to their parents’ home country.”

T1’s categorical reasoning finds resonance among some students who consequently took up such a position and negotiated their identity as more Norwegian. These words from S2 may illustrate:

“Since many are born in Norway and grow up in Norway, so many feel that they are more Norwegian than from their country”.

T1’s words illustrate the very common situation many students with immigrant backgrounds find themselves in, caught up between the expectations and demands from the majority society on the one hand, and the minority culture of their families on the other. For some, this might create an ambivalent position which is hard to deal with. Such ambivalence might sometimes be subtle as exemplified by the above quotation of S2 who used, similarly to several other students, the word ‘their country’ to refer to their parent’s home country. Apparently, belonging to their parents’ country might be taken for granted or given, but belonging to Norway must be negotiated. S11 and S13 pointed to the potential confusion:

S11: “Because I grew up in another country...How can I say this? ethnic-I am, like, not Norwegian, I am Norwegian, but I am not ethnic- Norwegian.”

S13: “...and he [ethnic Norwegian] asked me yeah, where are you from?. Then I said I am from Oslo. ...And he said, But where are you really from? And I said I am from Norway. And then he said but where are you really from – you don’t look Norwegian? And then I said yes, my parents are from Pakistan... because I am really Pakistani, but the thing is that my parents grew up in Pakistan... I felt a little like Pakistani and a little Norwegian. So, I was unsure. It was like, it crashed into each other. So, I was a little unsure what I really was.”

These two quotations illustrate how important a Norwegian ethnic-cultural background over centuries and a Nordic look in terms of skin and hair color, are as an inclusion criterion for being part of the Norwegian population, a belief that is still widespread in the Norwegian society. Even though teachers via the IP might make

certain identity positions available to the students, they do not escape the societal discourse. At the same time, the heritage ethnic-cultural background might be a very important part of the young students’ identities, as DC1 explained:

“...the way the youth talk about their identity and ethnicity, to a large degree, is connected to their minority background, ehm and background from other countries than Norway. So, even though many are aware that they are born in Norway, grew up in Norway, and attended Norwegian schools, and have a strong bond to Norway, their identity is still connected to the other, minority position. hmm. It was obvious throughout the project how important family (ethnic) background was.”

There was a third identity alternative to be found in the information from both the facilitators and the students; namely the possibility of developing a bicultural or multicultural identity. T2 explains:

“One can have several identities....one can be both Norwegian and Moroccan or Pakistani or Turkish....It is totally accepted, and no one can tell you who you are or what you are. It is what you yourself feel.”

Although many students referred to having some kind of confusion or insecurity at one point regarding where they really belonged, which emphasizes the complexity of identity negotiation, most of them reported developing a bicultural identity.

S10: “...I relate to both [cultures], I celebrate traditions from both and practice both.”

S15: “...my father and mother are from Somalia, so I am Somalian, but I am Norwegian-Somalian.”

Through the IP, what the facilitators provided students with, in terms of arguments, ways of thinking and values, might then have contributed to several students negotiating a bicultural identity, as exemplified by T3:

“I tried to show them the elements they have which could come from the Norwegian part [of their identity], even though they try to distance themselves from that.”

3.4 Theme 4: challenging concepts

The fourth theme involves aspects of the IP that the participants have experienced as demanding and hence might threaten user acceptability. This theme includes two subthemes which refer to challenges the students and facilitators experienced with the language, that is the conceptual universe of the IP. One subtheme is related to the conceptual difficulty and hence the need to adjust the language while the other more specifically refers to the challenge of the use of ‘race’ as a concept.

3.4.1 Subtheme 1: difficult concepts—adjusting the language

Both students and facilitators mentioned that several concepts such as ethnic-cultural identity, stereotypes, prejudice, inherent to the goals of the IP, might be challenging. DC1 emphasized the importance of ensuring that the students acquired a common understanding of these terms,

arguing that “without these concepts, you do not have the Identity Project.” She reported, similarly to the other facilitators, that there was perhaps too little time to achieve that, given the low levels of Norwegian language competence among many students with short length of stay in Norway. Similarly, DC4 reported, considering the academic level of their students:

“I think they [the students] might not be at a [language competence] level where all this makes sense to them... I was afraid that this could lead to misunderstandings, to be honest.”

