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Language as a medium for inclusion and exclusion: Supporting multilingualism in a Swedish minority language ECEC setting in Finland

Jan-Erik Mansikka[a], Monica Londén[b], Gunilla Holm[c], Maria Saloranta[d] & Alexandra Nordström[e]

[a] University of Helsinki, corresponding author, e-mail: jan-erik.mansikka@helsinki.fi, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6776-3860
[b] University of Helsinki, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0119-0294
[c] University of Helsinki, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9706-8906
[d] University of Helsinki, https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6512-106X
[e] University of Helsinki, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0606-979X

ABSTRACT: Language awareness and multilingualism in early childhood education has received much attention in recent years. The aim of this article is to shed light on challenges and tensions in supporting multilingualism in a minority language ECEC setting in Finland. Of special interest are situations where children not yet proficient in Swedish or Finnish are included or at risk of being excluded. The study was conducted in Southern Finland where many children attending Swedish ECEC come from bilingual Finnish-Swedish homes. The qualitative data consists of interviews with 74 teachers and staff working in 18 Swedish ECEC. Also, participant observations of children aged 3–5 interacting with peers were conducted. The results show that children are aware of language differences and use language as a means for inclusion and exclusion of peers during play. The high degree of freedom in children's free play, without the participation of adults, makes it difficult for staff to create a common praxis or linguistic strategies. Furthermore, the results indicate that ECEC staff need more guidelines on how to actively support the children's development of Swedish while supporting children's bilingualism or multilingualism.

Keywords: *language, inclusion, ECEC, children's play*

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Introduction

Supporting multilingual development in early childhood education has received much attention in the last decades (e.g., Zheng et al., 2021). Children's language development is dependent on the interaction between adults and children (Zimmerman et al., 2009) and it is well known that early childhood education and care (ECEC) can have positive impacts on children's language development (Cabell et al., 2015). The communicative patterns between the educator and the child in ECEC settings are thus significant and impact not only the child's linguistic competence but also the socioemotional development and understanding of social interaction (Lengyel, 2012).

Emphasising the social aspects of learning helps us to view children's multilingual learning opportunities in ECEC in a framework of social justice, which, in Kultti's (2022) words, means *"working toward a situation where a child is not disadvantaged in learning opportunities and support due to her/his language experience"* (p. 3037). It is documented that language skills and teacher-child interactions are critical for learning (e.g., Langeloo et al., 2019; Langeloo et al., 2020; Vygotsky, 1986). But there is limited research on the role of language when building friendships among children (Lee et al., 2021), however, in multilingual settings bi- or multilingual children may have more possibilities to interact and find friends compared to children who are monolingual (McLeod et al., 2015). This is also the context of our study as many children in the participating ECEC centres are bi- or multilingual.

The aim of this article is to highlight some of the challenges, from a perspective of social justice, in supporting multilingualism in a minority language (i.e., Swedish) ECEC setting in Finland. Finland is a bilingual country with Finnish and Swedish as the two national languages. Despite the official bilingualism in Finland, the Finnish language is strongly rooted in the linguistic landscape. Of the population, 86.5% speak Finnish as their first language, 5.2% are native speakers of Swedish, 8.3% are native in a foreign language and less than 0.5% are native Sámi-speakers (Official Statistics Finland [OSF], 2022). Swedish holds a recognized legal status; hence there are parallel educational paths from ECEC to higher education in both Finnish and Swedish (From & Sahlström, 2017). Children thus have the right to attend ECEC in their mother tongue Finnish or Swedish (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018). At the same time, there are requirements from national policy documents to support bilingualism and multilingualism in young children (Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2022; Statsrådet, 2022). From the perspective of Swedish-speaking ECEC, this means that the ECEC staff needs to both strengthen children's Swedish language, while at the same time confirming Finnish or other languages, since integrating a child's home language(s) enhances learning and the child's language development (cf. Sierens & Van Avermaet, 2014).

In this article we examine how children in Swedish-speaking ECEC centres use their linguistic competence to include and exclude other children and use language as a tool for accessibility to participation, play and friendship. We also explore how aware the staff is of their own views on language as a tool for children to include or exclude other children and their own practices for supporting children's linguistic competencies in a multilingual ECEC setting.

The article has the following structure. First, we look at the curricular requirements for all children, irrespective of linguistic background, to participate in the daily activities of ECEC in Finland. Then, we discuss the theoretical framework and empirical research perspectives on multilingualism in ECEC. Thereafter, we describe the sample, data collection and analysis, before presenting our results. We finish with a concluding discussion.

Curricular framework for an inclusive multilingual operational culture[1]

The Finnish curricular framework of ECEC has gone through extensive reforms in the last decade. ECEC moved from the social sector to be part of the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2013. A new Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) came into force in 2015, with a revision in 2018. The Act was also the basis for a new curriculum, implemented in 2016, and revised both in 2018 and 2022 (EDUFI, 2022). The new curriculum emphasises the concept of education in a way that is compatible with educational discourses at other levels. Also, the language in the new curriculum is permeated by a strong sociocultural framework: children learn everywhere and all the time. A desirable learning environment within ECEC is one in which children's participation comes to the fore: both in developing learning activities and social interaction in day-to-day activities (cf. Mansikka & Lundkvist, 2019).

