



Linguistic diversity in transition: Shifting language orientations in the Swedish ECEC curricula

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the dominant language orientations within the Swedish national curricula for early childhood education and care (ECEC), with a focus on multilingualism, an approach traditionally embraced in Sweden but recently under strain. Through documentary analysis of relevant policy documents over a period of 30 years, the research utilizes Ruíz' (1984) analytical framework that identifies three orientations towards language in education policies: language-as-a-right, language-as-a-problem, and language-as-a-resource. The findings indicate first that language is seen as a positive resource, and multilingualism has been consistently embedded in curricular policy discourses even though there are shifts in the presence and emphasis of such discourses across time. Second, the differences in how much value is placed on diverse languages used in preschools, and their perceived associated functions, reflect changes in educational and social goals of ECEC. Finally, the findings identify a general shift in policies towards the prioritisation of competence development and Swedish language proficiency for future educational, social, and economic purposes. The article argues for a more comprehensive language policy approach and a policy orientation that helps preschool teachers to value and support multilingualism.

Keywords: *early childhood education and care, Sweden, multilingualism, language policy*

Introduction

In recent years there has been a substantial increase in linguistic diversity in the Nordic countries, driven by globalization and migration. The Nordic Council of Ministers (2017) has set in their agenda and emphasized the importance of fostering social cohesion when addressing cultural and linguistic diversity in educational settings including Early childhood education and care (ECEC). Moreover, discourses in the public domain and embedded in language policies have increasingly embraced and promoted multilingualism, in what May (2014) discusses as “the multilingualism turn”. Hence it has been incorporated in school curricula, but it is a complex and dynamic phenomenon (Jessner & Kramsch, 2015). To this end, addressing cultural and linguistic diversity is increasingly important in ECEC, as the shifts present significant educational opportunities and challenges.

The literature suggests that Nordic orientations in educational policies approach multilingualism as a resource (Alstad & Sopenan, 2021; Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; Özerk & Williams, 2023) and the Nordic countries, in general, have a long-established tradition of adopting language policies that promote multilingualism in ECEC. Yet, these are differently manifested at both national and local levels in each country depending on historical, societal and political factors. Despite acknowledged advantages of multilingualism, there are concerns related to issues such as equitable access to knowledge and fairness in democratic civic participation (Jessner & Kramsch 2015). In Sweden and Norway, challenges and shifts within language and education policies have been identified (Björk-Willén, 2018; Bubikova-Moan, 2017), particularly in preserving the status of the mainstream language and ensuring that citizens acquire proficient skills for active engagement and success in all societal domains. These challenges significantly impact the role and mission of preschool settings in relation to multilingualism.

This article is situated in the Swedish context, which will be presented in more detail in the following section. It aims to examine the evolving language orientations related to multilingualism and the ways Sweden has addressed linguistic diversity in ECEC, focusing on the trajectories of discourses regarding linguistic diversity in Swedish ECEC national curricula during the last two decades. Both preschool and ECEC are used for the same educational stage which refers to children aged 1-5 years. Most previous relevant studies have investigated language policies in ECEC in European contexts (Kirsch & Aleksić, 2021; Putjata, 2018), including some in Nordic countries such as Norway and Finland (Alstad & Sopenan, 2021; Giæver & Tkachenko, 2020) or Swedish compulsory school education (Paulsrud et al., 2020). Some aspects of language orientations in Swedish ECEC, particularly ‘translanguaging’ have also been addressed (Rosén & Straszer, 2017). Nevertheless, according to de Jong et al. (2016), further research is needed to obtain a

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more nuanced and context-specific understanding of language policy orientations. This article seeks to fill this gap in ECEC policy research by addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the key language orientations that underpin Swedish ECEC curricula in the period 1997-2020 in relation to multilingualism?
2. What functions and properties of language and multilingualism are emphasized in the relevant ECEC policy documents?
3. How have the different language orientations evolved in connection to the wider ECEC policy context in Sweden?

To do so I apply both historical and contemporary perspectives to deepen understanding of approaches to linguistic diversity in Swedish ECEC within the broader context of educational policy. Changes in language policies may affect approaches to wider issues of participation and equity in ECEC, and hence influence (and be influenced by) pedagogical praxis in multilingual settings. Thus, in addition to exploring the focal phenomena in Swedish ECEC settings the study may provide some more general illumination of the value and functions of languages associated with variations in the educational and social goals of ECEC.