Because the facilitators spent much time on explaining concepts they perceived as difficult for the students, the facilitators expressed concerns that the content of the Norwegian version of the IP was too abundant relative to the two school classes assigned to each module of the curriculum. The gap between the students’ language competence and the time needed to explain the new concepts in addition to the number of activities included was reported as a burden in relation to the time allocated to the intervention. Hence, most of them underscored the need to adjust the language to the level of students:

DC1: “We used time on the definitions, sort of rephrasing...and repeating, often repeating sentences by changing the words and repeating the message.”

3.4.2 Subtheme 2: racism without race

Several facilitators reported having difficulty covering the topic of race the way it was intended in the manual of the Norwegian version of the IP. Even after the completion of the project, DC4 reported “finding the thing with race difficult.” Referring to a discomfort both the students and the facilitators experienced, she explained:

“Well, I don’t know, but ... I covered that part and [name of her teacher co-facilitator] thought there were students who were not able to keep up with the teaching and / or looked like they disliked the topic intensely...”

Not only might the topic of race be challenging to deal with in the Norwegian context as it is not common to use race as an identity category at all, but also, as DC4 pointed out, one would need more than “2 min to get into the historical events and other stuff.” DC4 continued:

“We didn’t have time to... we mentioned it in passing, which then might create confusion...discomfort in the class or a kind of insecurity... I think the solution perhaps is to rather talk about racism, as simple as that...because they can relate to and understand it without going into the concept of race. Racism is something they all have heard about...race is not a word they use or relate to.”

The way race was used in the manual of the Norwegian IP might refer to a challenge, in terms of cultural and historical differences. T3 underscored that they would need “more time so that they do this in a [proper] manner...with time for discussion and reflection.” DC1 pointed out:

“...I am very used to talking about discrimination and racism, race as a concept...the historical meaning of the word in Norway

compared to abroad...the handling of the concept in the manual did not quite make sense to me or to the students...we need to focus on both racism and discrimination...have a room for that in the [Identity] Project, but it needs to be clarified why we have dissociated ourselves from race as a concept...how it has been used to force people into categories they do not feel they belong to.”

4 Discussion

Successful implementation of school-based interventions depend on a series of activities and processes, such as user acceptability, the deliverers’ fidelity to the intervention, training of deliverers, and school leaders’ support in providing the necessary resources for the realization of the intervention (Durlak and DuPre, 2008; Forman et al., 2009; Han and Weiss, 2005). In the present study, we explored experienced acceptability of the culturally adapted Norwegian version of the IP by analyzing interview data from the facilitators with varied ethnic backgrounds who delivered the intervention and from upper secondary school students with an ethnic minority background who had received it.

Our analysis led us to generate four major themes based on the information of both the facilitators and students. Three themes concerned agreeable and satisfactory aspects of the intervention associated with the positive changes that resulted from the intervention on the classroom, interpersonal, and individual levels. These themes, *more culturally inclusive classrooms, expanding one’s perspectives, coming to terms with ethnic-cultural identity*, reflect high levels of acceptability. These positive aspects were related to interpersonal relationships, classroom environment, feelings of excitement because the IP curriculum was different from other subjects, to learning new concepts to put into words their minoritized experiences, and exploring who they are and have been, as well as their family background. Findings from three focus group interviews conducted with students at the participating schools prior to the implementation of the IP showed that issues of ethnicity, culture and identity were either avoided in the teaching, or they were treated very superficially. They pointed out that they wanted to learn about these topics, to better understand each other (Türken et al., 2024). The teachers confirmed that they lacked both the competence and the tools to teach about these themes (Oppedal et al., 2022). Our findings demonstrate that students and teachers alike experienced the IP as both effective and appropriate for these problems, which is an important criterion for acceptability. Besides, the three positive themes suggest that the intervention had been effective in promoting positive interethnic relationships and stimulating the students’ ethnic-cultural identity exploration, in accordance with the main aim of the IP (Umaña-Taylor and Douglass, 2017). However, an evaluation study with adequate design is needed to verify such effects of the IP in Norwegian multicultural school context. The fourth theme, *challenging concepts*, involved aspects of the IP that the users perceived as demanding, and thus may reduce intervention acceptability, and were primarily related to wordiness, language difficulties, and the construct of race.