The most important policy document concerning children's right to participation is the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) from 1989, especially art. 12, which is explicitly present in many ways in the recent Finnish ECEC curriculum (cf. Mansikka &

[1] The concept of operational culture is, on a global scale, perhaps not always associated with an ECEC context. However, in Finland, it is much used in the English translations of central policy documents of ECEC. In the latest ECEC curriculum, operational culture appears 43 times, and one of the main chapters (Chapter 3) has the title: The operational culture of early childhood and care (EDUFI, 2022, p.26-34). Operational culture is defined as "historically and culturally evolving way of doing things", and where "all members of the community influence the operational culture, while the operational culture affects all within its sphere, whether its significance and impacts are recognised or not" (p.26).

Lundkvist, 2022). UNCRC, ratified by Finland in 1991, is a document with a deep respect for the unique lifeworld of every child, but which also considers childhood from a perspective of children's active agency. At the same time, it is important not to conceive of children's participation solely in the light of self-determination and individual choice. Instead, the relational aspect of being in the world is fundamental, well described by Bae (2010, p. 207) in that *"young children are sensitive towards their interpersonal surroundings, and that the quality of interactional processes will create premises for their participation"*.

A consequence of looking at children's participation as rooted in the quality of interaction is that emphasis is on the inclusive operational culture as a whole, and that all children feel they belong to a community of practice in their ECEC setting. From that perspective, the relational aspect is a fundamental right, or in the words of the curriculum, that *"[e]ach child has the right to experience togetherness and belong to a group"* (EDUFI, 2022, p. 18). This means that the staff must be attentive to any kind of exclusion, and according to the curriculum *"promote the right of children to a good and safe childhood"* (EDUFI, 2022, p. 20) which includes that they *"shall ensure that each child gets an opportunity for participation and involvement"* where children can *"develop their self-image, enhance their confidence and shape social skills needed in a community"* (EDUFI, 2022, p. 24).

The emphasis on children's right to participation also echoes the curricular discussion about language and multilingualism in ECEC. Language is present throughout the 2022 ECEC core curriculum, both concerning the development of language skills as well as children's linguistic identity. In the section *"Special perspectives on language and culture"*, it is noted that *"[c]hildren are encouraged to interact in bilingual and multilingual environments"* (EDUFI, 2022, p. 48). Finnish-Swedish bilingualism is described as a distinct phenomenon that should be taken into consideration.

> *In ECEC, there are children who speak both Finnish and Swedish as their mother tongue. It is important for the development of these children's language skills and identities that both languages are supported, and the children are encouraged to use them* (EDUFI, 2022, p. 49)

At a general level, the ECEC curriculum expresses a multilingual turn, a stance that permeates all levels of education in Finland (see Zilliacus et al., 2017). The most central concept, with respect to multilingualism, in the curriculum, is *language awareness* – referring to a certain attitude guiding the operational culture.

> *Early childhood education and care with language awareness acknowledges that languages are present constantly and everywhere. The staff understand the key importance of language for children's development and learning, interaction and cooperation and for the building of identities and belonging to the society. Making multilingualism visible supports children's development in a culturally diverse world* (EDUFI, 2022, p. 29–30)

It is quite clear from the context that linguistic diversity is considered as a resource for learning. The curriculum seems to underline that multilingual environments are something that benefits all children (cf. Romøren et al., 2023). At the same time, language awareness is also seen as a quality/property for children to develop:

> *Observing different languages in the immediate surroundings support (sic) the children's developing* ***language awareness.*** *The staff have the task of attracting and encouraging the children's interest in spoken and written language* (EDUFI, 2022, p. 41, bold in original)

We can see that the concept of language awareness refers both to a positive approach to linguistic diversity as well as supporting children's active linguistic agency. These expressions can be seen in the light of a broader picture, where the Finnish ECEC curriculum represents an arena for formulations of a language policy, with emphasis on viewing children's linguistic repertoires as a resource, as something dynamic and flexible and to be promoted in concrete situations (cf. Garcia, 2009; Giæver & Tkachenko, 2020). It is very much in line with conceiving ECEC through the lens of a growing diversity with implications for education, in which *"linguistically and culturally aware ECEC, languages, cultures and worldviews"* are supposed to be *"integrated in all activity"* (EDUFI, 2022, p. 48). Language awareness is part of the broader diversity work to be done in ECEC centres. Therefore,

> *[i]n order to develop the operational culture, it is important that attitudes towards equity and equality are discussed in the working community. The way in which attitudes related to such aspects as language, ethnicity, worldview, disability, gender and its diversity manifest themselves in people's talk, gestures, actions and operating methods should also be considered* (EDUFI, 2022, p. 32)

Of course, such expressions from the curriculum say little about the guiding role it has at a practical level. As Bergroth and Hansell (2020a, p. 85) have pointed out, the concept of language awareness in Finland can be seen as *"a collection of closely related concepts"* that is very much *"dependent on the policy context and the situation it is used"*. It is a concept that first and foremost, is an expression of a particular language ideology, with an emphasis on viewing linguistic diversity as something valuable, as a resource (cf. Ruiz, 1984). However, it has been indicated that despite an overall positive approach and encouragement to promote bi- or multilingualism in the Nordic countries, an implicit monolingual norm can still be found in policy documents, even in bilingual Finland – where societal bilingualism is built upon a parallel monolingualism (see Alstad & Sopanen, 2021).