Before moving to the next section, I provide brief clarifications on the key concepts used in this article. Multilingualism has been defined in various ways in the Swedish research and policy literature. The Swedish National Agency for Education situates multilingualism in a broad, global context and refers to it as the ability of children to understand, speak, and communicate in multiple languages (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023). It indicates that this can be facilitated by children's natural exposure to multiple languages or the ability can be gradually acquired. Multilingualism is, therefore, characterised as a competence that can be developed, especially with appropriate support from parents and preschool staff. In connection to multilingualism, the term 'mother tongue' refers to the language used by children who have a national minority or migration background, namely to the primary language used at the home context (Alisaari et al., 2023; Salö et al., 2018).

Language diversity in Swedish preschools

According to the Language Act (Swedish Code of Statutes [SFS] 2009:600) Swedish is the official principal language that serves as the shared means of communication in society, ensuring that all individuals living in Sweden can use it in every aspect of their lives. Clearly, these stipulations strongly apply in educational settings, including preschools.

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In Swedish preschools a quarter of the children now have a foreign background (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023). The importance of addressing the needs of children from various linguistic backgrounds in preschool has been recognised in national documents, including the national curricula. Provisions in national policies include entitlements to support the use, maintenance and/or development of the 'national minority' languages, sign language, and other mother tongues. According to the Bill for National Minorities and Minority Languages (SFS 2009:724), minority languages in Sweden are those of Jews, Roma, Sami, Swedish Finns and Tornedalings.

Swedish preschools have also been covered by broader integration policies dating back to the 1990s, including promotion of universal provision of preschool education to support multiculturalism and incorporate mother tongue development in the preschool curriculum (Martin Korpi, 2015). Although Sweden has a long history of promoting multilingualism in educational policy, including preschools, implementing it in practice is challenging. Several recent studies have examined teachers' efforts to support language development and multilingualism in Swedish preschools (Björk-Willén, 2018; Harju & Åkerblom, 2020; Puskás & Björk-Willén, 2017). The findings have highlighted dilemmas related to competing perceptions of encouraging, tolerating, and constraining linguistic diversity. The curriculum is ambiguously interpreted with observed tensions due to multilingualism being treated as something that should be practiced occasionally, rather than incorporated in routine preschool work.

Recent political attention to language issues in ECEC due to increased diversity and historical trajectories of mother tongue instruction in Swedish settings raise questions, explored here, about the conceptual framework of multilingualism in the ECEC curricula, as well as how it shapes (and is shaped by) linguistic diversity.

Theoretical framework

Language and language policies

In language education research, languages are no longer regarded solely as tools for constructing linguistic forms. Instead, they are recognized as social practices of meaning making and interpretation, essential for the formation, enactment, and interpretation of cultures (Dervin & Liddicoat, 2013). This interconnection between language and culture is integral, influencing the creation and understanding of everyday meanings and practices. Language not only shapes cultures but also influences our perceptions of them, both our own and those of others. Described as open, dynamic, and constantly evolving (Shohamy, 2007), language serves at the same time as a personalized and communal lens through which we comprehend and communicate about the world. Each language user

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employs their language(s) for these purposes. This duality underscores language's role as both an interactive tool and an independent entity.

At the same time, language policies and ideologies are not developed in a vacuum, as they are related to, and situated in, particular social and historical contexts (May, 2012). Language-in-education policies shape the language-related issues that educational institutions address and the 'linguistic resources' that education is intended to develop (Liddicoat, 2013). These policies project an envisioned future linguistic landscape and associated socio-economic objectives for education. In this manner, language policy documents are texts that are intended to guide future action and provide a specific understanding of the essence and value attributed to language by influencing the ways in which languages are used, valued, and preserved within societies. In doing so, language policies shape the linguistic landscape of a society and also reflect and contribute to the broader socio-cultural and political dynamics by impacting how individuals communicate, access resources, and engage with their cultural heritage. When these policies are incorporated into official discourses they provide a contextual framework for decision-making processes that shape the potential for conformity or resistance in actual pedagogical practices (Liddicoat, 2013). Hence, definitions of language policy are characterised by a layered understanding that encompasses official regulations, unofficial mechanisms, multi-layered policy processes, and the associated discursive and ideological functions that language can serve (Johnson, 2013).