Whereas the students shared their own thoughts and feelings about the IP, both teachers and diversity counselors tended to focus

more on their observations of the students' reactions rather than sharing their own personal experiences during the interview. This was true even when we asked specifically about the facilitators' own experiences. Seeing positive outcomes of the IP such as more inclusive interpersonal relations among the students, as well as their students' motivation and engagement with the intervention contributed to the facilitators assessing the IP as agreeable, effective, and appropriate to handle topics of ethnicity and culture in their work with the youngsters. This aligns with the acceptability literature of school-based interventions, which highlight that teachers' perception of the discomfort the intervention may cause among students plays a crucial role in determining their willingness to implement it (Harrison et al., 2016; Sekhon et al., 2017).

Previous results from the culturally adapted versions of the IP in European context, show the curriculum's efficacy in promoting students ethnic-cultural identity development (Abdullahi et al., 2024; Ceccon et al., 2024; Hölscher et al., 2024; Sandberg et al., 2024; Schachner et al., 2024), and that pre- and in-service teachers gain confidence and competence in implementing culturally responsive approaches after delivering the IP (Pevac-Zimmer et al., 2024; Türken et al., 2024; Ulbricht et al., 2024). Hence, the present acceptability study adds to this growing evidence base supporting the implementation of the IP to promote multicultural education strategies in European educational institutions to ensure positive psychological and academic outcomes among the students.

4.1 More culturally inclusive classrooms

Taken as a whole, both deliverers and receivers of the IP were very enthusiastic about the intervention. While it is often believed that treating issues of ethnicity and culture in school is sensitive and may increase racism and discrimination (Juang et al., 2022; Rivas-Drake and Umana-Taylor, 2019), the students enjoyed working with these topics and learning from each other. The IP, instead of alienating the students from one another, was a means to develop closer and more respectful relationships with classmates, and a more inclusive classroom environment. Both working together in groups, and sharing one's experiences with the whole class, seemed to promote positive intergroup relations which was salient to the IP acceptability among them.

The most important aspect of user acceptability of the IP seems to be that it provides the students with safe spaces and opportunities to learn about each other's ethnic-cultural background, and the school staff with educational material to guide these processes. Similar responses to treating issues of ethnicity and culture have been observed in communication with students both in the United States (Umaña-Taylor, 2023), and in Germany (Juang et al., 2020). Based on how important peers are during the developmental period of adolescence, the IP provides many opportunities to share new learning about their ethnic-cultural backgrounds with their classmates (Umaña-Taylor and Douglass, 2017), and the cross-cultural similarities in students' responses shows that this is an important pedagogical asset of the intervention.

Ethnicity and culture apply to everybody, but Norwegian teachers often perceive these aspects of the students' reality as sensitive, and hence tend to be reluctant to address them (Herzog-Punzenberger

et al., 2020). Moreover, teachers lack tools and strategies to address this aspect of the students' reality in safe and positive ways (Midtbøen et al., 2014). Thus, an important aspect of the teachers' approval of the IP is that the intervention provides them with a perceived competence to engage with ethnicity and culture with their students and offers them a strategy to enhance the cultural diversity climate in their classrooms (Türken et al., 2024).