Theoretical framework

In this section we will discuss *participation* and *language* in relation to inclusion and exclusion in ECEC. We take our point of departure in a sociocultural framework, through which human agency must be understood in relation to the surrounding society, with its institutions, norms, regulations and cultural habits (Säljö, 2014). The practice of a Finnish ECEC teacher, with a professional relationship to the child group, becomes intelligible only in relation to the traditions and guiding principles of ECEC in Finland and the surrounding linguistic landscape. We have seen that the curricular framework is an important part of ECEC professionalism, to be followed and implemented by the professionals in the operational culture.

Participation can be considered one of the cornerstones in enhancing an individual's well-being and learning and is therefore also a cornerstone in ECEC (EDUFI, 2022; Ree & Emilson, 2019). ECEC educators and children can create a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Ree & Emilson, 2019) in which children's participation can be either peripheral or central. Children's possibilities of participating in the ECEC setting is dependent on the approach of the educators, how they communicate and exercise power (Pursi, 2019).

Children's communications and negotiations about participation as well as rules and roles in play are ongoing; children continuously create and change positions regarding who is included or excluded (Boldermo, 2020; Howe & Leach, 2018; Skoglund, 2020). Consequently, children's interactions can be both controlling and excluding (Cobb-Moore et al., 2009; Lundström et al., 2022). Children are usually aware of the significance of certain social resources to be included in social interaction. As Skånfors (2013) has pointed out, the social life of children in ECEC often has an uncertain dimension connected to these resources: being included at one moment, does not prevent you from becoming excluded at another moment.

A study conducted by Fanger et al. (2012) shows that an act of exclusion takes place every 6.6 minutes in outdoor play. Research also shows that young children often both limit and control entry from non-participant peers in their play (Cederborg, 2020; Cromdal, 2001). Previous studies have identified several strategies children use to receive access to play, in fact, a multitude of strategies is often used since attempting to enter ongoing play is challenging for a child (Corsaro, 1979; Donner et al., 2022). Three forms of social exclusion have been identified in free play among young children. These are direct exclusion such as verbal rejection or negative facial expressions, indirect exclusion such as ignoring behaviour, or spreading rumours and planned exclusion when children plan an activity that they are aware some children for a range of reasons cannot participate in (Rosell, 2022). According to Repo's (2015) study in Finland, exclusion from peer relations

is the most common form of bullying among children in ECEC, with a significantly higher proportion of victims being children with special educational needs.

Children's peer groups can be a powerful socialising agent and an arena for children's learning and socialisation (Pursi, 2019), where also language can play a central role. Children skilfully and actively create, share, and participate in their own peer cultures while integrating information, such as rules, from the adult world. However, children can also become frustrated with rules set by adults and create their own agreements or set of behaviours only accessible to children (Corsaro, 2000). From this perspective, children themselves participate in forming the language policies, which imply more context-sensitive approaches to language policies, approaches that *"direct our gaze to the diversity of language socialisation practices that develop in social interactions between caregivers and children, and between the children in the peer group"* (Cekaite & Evaldsson, 2017, p. 453). This is very much in line with seeing language as a social phenomenon connected to the surrounding social practices, rather than on an individual level (Alstad & Mourão, 2021).

From this perspective, language can be used as an instrument for exercising power. However, there has been limited research on the development and dimensions of friendship in children who do not share the same first language. Nevertheless, a study by McLeod et al. (2015) shows how children intentionally use language to include or exclude peers from play. In their study code-switching among bilingual children was used in an educational setting to exclude children not yet fluent in the language of play. The playground was the most significant place *"where becoming bilingual most strongly impacted initiation and negotiation of friendships"* (McLeod et al., 2015, p. 391). Children value playground friendships, being active and doing things together, and these are important factors for social inclusion (Hoyte et al. 2014; Rönnlund 2015). Playground interactions are crucial for children, but educators and other adults often tend to focus more on the child's academic development (McLeod et al., 2015).

We can see that linguistic practice is an important social resource that can have both inclusive and exclusive effects, not only as a medium for communication, but also for children's learning. It is common for practitioners in ECEC to be unsure about language awareness and how best to support multilingual children and their families (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020b; Peleman et al., 2022). However, there are alternative strategies that the operational culture can be based on. Practitioners receiving training on multilingual pedagogies use a variety of strategies and translanguaging to meet the linguistic needs of children in a multilingual ECEC context (Kirsch, 2021). According to a study by Kultti (2022), an additive stance on bi- or multilingualism, by separating languages in an educational context, tends, to limit the agency of some children. Thus, an important aspect

of being teacher-responsive to linguistic diversity is making children aware of the variation of understanding that the use of different languages brings along.

In Finnish ECEC, teacher-responsiveness to linguistic diversity is usually discussed within the framework of language awareness. According to a study by Bergroth and Hansell (2020a), teachers in Swedish-speaking ECEC, who took part in a pre-service training, related to multilingualism and working methods guided by language awareness in several ways. The results indicated that although bilingualism is considered to be an advantage for the child, the ECEC practitioners raised concerns about language development and overall learning. At the same time, linguistic diversity in the ECEC centres usually corresponded with more language-oriented working methods. Importantly, the findings also pointed out the significance of the entire staff participating in training to deepen their knowledge of language learning in children in a bilingual or multilingual environment and consequently creating a community working together with language awareness strategies (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020a).