Language orientations and the construction of multilingualism

Ruíz (1984) aimed to explore the principles underlying policymaking, specifically intending to present a perspective that highlights the beneficial aspects of both personal and societal multilingualism. His language orientation framework is used to facilitate exploration of the ideological underpinnings of ECCE policy regarding linguistic diversity. This recognizes three orientations: language-as-problem, language-as-right and language-as-resource. Ruíz initially applied the framework to describe language policies in the USA during the 1980s. However, it provides a useful heuristic for analysis in contexts across time and national borders, since it describes public and policy attitudes towards language and its core functions, as well its role and significance in social contexts (Ruíz, 1984). According to Ruíz, it could be beneficial to combine these approaches, and adjust policy according to the circumstances, because although there are tensions between the orientations they are not incompatible. Thus, the optimal combination may depend on wider sociopolitical contexts and specific objectives of initiatives, which may vary substantially in both space and time.

The language-as-problem orientation refers to treatment of language education largely as a set of problems to address, including issues related to social and cultural diversity,

rather than purely linguistic problems (Ruíz, 1984). Drawing on the sociohistorical contexts of societies characterised as multilingual, language issues are linked with social mobility problems of socially disadvantaged groups. As Ruíz argues, in this orientation views language is viewed as “a social problem” that needs to be resolved and identifies multilingualism as a barrier to social cohesion (1984, p. 21). In educational settings, this can be equated to conceptualizations of students from diverse linguistic backgrounds in deficit terms (Hult & Hornberger, 2016).

The language-as-right orientation is rooted in rights of freedom from discrimination on account of language, including not only the formal, legal protection of minority groups, but also rights of freedom of personal and social expression (Ruíz, 1984). Thus, it addresses linguistically-rooted issues of inequity through legal frameworks (Hult & Hornberger, 2016). Ruíz (1984) problematizes this orientation and recognizes the complexity of formulating specific rights-related questions and policies to address them. Nevertheless, he regards this orientation as a key element of language policy-making and associated activities, particularly in conjunction with the third orientation, language-as-resource.

In stark contrast to the language-as-problem orientation, in the resource orientation the main focus is on the potential advantages rather than disadvantages of multilingualism (Hult & Hornberger, 2016). Language is perceived as “a resource to be managed, developed and conserved” and minority language groups as “important sources of expertise” (Ruíz, 1984, p. 28). A characteristic feature of this orientation is inclusivity, rooted in recognition that all members or students of a community can benefit from multilingualism and that it provides opportunities to enhance collaboration and social cohesion. Rather than recognizing a need to prioritize the language(s) of either the majority or minorities, due to a conflicting or differentiating conception of languages, both are regarded as valuable linguistic repertoires that should be developed (Hult & Hornberger, 2016).

Method

Recognizing the crucial role of the wider sociopolitical and historical context in which language policies are developed (May, 2015), this study was designed to enhance understanding of the “policy-shaped/policy-shaping texts” and discourses (Hornberger 2015, p. 13) related to multilingualism in Swedish ECEC policy. For this, Ruíz’ (1984) conceptual framework of language orientation was used as an analytical tool.

Empirically, the study focuses on national preschool curricula, as presented in official policy documents that outline the goals and core values of ECEC policy, particularly one

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introduced in 1998 (Lpfö98), and another in 2018 (Lpfö18). During the intervening period two revised versions of Lpfö98 were published, one in 2010 (Lpfö98 Revised 2010) and the other in 2016 (Lpfö98 Revised 2016). As extensive changes were introduced in Lpfö18, the government decided that Lpfö18 constituted a new curriculum, replacing rather than revising Lpfö98 (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023). The 2010 and 2016 revisions have identical clauses regarding linguistic and cultural diversity. Hence, only the 2010 Revised version, which includes the current Education Act (SFS 2010:800), was used in further analysis.