4.2 Expanding one's perspectives

Another aspect of user acceptability was the positive changes in the students' motivation and learning as the intervention progressed over the 8 weeks of its duration. The students highlighted that both the topics included in the IP curriculum as well as the pedagogical variation in the way they worked with these topics triggered their motivation to engage with the intervention. They felt that the curriculum dealt with themselves, their own experiences, and that they learnt things that were personally important to them. This point was also raised by the teachers in a U. S.-study of the IP (Umaña-Taylor, 2023). Interestingly, the students also highlighted the didactic building stones of the IP as an important aspect of their approval of the intervention. They found the variability in the ways they addressed topics of ethnicity and culture, individually, in pairs, in larger groups, and sharing one's thoughts and ideas with the whole classroom, in addition to the diversity of the content of the curriculum, engaging.

Among the students, attaining a language they need to talk about and discuss their minoritizing experiences was also a satisfying aspect of the IP. They appeared almost perplexed to learn about the existence of words that can describe such encounters. School staff may avoid addressing topics related to ethnicity and culture because of a preferred color-evasive approach to teaching that dismisses the importance of these issues (Rosenthal and Levy, 2010), because of a lack of perceived competence (Midtbøen et al., 2014) or because they believe the topics are too complex for their students to comprehend. A result of such perspectives may be that many youth do not acquire the necessary concepts to describe their own experiences in precise and meaningful ways, which is important for positive ethnic-cultural identity development (Rivas-Drake and Umana-Taylor, 2019). As discussed also by Galloway et al. (2019), replacing color-evasive language with a language that makes available diversity concepts can potentially help educators increase critical consciousness among especially minoritized students who will be better equipped with the language to critically understand their experiences and identities within broader systems oppression. The fact that language learning is an important aspect of user acceptability is therefore an asset of the intervention.

4.3 Coming to terms with ethnic-cultural identity

The third major aspect of user acceptability was that that the IP provided an arena for the students to learn more about their background and come to terms with their belongingness to their heritage and to the Norwegian cultures. The main idea underlying the

development of the IP was to strengthen young people's ability to actively explore their ethnic-racial identity by providing them with tools and safe spaces where this can be done (Umaña-Taylor and Douglass, 2017). Our analysis shows that the students did engage in ethnic-cultural identity developmental processes during the intervention and that they felt this process very satisfying. Many students demonstrated that they in one way or the other even continued exploring their ethnic-cultural backgrounds beyond the activities of the intervention, to gain deeper insights into who they are. The finding that the students are enthusiastic about engaging in ethnic-cultural identity developmental processes underscores the need for interventions like the IP for Norwegian multicultural schools to respond to the objectives of the core curriculum for primary and secondary education to provide an inclusive school community in which the diverse identities of students can be maintained and developed (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2017).

Flight and other migration processes are associated with losses of close relationships and disruption in social networks. It appears that the dispersion of family members around the globe and the long distances between Norway and their residence countries are barriers for many ethnic minority youths to get to know family members they under other circumstances would have had closer contact with. Through the IP they are given an appreciated chance to gain a better understanding of their family background.

The IP's theory of change posits that when individuals gain a greater clarity about the personal meaning of their identity as a result of exploration processes, the result can be a stronger sense of identity cohesion and less role confusion (Umaña-Taylor and Douglass, 2017). Several students in the sample communicated that during the IP they reached new resolutions about their ethnic-cultural belongingness, in terms of coming to terms not only with their heritage culture background but also with their position in Norwegian society. Their responses highlighted some of the barriers ethnic minority youth are exposed to that may prevent them from feeling part of the Norwegian population. One informant appeared to have internalized many ethnic Norwegians' attitudes that to be Norwegian you must have a light skin color (Gullestad, 2004). She had never even considered belonging to Norwegian society, even if she was born in the country. A salient aspect of user acceptability of the Norwegian version of the IP is that it provides minority students with possibilities to consider their "Norwegianness," when considering traditions, rituals, and symbols that are important to them, and which people in their lives that have a part in who they are.

4.4 Challenging concepts

The last theme involved demanding factors that may represent significant barriers to the successful implementation of the IP. This theme mainly included inputs from the facilitators and concerned the complexity of many of the concepts involved in the intervention, and discomfort associated with the way the concept of race was treated in the manual.