Such a shared community is constructed through actions and communication (Emilson, 2008); thus, language is important for the child's feeling of belonging (Erwin et al., 2022) and participation (Corsaro, 2000; Ree & Emilson, 2019). Moreover, the educators are crucial in both acknowledging and supporting all children's linguistic competencies. Educators can provide different kinds of opportunities for children to be central actors in the community of practice. How educators are involved in the everyday activities of the children, will affect both the power relations in the community of practice and the group dynamics being either more inclusive or exclusive (see Öhman, 2019).

The context

ECEC is the foundation of the education system in Finland, and every child has the right to receive early childhood education and a personal ECEC plan (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018). In Finland, children's participation in ECEC services has traditionally been lower compared to the Nordic neighbours, but the gap is diminishing. In 2020 about 90% of three-year-olds in Finland were enrolled in ECEC institutions, whereas in other Nordic countries, the proportion was 95–98% (Eurostat Statistics, 2023). Today, three professional groups are qualified to work in the Finnish ECEC centres: teachers, social pedagogues, and child carers (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018, §§26–28). The normal staff set up for a child group in an ECEC centre is one of each, or two teachers with one child carer. Lack of qualified staff, especially in the bigger cities, is widespread, implying that substitutes are common.

Finnish ECEC follows a social pedagogic tradition, characteristic of the Nordic countries, with a strong emphasis on children's agency. This implies that teachers have the freedom to adapt the activities to local settings and circumstances, without having to follow standardised objectives (see Kangas et al., 2019). Pedagogical activities that combine child-led free play, and adult-led activities are a distinctive feature of Finnish ECEC, whether they are conducted indoors or outdoors. Furthermore, a child-centred pedagogy, which places a focus on children's initiative and agency in and for pedagogical activities and ensuing learning opportunities, has a long history in Finnish early childhood education (Kumpulainen, 2018; Nordström et al., 2022).

Our context is Swedish-speaking ECEC in Southern Finland, where many children attending the centres come from bilingual (Swedish and Finnish) or Finnish-speaking homes. The strong presence of Finnish can pose challenges for the staff in their activities in Swedish, such as reading and organised activities since bilingual or Finnish-speaking children often need extra support in understanding and consequently in learning Swedish. Since the environment in many areas is predominantly Finnish, ECEC in Swedish has an important role in strengthening the language proficiency of Swedish-speaking children. Not all children from Finnish-speaking and Finnish-Swedish bilingual homes are exposed to Swedish in their everyday lives outside ECEC (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020a). Thus, these children may need language support before starting school in Swedish, if the child's legal guardians choose a Swedish school. Furthermore, at a societal level, ECEC in Swedish plays a significant role in maintaining the Swedish language and Finland-Swedish culture.

Many parents or legal guardians acknowledge the value of being bilingual or multilingual and immersion ECEC settings are quite popular in some parts of Finland (Garvis et al., 2018). In addition, monolingual Finnish-speaking children can attend Swedish ECEC centres, as can monolingual Swedish-speaking children Finnish ECEC centres. In some areas the majority of children in Swedish ECEC are bilingual, and ECEC staff need to be able to support both children who are monolingually Swedish speaking and children who are emergent Swedish speakers. In some cases, the staff not only have to support the child's language development, but they must also teach Swedish as a new language to some children while simultaneously supporting the Swedish-speaking children's development of their mother tongue.

Methods

This article is based on a qualitative study of inclusion and exclusion in ECEC centres in Southern Finland. The 18 ECE centres represent municipalities along the southern coast which is a major region for Swedish speakers. The centres have children from a variety of

social class backgrounds. Some centres have mostly Swedish-speaking children while in others most of the children are bilingual Swedish-Finnish. The empirical data includes participant observations of children and their interaction with peers and centre staff as well as interviews with staff from 18 Swedish-speaking ECEC centres. The observations were conducted by three researchers of children aged 4–5, but occasionally aged 3–5. The researchers spent one month observing and interviewing in each ECEC centre. A total of 74 staff members (11 directors, 28 teachers, 25 caregivers and 10 other staff) were interviewed and observed. Early childhood education is a very female dominated area, which was also the case in our study. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions and were conducted in the ECEC centres or via Zoom during the staff's working hours and then transcribed verbatim. The researchers had a set of questions as a guide for the interviews.[2]

The interviews varied in length from 26 to 108 minutes. The interviews were conducted predominantly in Swedish except for one interview with a custodian, which was conducted in Finnish and not recorded.[3] The researchers spent a total of 1161 hours over 238 days in the centres. The number of hours per centre varied from 34 to 96 due to the Covid pandemic. The ECEC centres are anonymised, and, in the results, they are given pseudonyms in the form of names of stars. In this article, 11/18 centres are cited: Alkes, Atlas, Chara, Lerna, Lyra, Polaris, Ran, Solaris, Taika, Ursa, and Vega. The quotes from the data presented in this article have been translated to English by the authors. For the quoted staff members pseudonyms have not been used here, but we refer to their position as teacher or childcare worker as well as the centre's name.