The empirical material also included two reports of government commissions (SOU 1997:151; SOU 2020:67). These reports provide recommendations for policymakers and several of their proposals are usually incorporated into government acts. Thus, they convey prevailing national priorities at the time they were drafted. The report published in 1997 (SOU 1997:151) was commissioned a year before the introduction of the Lpfö98 national curriculum in Sweden for preschools in 1998. It included general recommendations, as well as extended sections addressing issues associated with cultural and linguistic diversity, such as the role of preschool in a multicultural society. The second report, by a more recent commission (SOU 2020:67), focused explicitly on issues of Swedish language development for children whose mother tongue is not Swedish. The choice of these two documents for inclusion in the study is in line with Bowen (2009) who argues that documents should be evaluated as contextual data, as well as for their content. Overall, these official policy documents and texts published from 1997 to 2020 describe the trajectories of language-related policies in ECEC. They express core ideas and normative positions regarding children's language repertoires, and thus the prevailing orientations towards multilingualism, and the role of ECEC in fostering or directing it.

TABLE 1 Policy documents analysed in the article

YEAR	TITLE	TYPE OF DOCUMENT
1997	<i>Att erövra omvärlden. Förslag till läroplan för förskolan</i> SOU (1997:151)	Government Commission inquiry
1998	Läroplan för förskolan <i>Lpfö 98</i>	National curriculum
2010	Läroplan för förskolan <i>Lpfö 98 (Revised 2010)</i>	National curriculum
2018	Läroplan för förskolan <i>Lpfö 18</i>	National curriculum
2020	<i>Förskola för alla barn – för bättre språkutveckling i svenska</i> SOU (2020:67)	Government Commission inquiry

The documentary material was analyzed in two stages. The first stage, involved close readings of the documentary material to acquire familiarity with the texts. Following typically descriptive qualitative content analysis procedures (Drisco & Maschi, 2015), I engaged in a thorough review of the national ECEC curricula and relevant commission

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inquiry reports with the intention to identify relevant terms and references to policies regarding language education in early childhood. These provided an early focus on terms such as: 'language', 'mother tongue', 'communication', and cultural issues connected to language. Cultural aspects are important elements of the broader conceptual foundations of language policies and were thus included in the analysis. Despite a lack of explicit references to multilingualism and linguistic diversity in the ECEC curricula, there are several to 'multiculturalism' and the 'cultural identity' of children with Swedish as a second language.

The second stage entailed a deductive interpretive approach, using Ruíz' (1984) orientations (language-as-problem, language-as-right and language-as-resource) as analytical categories that offer a heuristic tool for the understanding of emphases and shifts in the discursive references to multilingualism during the focal period. This was done by identifying common patterns in the national documents and examining what was, and was not, expressed. The content was interpreted by analysing how text formulations were used in the documents and their alignment with Ruíz' three orientations. For example, mother tongue was identified both as a 'legal right' and as a 'right to development of cultural identity', with overlapping and distinct argumentation in the policy texts. Similarly, language is seen 'as a resource' for holistic learning and as 'competence for language proficiency' connected to communication and participation. A comparative analysis of the texts was also employed to identify key content, omissions and/or additions (Drisco & Maschi, 2015). In particular, I interpreted the connections and (at times) contradictions in the curricula and their relations to views expressed in the commission reports using the orientations framework to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the portrayals of multilingual issues. Thus, the SOUs were used both as sources of data and sources of contextualizing information. Following Gibbs (2007), the results were also used to investigate patterns and co-occurrences of identified analytical units through qualitative content analysis, by shifting from individual analysis of each orientation to exploring the connections between them. The language-as-problem orientation constitutes an example of how insufficient knowledge in Swedish has broader socio-economic implications, where proficiency in Swedish is regarded as a valuable resource. The following sections provide quotations from the documents to exemplify the analytical process. These were translated by the author from the Swedish versions, except for extracts of the latest curriculum for preschools (Lpfö18), which is also available in English.

An example of the systematic comparison of language orientations in the three curricula is presented in Table 2. It demonstrates the emerging layers that are added and text formulations that are omitted to comprehend the nature of policy shifts over the years in relation to language orientations in ECEC. The parts that are similar and/or differentiated

are marked in bold. The results of the analysis of the three language orientations embedded in the ECEC documents are presented in the following section.