Most of the students of the classrooms that conducted the IP and took part in the feasibility study, had an ethnic minority background. Of these 43% were foreign-born from mainly African and Middle Eastern countries. They were on average 11.2 years upon arrival in

Norway, but 44% were 13 years or more (Oppedal et al., 2022). Consequently, a considerable proportion of the students had relatively short length of stay in the country, and presumably their Norwegian language competence was still not fully proficient. This may be one of the reasons that the facilitators raised concerns about the complexity of the language. It is demanding to accommodate the manual to the variety in the level of academic and language competence typically represented in secondary multi-cultural school classrooms, but nevertheless very important. Based on the feedback from the facilitators, we made revisions in the Norwegian IP manual that is currently employed in an effectiveness study. Difficult concepts, such as stereotypes and prejudice are explained more thoroughly. The activities concerning race as an identity concept were substituted with a stronger focus on the history of racism and discrimination against indigenous and national minorities as part of the Norwegianization policies in the 19th and 20th centuries. Such revisions are in accordance with the idea of a feasibility study, that they can be used to refine the intervention in question (Pearson et al., 2020).

4.5 Limitations

The feasibility study utilized a self-selection sampling method, where diversity counselors and teachers volunteered to take part. This implies that they embraced cultural pluralism as pedagogical approach to the cultural diversity of their classrooms (Schachner et al., 2016), even if they lacked the tools and competence to implement this (Türken et al., 2024). They were open to teaching about ethnicity and culture in their classrooms, and they perceived that the IP curriculum could be helpful to this end. In other words, their *anticipated* acceptability (Eckert et al., 2006; Stok et al., 2016) of the curriculum was high. Moreover, their motivation to implement the curriculum, i.e., the *concurrent* acceptability (Russell et al., 2023; Tilley and Montreuil, 2023), became even stronger during the 3 days of training. It is likely that these positive attitudes influenced their experiences with the curriculum, and the high level of acceptability they expressed. It remains uncertain whether teachers who strongly endorse color-evasive pedagogical practices (Schachner et al., 2016), and deliberately avoid addressing the variation in their students' backgrounds in their teaching would agree to implement the curriculum, or find it agreeable. A goal for future studies should be to assess the anticipated, concurrent, and experienced acceptability of the IP among teachers who embrace a variety of cultural diversity pedagogical approaches.

The 16 students that were interviewed represented 17% of the 75 students participating in the feasibility study across six intervention classrooms, and they all had an ethnic minority background. Consequently, it is not possible to conclude that their experiences are representative of all students who took part in the IP.

5 Conclusion

The findings from the present study demonstrate that the acceptability of the IP is high among school staff deliverers as well as ethnic minority student receivers, when also giving directions to revisions necessary to reduce the burdens and discomfort perceived by the users.

The IP curriculum is valued and appraised because the users experienced its contribution to promote intercultural relationships and more inclusive classroom environments. The main aspect of the IP making it acceptable to the users, is that the curriculum provides them with a safe space, and much needed strategies and tools to engage in discussions about their ethnicity and culture in the classroom. The results show that adolescents want interventions like the IP that focus on developmental competencies and ensure addressing ethnicity and culture in safe, non-stigmatizing, and developmentally appropriate ways. Students in multicultural schools need an arena to discuss these topics openly, in relation to their personal experiences, and to learn from each other.

Given that its effectiveness can be documented in future studies, as in other European countries, the Norwegian version of the IP should be promoted to educational institutions as a curriculum that can be integrated in their strategy to enhance approaches to multicultural teaching.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the participants have not consented to data being shared, and the participants may be identified through reading of their individual interviews. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to brit.oppedal@fhi.no.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Data Protection Officer of the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (30.09.2021) based on a privacy impact assessment in accordance with the General data protection regulation (GDPR). Participation was conditioned on written consent from youth and school staff. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation was not required from the participants' legal guardians/next of kin because all the participating students were 16 years or more, and hence allowed to provide their own written consent. All the participating teachers and diversity counsellors also provided written consent.

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