Throughout the study we have followed the ethical principles outlined by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2019). We obtained the consent of the ECEC directors and staff as well as of the children's guardians. Acknowledging the power differences between researchers and children as well as the ethical issues doing research with children, the researchers asked continuously for the children's assent before they discussed actions and incidents with the participating children. The researchers worked

[2] The interview questions for the overall study included themes such as interaction, diversity, racism, language, non-normative abilities, gender, and social class in relation to inclusion and exclusion among the children at the ECEC centres. Examples of interview questions relating to language, which is the focus of this article, are: (1) Have you observed if children are included or excluded based on the language(s) they speak or on their ethnic background? (2) How do you decide whether children should have the right to their own play or whether they should include another child? (3) Have you observed or asked how children reason when excluding another child? For example, have you observed if language plays a role or how a child who does not share a common language with other children is encountered?

[3] In this particular case, notes were taken during and at the end of this interview. The interviewer read aloud the notes and the interviewee approved them.

purposefully on establishing and maintaining a trusting and collaborative relationship with the staff. The staff helped the researchers with collecting parents' consent forms. Other ethical issues were also continuously taken into account. We carefully considered the impact the researchers might have on the everyday activities in the centres. The researchers avoided interfering in the staff's work and daily routines. The interviews were always conducted when the staff had time to participate. How many staff members were interviewed in a centre depended entirely on their interest in participating. Hence, the researchers took care not to impose their research on the staff, but instead adjusted to the needs and activities of the staff. The researchers did not intervene in children's play and activities but interacted with the children when they wanted to talk, and asked the children about their play when it did not interrupt their play.

Both the fieldnotes of the observations and the transcribed interviews were coded in Atlas.ti according to the major categories inclusion and exclusion based on language, gender, ethnicity/racialization and social class, as a part of a larger research project. In this article, we have focused on the major categories inclusion and exclusion based on language. Any action, non-verbal gesture, or word used by a child or a staff member to allow or encourage another child to participate was categorized as inclusion. Likewise, any action, non-verbal gesture, or word used by a child or a staff member to prevent or discourage another child from participating was categorized as exclusion.

The excerpts in these categories were read numerous times by three researchers searching for patterns, commonalities and differences. A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) was structured around the patterns and themes emerging based on situations, practices and activities in the centres related to inclusion and exclusion based on language as perceived and interpreted by staff in the interviews. The themes that emerged in our reading were: Challenges for inclusive practices, Children at risk of exclusion, and Staff's language awareness. In addition, special attention was paid to inclusion and exclusion of Swedish, Finnish, bilingual Swedish-Finnish and foreign language speakers within these three themes. In presenting the results based on these three major themes we focus on the linguistic complexity in the operational culture (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020b), including challenges and tensions, when working in a minority language Swedish ECEC setting in Finland, where the majority language Finnish has a strong presence plus an increasing bilingual Swedish-Finnish and multilingual group of children. Our results are mostly based upon the interviews with staff in the ECEC centres that were a part of our study but are occasionally supplemented with examples from observations.

Results

We present our results through three themes with an aim to highlight some of the challenges in supporting multilingualism in a minority language ECEC setting in Finland. The themes helped us to structure and present the empirical findings in a narrative form. When speaking about inclusive practice and exclusion, we examined both interaction between children as well as interaction between adults and children.

Challenges for inclusive practices

The presence of a shared language was perceived by most ECEC practitioners as an important factor in who plays with whom and who is included or excluded in playing groups. The integration of a child in the social environment of ECEC is very much dependent on finding peers to communicate with, or as one childcare worker in the Taika centre put it in the interviews: "*If there is no common language, it is difficult to start a good play*". Both interviews and observations indicated that it is very common for children to divide themselves into Swedish-speaking and Finnish-speaking playing groups. Children have the freedom to navigate between groups, and therefore they also actively participate in recreating linguistic practices, at least when it comes to play (cf. Alstad & Mourão, 2021; Cekaite & Evaldsson, 2017). One teacher from the Vega centre said in the interview that "*especially those with strong Finnish … like to play together because they have a common play language*", while another interviewed teacher in the Ursa centre noted that it is the play language that decides who plays with whom and with whom children feel safe. In such a context, bilingual children with strong Swedish and Finnish (usually from bilingual families) have an advantage in that they can play with both Swedish- and Finnish-speaking children. They have linguistic resources to switch between languages depending on who they play with.

Despite parallel playing groups, there are negotiations between children about entering a playing group playing in another language. These groups can be linguistically more or less flexible. In one observed example from the Chara centre–a group of Finnish-speaking children switches to Swedish when a Swedish-speaking child approaches the group, but then switches back to Finnish when the Swedish child leaves and a Finnish child says something in Finnish. Another observed example from Chara is when a child asks the group questions in Finnish but switches to Swedish for one child, but then continues in Finnish for the rest again. A common observation was that in cases in which Finnish-speaking children were drawn to other Finnish-speaking children, Swedish-speaking children could join the play if they switched to Finnish. An example, from the observations in the Ursa centre, of a case of less flexibility due to the lack of language skills is a child who spoke English and some Swedish. Other children refused to let her into their group despite numerous attempts because they could not speak Swedish with her. A childcare

worker explicitly asked the child leading the playing group to let the mostly English-speaking child join them. The group ended up changing the play to a non-verbal running around game to include the English-speaking girl.