TABLE 2 Trajectories of language orientations in Swedish ECEC curricula from *Lpfö98* to *Lpfö18*

<i>LPFÖ98</i>	<i>LPFÖ98 (REVISED 2010)</i>	<i>LPFÖ18</i>
The pre-school can help ensure that children who belong to the national minorities and children with a foreign background receive support in developing a multicultural sense of belonging.	The pre-school can help ensure that children who belong to the national minorities and children with a foreign background receive support in developing a multicultural sense of belonging.	Education in preschool should lay the foundation for the children's understanding of different languages and cultures, including the languages and cultures of the national minorities.
Language and learning are inextricably linked , as are language and identity development. The preschool should place great emphasis on stimulating each child's language development and encouraging and making use of the child's curiosity and interest in the world of written language.	Language and learning are inextricably linked , as are language and identity development. The preschool should place great emphasis on stimulating each child's language development and encouraging and making use of the child's curiosity and interest in the world of written language.	Language, learning and the development of identity are closely linked . The preschool should therefore place great emphasis on stimulating children's language development in Swedish , by encouraging and taking into consideration their curiosity and interest in communicating in different ways. Children should be offered a stimulating environment where they are given the opportunity to develop their language by listening to reading aloud and discussing literature and other texts.
Children with a foreign background who develop their mother tongue get better opportunities to learn Swedish and also develop skills in other areas.	According to the Education Act children with a foreign background who develop their mother tongue get better opportunities to learn Swedish and also develop skills in other areas.	

Findings: Language orientations in Swedish ECEC curricula

In this section, I report the findings of the analysis, using Ruíz' (1984) three language orientations as a structure template. The use of Ruíz' orientation reveals the richness of the three general categories that can capture the discursive focus and changes in the policy around multilingualism in the very specific context of the Swedish policy documents. I first begin with the language-as-right orientation which was mainly identified in the curricula for preschools, indicating the evolution of language policies in ECEC as legitimized in official policy documents. Then I move on to the presentation of the material under the language-as-problem orientation, mainly prominent in the latest commission inquiry SOU (2020:67). The language-as-resource orientation, prominent mostly in the earlier versions of document material, draws later in the analysis mainly on a comparison of both the commission inquiries with references to the curricula.

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Language-as-right

From 1998 to 2018 all the ECEC curricula were aligned with a language-as-right orientation. This is a dominant narrative in all official policy texts that have included the development of children's skills in both Swedish and their mother tongues as parts of the preschool's mission (Lpfö98, Lpfö98 Revised 2010, and Lpfö18). It should be noted that preschool children are not entitled to formal mother tongue instruction, which comes at later stages in compulsory education. The rights-oriented approach gradually gained increasing significance in the ECEC curricula, grounded in legitimization of children's various linguistic repertoires. This is particularly evident in the 2010 revision of the curriculum, which explicitly refers to mother tongue support as ratified in the governing document of the Education Act (SFS 2010:800).

The increasing focus on rights has extended to national minorities' languages and sign language. In Lpfö98 and Lpfö98 Revised 2010, children of national minorities and those with a foreign background are mentioned in the same sentence without further distinctions or specifications. However, the most recent curriculum, Lpfö18, explicitly describes rights of speakers of national minority languages, which are grounded in three governing documents: The National Minorities and Minority languages Act (SFS, 2009:724), Language Act (SFS 2009:600) and Education Act (SFS 2010:800). Additionally, immediately following the reference to national minority languages in the Lpfö18 curriculum there is recognition of the importance of developing proficiency in Swedish Sign Language for "deaf children, children with hearing loss, and children who, for other reasons, need sign language" to develop their language (p. 9). The Education Act (Chapter 8, 12 b) provides the right for children to be placed in a preschool that provides much of the education in Finnish, Meänkieli or Sami, in areas and municipalities where their use is prevalent, if their guardians request it. The Lpfö18 curriculum introduced the term 'indigenous people' to refer to the Sami, reflecting the recent political moves to preserve the languages of national minorities in connection with the development of cultural identity.

The education in preschool must lay the foundation for the children's understanding of different languages and cultures, including the languages and cultures of the national minorities. The Bill on national minorities and minority languages states that the national minorities are Jews, Roma, Sami, Swedish Finns and Tornedalings. The Sami are also an indigenous people. The Language Act (2009:600) states that the national minority languages are Finnish, Yiddish, Meänkieli, Romani Chib and Sami.

(Lpfö 18, p. 6)

The preschool must thereby contribute to protecting and promoting the languages and cultures of the national minorities.