The ECEC staff seemed confident that children with little or no knowledge of Swedish would find peers or their own ways to make themselves understood. This was exemplified in an interview with a teacher in the Vega centre:

> *"We had a Finnish-speaking child last year who did not know any Swedish in the autumn, and who has now started to say some sentences and words in Swedish. It was obvious that the child sought out those who had a strong Finnish or bilingual children with a strong Finnish. The child did not approach those who spoke only Swedish, who couldn't play in Finnish."*.

In this manner, the child found a group that they could join and at the same time avoided trying to join a group in which they would most likely not have been included. In other words, they figured out how they could be included (cf. Skoglund, 2020). However, according to the interviewed educational resource person in the Ran centre. Noa, 5 years, who speaks English and only some Swedish, had said that he sometimes felt afraid of other children because he could not understand what they said. One day another child placed a block on Noa's head, and he started laughing, which made it possible for a couple of other children to join in, also placing blocks on him. The children had found their own way to include Noa in a common game. They were all laughing, and the teacher explained to the researcher after the situation that immediately when someone makes contact with him, he is ready to join and that it doesn't much matter who it is. Further, according to the educational resource person from Ran, "*he just wants to be seen*". The question that didn't come up in this context was what Noa really felt in the situation. Was laughing and being funny just a strategy to be included in the situation? Leaving children by themselves, without discussing with them about their experiences, might be risky.

Another example of the fragile relations between children without a common language was given in a staff interview. According to the interviewed teacher in the Ran centre, Henry, an English-speaking child was very close to a Swedish-speaking-only child Celine, but then Henry found two friends who could speak English, which meant that Celine who spoke only Swedish was left alone and "*had to find a new playmate"* even though the teacher did acknowledge that Celine probably was feeling sad about the situation. From both the interview and observations, it became apparent that this was not a happy outcome for Celine, and she felt left out.

In the interviews, the staff brought up several strategies they used in organised activities to ensure that all children were included and understood what was going on. These activities were in Swedish, or as one teacher from the Vega centre put it:

> "*We adults speak Swedish, and the led activities are in Swedish. The language will come, but not in a week, not in a month.*"

The most common inclusive strategies were to use pictures, gestures, and "simple" Swedish to keep the instructions at a level all children could understand. This is widely used in both intercultural, special education but also mainstream ECEC contexts in the Nordic countries, sometimes expressed as clarifying pedagogy (see Edfelt et al., 2019). To ensure that the children understand, the staff can translate the instructions into a language the children are more comfortable with. Of course, it depends on the staff's own language skills. The question of who benefits from the simplifications and who is at a disadvantage concerning language development also arises here, i.e., how is the language development of the (mainly) monolingual Swedish children supported?

From the interviews and observations, despite the inclusive practices in the organised activities, it becomes clear that children were often left to themselves in free play-with others. Small cliques and groups were created by children based on language, or linguistic competence. A problem is that without participation from adults, these groups can be very exclusionary. By themselves, children cannot create a culture in which all children are included. The responsibility lies with the staff to create an ECEC operational culture that pays attention to the risks of children being socially excluded because of the language they speak (cf. Lave & Wenger, 1991; Pursi, 2019).

Children at risk of exclusion

In the analysis of our data, we found that there were at least two vulnerable groups, that might be socially excluded because of language. Because the environment in which many of the ECEC centres are situated is bilingual, this is also strongly reflected in children's playing groups. One vulnerable group is formed by children who are outside the bilingual sphere, that is, children not speaking Swedish or Finnish. They might have a language that nobody else speaks in the group.

In the interviews, examples were given of how children who speak neither Swedish nor Finnish are at risk of being excluded from the other children's play. One teacher from the Ran centre explains that:

> *"... when Swedish or Finnish children notice that another child speaks a different language and does not understand Swedish or Finnish, they don't play together."*

This is closely related to another teacher in the Alkes centre pointing out that the Swedish and Finnish children "*know that they will have difficulties understanding a child who wants to join the playing group, and they do not allow the child into the play because they know it will difficult*". Similar experiences, confirming the difficulties, came from yet another group, in the Ursa centre, about which it was described that children usually are alone

because no one else knows their language. In that group there had been children speaking, for example, Hindi and Somali. According to the teacher in that group, it was only a temporary problem. At the beginning, the children do not know Swedish at all, so they come and learn as a teacher in Ursa said: "*It is difficult for them at the beginning. But luckily, they learn fast*". On the other hand, it was also noted that the situation for children who do not speak Finnish or Swedish might change in the future since some of the Swedish-speaking children use English when they play. According to interviewed childcare workers in Lerna and Vega, the children understand English quite well thanks to having played games and watched programmes in English on their tablets.