(Lpfö 18, p. 9)

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A recent report from the Swedish National Agency for Education on the changes in Lpfö18 highlights the government's role in identifying areas that required clarification, including promotion of children's development of cultural identity and the use of minority languages (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023). Overall during the focal period there was clearly an increasing focus and more detailed, clearer guidance regarding children's access to and development of national minority languages and cultures.

Anti-discriminatory discourses regarding ethnicity and a commitment to human rights (particularly children's rights) are also clearly evident in ECEC policy. The expressed respect for human rights is grounded in democratic values, in all three curricula. In particular, the Lpfö18 foregrounds children's rights using the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) as a source of legitimation.

The preschool must reflect the values and rights expressed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child...The education must therefore be based on what is judged to be in the best interests of the child, that children have the right to participate and influence, and that the children must be made aware of their rights.

(Lpfö18, p. 5)

The UNCRC was ratified in 2020 in Sweden, so its citation reinforced and emphasized the rights discourse in Swedish ECEC policy. The cited passages also illustrate increases in both the inclusiveness of the rights-orientation towards various languages and the values explicitly attributed to participation and influence, embedded in a broader democratic perspective.

Both considered reports address the above issues, but only briefly. The earlier SOU (1997:151) broadly discusses children's cultural rights, and emphasizes the positive connections of multilingualism to other policy areas. In this context, language is considered a right linked to the development of a strong personal identity. In contrast, the later SOU (2020:67) specifically addresses rights of children, particularly asylum-seeking children, to access preschool, with references to the Law on National Minorities and Minority Languages (SFS 2009:724), Language Act (SFS 2009:724) and UNCRC (like Lpfö18).

Language-as-problem

The analysis of the language-as-problem orientation shows that although multilingualism is not specifically addressed as a problem per se in any of the scrutinized documents, problems of an organizational and professional development nature are mentioned, mostly in the later SOU (2020:67).

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Passages aligned with this orientation still focus primarily on aspects of language policy, but there are some tentative links between language policy and other policy domains. In particular, the SOU (2020:67) highlights a need to adjust policy, and adopt a more problem-solving language orientation in ECEC policy, particularly for development of proficiency in the Swedish language. This is also evident in the latest curriculum, which explicitly refers to the role of preschool in language development.

The preschool should therefore place great emphasis on stimulating children's language development in Swedish, by encouraging and taking into consideration their curiosity and interest in communicating in different ways.

(Lpfö18, p. 9)

Policy solutions for addressing complex social and structural issues are contextualized and used to support the emphasis on the Swedish language in SOU (2020:67), which highlights a problematic lack of proficiency in Swedish before some children begin compulsory education. The report identifies structural challenges, such as a shortage of trained preschool teachers and recruitment difficulties, especially in socio-economically disadvantaged areas with significant shares of newly-arrived children relative to those whose mother tongue is Swedish. This constitutes

...a major problem, because children at these preschools often have a particularly great need for teaching by competent preschool teachers, with a particular focus on language development in Swedish.

(SOU 2020:67, p. 223)

Thus, lack of competence in teaching the Swedish language at preschool is recognized as a significant potential barrier to children's development of proficiency in the mainstream language. Development of other mother tongues is not viewed as a hindrance, but Swedish is ascribed more explicit educational, social, and citizenship value. The importance of integrating children and their guardians in Swedish society is emphasized, and explicitly tied to language development, which is a highly pertinent issue in Sweden.

... there are risks that their children will have poorer knowledge of the Swedish language when they start school than classmates of the same age who attended preschool

(SOU 2020:67, p. 223)

... children whose guardians have a foreign background and as a result of e.g. residential segregation, weak establishment in the labor market or lack of language skills have not been integrated into Swedish society, and whose family's contact network consists of other families with the same language background ... have limited opportunities to learn the Swedish language.

(SOU 2020:67, p. 158)

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Thus, due to the recognized value of these educational and socio-economic dimensions of the Swedish language as a resource, the report recommends prioritization of the mainstream language. In the context of preschool settings, this implies a focus on nurturing children's ability to use Swedish so they can engage fully in education.

Open interpretation concerning children's language development

The recent curriculum Lpfö18 places a stronger emphasis on promoting communication, in relation to language issues, than previous versions. A new section, entitled 'Communication and creation', highlights the importance of providing children with an intellectually stimulating environment that enhances their language development and fosters critical thinking skills.