In the interviews only a few teachers explicitly articulate having strategies for facilitating the inclusion of children who do not speak Swedish or Finnish in play with Swedish- and Finnish-speaking children (cf. Bergroth & Hansell, 2020b; Peleman et al., 2022). Either these children must find their own ways to play with others or they end up alone. In the observations from the Chara and Vega centres, it was often noticed that the children who did not speak Swedish or Finnish were sitting by themselves drawing or engaging in some other solitary activity. The staff in the ECEC centres describe the problems faced by children who do not know Swedish or Finnish, but do not discuss how they could ease the way for these children in some way and prevent their exclusion from other children's playing groups (cf. Kirsch, 2021).

The other vulnerable group, somewhat surprisingly, consists of children who only speak the minority national language, having only Swedish as a linguistic resource. In some centres Swedish-speaking-only are a small minority. As a language, Finnish is so strong (both in number of speakers and status) that speaking only Finnish seldom has exclusionary consequences. As a childcare worker from the Ursa centre pointed out in the interview, the monolingual Swedish children might find it difficult to join playing groups with Finnish-speaking children. An example was given by another interviewed childcare worker in Solaris in which a Swedish-speaking-only child approached a group of three children who are bilingual but speak Finnish in the playing group. One child switched to Swedish to invite the Swedish speaking child into the play, but according to the childcare worker another child says, "*we won't take him with us in this game because he doesn't speak Finnish*". The same childcare worker summarised the situation with a statement that "*Finnish is the ruling language even in Swedish ECEC centres*". When the child sought help from the childcare worker, her solution was to split the kids into a Swedish and a Finnish group, which meant all children were included in a playing group. Even though this was a pragmatic solution it also strengthened the division between Swedish- and Finnish-speaking children.

Children can also use language proficiency to test or exclude others. An example came from an observation in the ECEC centre Atlas when a mostly Swedish speaking boy is

trying to approach a bilingual Swedish-Finnish girl by waving a toy at her. She responds in a superior way by asking in Finnish, "*can you talk like this?*", indicating that he can join if he can speak Finnish. He mimics the superior tone and answers also in Finnish, but in a stiffer language, "*yes, I can talk like thithithithi*" but makes the end gibberish. It is as if he becomes unsure how to end the sentence and realises this will not be enough to get included in her play. They then ignore each other after this which seemed to be the goal for the bilingual child.

The interviews also reveal that bilingual Swedish/Finnish children often use Finnish in their play, and at times the staff try to encourage them to play in Swedish to make it possible for the Swedish-speaking-only children to join the play. A childcare worker in the Vega centre describes how those who have strong Finnish are drawn to each other which leads to children with a strong Swedish background switching to Finnish if they can be part of the game. She continued saying that even if a group of children play in Swedish, they switch to Finnish if a Finnish-speaking child joins the group, which leads to Swedish-speaking-only children leaving the group. The staff perceive it as difficult to influence what language children speak during free play. According to an interviewed teacher in the Ursa centre, even if they ask the children who always speak Finnish with each other to speak Swedish, the children do not want to switch and leave the play to go and play in Finnish somewhere else. However, this teacher does not elaborate in the interview on why Swedish-speaking children in a Swedish-speaking ECEC centre need to learn Finnish to be in included in playing with other children.

The language awareness of the staff

The centres have somewhat different policies regarding how they encourage children to speak Swedish as a common language, which would make it possible for all children to understand and play with each other. In some centres, like in Polaris, the staff have tried to have a Swedish only policy. They have also tried to pair Finnish-speaking-only children with Swedish-speaking-only children and have noticed that after a while they start communicating in Swedish. However, in other centres, such as Ran, the staff say that the paired children usually continue to play in silence. Clearly, there is no widespread praxis about this; instead, it is very much up to the context, and each group of children. The organised activities are consequently held in Swedish, but based on the interviews and the observations, adults often hesitate to intervene in free play by encouraging children to speak Swedish. In the conducted interviews, teachers from e.g., Polaris and Lyra explain their reluctance by referring to the importance of children having enough time to be creative in play, solve problems related to play, and practice social skills.

At the Atlas centre, where many children come from Swedish-only homes, the interviewed teacher talked about a "Finnish group", referring to a playtime session, organised by the

municipality, for children who did not speak Finnish. When that ended, the centre continued to have music time for the whole centre in Finnish from time to time. They also include Finnish rhymes before mealtime and Finnish songs in their activities. Such practices offer bilingually Swedish-Finnish children support and encouragement for both languages. It also communicates that both national languages and other languages spoken by the children are considered and valued as well as supported in ECEC practices in accordance with the curriculum (EDUFI, 2022).

The challenges of working with children who know neither Swedish nor Finnish were clearly emphasised at certain ECEC centres. In some cases, the children's background was given little consideration. According to an interviewed teacher from Ran, the children's backgrounds, home cultures, religions, or the countries they come from are of no importance, but if they don't speak Swedish or Finnish, they have difficulties playing with Finnish- or Swedish-speaking children, which leads them to speaking some English with each other. She added that the children feel comfortable conversing with other children in English, but they remain silent if the adults approach them in Swedish.

Furthermore, there was a certain discrepancy related to adults' awareness of children's languages. In the interviews the staff talk about getting to know and use all the children's home languages, i.e., singing and counting together in the languages the children speak, which agrees with the national curriculum's recommendation that the staff should be role models in the flexible use of languages (cf. Peleman et al., 2022; Sierens & Van Avermaet, 2014). However, the observations revealed that the ECEC staff sometimes did not even know what language the child spoke at home. For example, they reported that the father speaks some English, but they do not know what language(s) the parents speak at home. There were cases in the Chara, Lerna, and Ursa centres, in which the staff could tell that a child had a certain African or Asian heritage, but they did not know what language(s) the children spoke with their parents.

Staff members also occasionally spoke to each other in English so the children would not understand, as evident in an observation from the Atlas centre. In such a case, rather than including children, the use of language becomes a tool for exclusion, for preventing the children from understanding. Even though the staff might have various reasons for speaking a language the children do not understand, using language in such an exclusionary sense is far from how language awareness is formulated in the curriculum, that is, understanding the central role of language for learning, communication and cooperation (EDUFI, 2022).

Overall, our interviews and observations show that there is a large variation in working methods and attitudes towards bi- and multilingualism in different ECEC centres. Most ECEC centres do not have an official language policy or strategy for how to support all

languages used and promote the use of Swedish as the common language in the centres. Moreover, few of the teachers have received training in second language teaching in ECEC as part of their formal teacher education.

Discussion

In line with research that emphasizes the importance of children's peer culture as a powerful socializing agent (e.g., Corsaro, 2000; Pursi, 2019), we see from our data that children continuously make up rules and negotiate positions to be included in a group (Boldermo, 2020; Skoglund, 2020). Moreover, children are aware of language differences, and actively use language for inclusion and exclusion of other children in play (cf. Lundström et al., 2022). We also see how children often, especially in free play, participate in forming the language policy in the ECEC centres by creating peer groups (on linguistic grounds) as well as challenging the linguistic practices in the operational culture guided by the staff. However, linguistic diversity often makes it difficult for the staff to influence the language use of children and there were many cases, in our material, where a child at the risk of exclusion because of language, was left to themselves. We see that a more active work against exclusion would require that staff is be more present in the dynamics of children's interactions. This is in line with research that emphasize the responsiveness of the staff in relation to the children, to create a community of practice that is inclusive and supporting (Öhman, 2019).

Finnish is often the dominant language in the community outside the centres and the strong influence of peer culture is also visible in the high status of the Finnish language in the playing groups, despite the centres being Swedish speaking. In some ECEC centres this is a real challenge, because there might be a conflict in what language ought to be supported. Staff are expected to support and develop Swedish, the language of the centre, for all children regardless of linguistic background. Even if multilingualism, in line with the policy documents, is considered as a resource, a real challenge in the centres which participated in this study was how to support multilingualism while simultaneously supporting the development of the child's first language(s) (cf. Alstad & Sopanen, 2021). Without a common praxis or strategy developed among the staff, the language choices might become quite opportunistic, or dependent on the linguistic background of the teachers (cf. Bergroth & Hansell, 2020a; Romøren et al., 2023).

In the recent ECEC curriculum, there is a strong emphasis on an inclusive operational culture that *"promotes participation, equality and equity in all activities"* (EDUFI, 2022, p. 29). Furthermore, participation *"is strengthened when the children are encountered sensitively and when they experience that they are seen and heard"* (EDUFI, 2022, p. 29). According to our study, children at risk of exclusion because of language was a theme that

the staff was clearly aware of, but not very active in giving extra support to these children. These children were seen as gradually socialised into the group, on their own. As research has shown, the linguistic interaction between adults and children can be rather meagre, and adults tend to talk more with children that have a more developed language than children just developing verbal skills. From this point of view, a high degree of freedom in ECEC, without the participation of adults, might lead to unequal learning opportunities for language minority children (see Kultti, 2023, p. 33–34). The high degree of freedom in the operational culture, in our case, also resulted in a considerable higher risk of social exclusion for children that were either Swedish-speaking-only or neither speakers of Swedish nor Finnish.

Moreover, if we consider the strong emphasis on language awareness in the ECEC curriculum, language was often conceived in a narrow framework in our interviews. Language was regarded as an instrumental skill for communication with other children and with adults, but language(s) as an identity marker was not part of the staff's discussions (cf. Bergroth & Hansell, 2020b; Erwin et al., 2022; Ree & Emilson, 2019). The staff was often aware of the existing language diversity and aimed in some ways to include different languages in the activities through, for example, songs in different languages. However, a reflection of why they were including these languages was missing and could be connected to the fact that there were no plans for furthering children's language skills and identities. An excellent opportunity for furthering multilingualism is lost.

Finally, we can see that supporting multilingualism in a minority language ECEC setting in Finland has many challenges. The children in Swedish ECEC centres are coming from more diverse language backgrounds than before when the children usually came from monolingual Swedish homes. The dilemma for the ECEC centres is how they can support all the children's home languages while developing their Swedish language skills. Currently the largest groups other than the Swedish-speaking children are bilingual Swedish-Finnish children and children from a Finnish-only background. The interviews suggest that the staff is searching for practices and guidelines on how to work with the numerous languages spoken at the centre and how to support the home languages concurrently without compromising Swedish as the instructional language. Therefore, we see the need for an increased awareness of how important language is for the inclusion and participation of all children in the ECEC milieu. The awareness, skills and strategies to support simultaneously a strong common language and multilingualism need to be made part of the education and in-service training of ECEC teachers and childcare workers.

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