Children should be offered a stimulating environment where they are given the opportunity to develop their language by listening to reading aloud and discussing literature and other texts.

(Lpfö 18, p. 9)

However, it should be noted that the word for language in the Swedish version (språk) can be either singular or plural. The word in the English translation of the preschool curriculum is in the singular form, as shown in the extract above, but it is ambiguous and open to interpretation. It could refer to a general, inclusive view of children's language(s) or the Swedish language. This vague reference to language, which could be interpreted as a monolingual term, signifies a shift towards a more restricted approach to multilingualism, and a risk that language hierarchies may emerge cannot be disregarded. Thus, ambiguous references to language in the curriculum raise questions about potential effects particularly on approaches to multilingualism and language hierarchies.

Language-as-resource

The resource orientation is more prominent in earlier versions of the curricula and SOU (1997:151) than in the more recent documents. The term resource is not explicitly used in any of the curricula, but both Lpfö98 and its revised version in 2010 explicitly recognize and promote utilization of children's linguistic repertoires. In line with Ruíz' framework (1984), mother tongue development is regarded as a significant educational resource that offers holistic learning opportunities, including for Swedish language acquisition. Both of the earlier curriculum versions state that:

Children with a foreign background who develop their mother tongue get better opportunities to learn Swedish and also develop skills in other areas.

(Lpfö 98, p. 6; Lpfö 98 (Revised 2010), p. 7)

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Thus, a mother tongue other than Swedish is portrayed as an intellectual resource that can promote broader knowledge construction, and multilingualism as a resource that can enhance literacy, offering significant cognitive benefits. The value of preschools helping children with a mother tongue other than Swedish to develop their cultural identity and communication skills in both languages is also recognized (Lpfö98; Lpfö98 Revised 2010). The recent curriculum, Lpfö18, focuses more on diversity with a specific emphasis on languages of the national minorities, with continuing recognition of mother tongues' value and role in development of children's cultural identity.

Until the changes introduced in 2018, expressions in the curricula regarding children's language repertoires were rooted in the framework of Sweden's multicultural and language policies, as outlined in SOU (1997:151). Chapter 3 of this report refers to the opportunities for bilingualism within a multicultural societal context that should permeate preschools' everyday practices.

Children with a mother tongue other than Swedish, who are given the opportunity early on to develop both their languages, have good foundations for acquiring a qualified bilingualism later in life. The willingness of preschool children to learn in various forms provides many opportunities to use and develop the language.

(SOU 1997:157, p. 80)

To expand functions of preschools both Swedish and multicultural aspects should be reflected in their environments and daily activities.

(SOU 1997:157, p. 81)

The SOU (1997:157) also recognizes the importance of language for participation and identity development, as early language exposure increases children's opportunities to develop their mother tongue "in parallel with Swedish" (SOU 1997:157, p. 82). Similarly, noting the importance of incorporating both Swedish and multicultural aspects into preschool activities reflects acknowledgement of the importance of multifaceted learning experiences that embrace children's diverse backgrounds. In line with the framework of Ruíz (1984), the resource-orientation embedded in the SOU (1997:157) recognizes that children's linguistic diversity is enriching for ECEC.

Recognition of the connections between language, identity, and learning is evident in the two earlier curricula as they explicitly state that language and learning, as well as language and identity, are "inextricably linked" (Lpfö98, p. 6; Lpfö98 Revised 2010, p. 7), and realized in multilingual and multicultural environments by development of "a multicultural sense of belonging" (Lpfö 98, p.5; Lpfö 98 Revised 2010, p. 6). However, this textual formulation is omitted in the latest curriculum, Lpfö18. Instead, there is a narrowing of focus on identity issues while acknowledging close relationships between identity formation, learning, and language.

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Language as competence in learning spaces

The analysis of the policy documents suggests the emergence of an additional dimension to the language-as-resource orientation, rooted in the perceived functions and utility of early language literacy skills in both educational preschool settings and other social contexts.

All three curricula underscore the multifaceted goals of education, including nurturing of a wide range of competencies, preparing children for active citizenship, and helping them adapt to the diverse and changing world. Although this is embedded in a broader context of language and communications skills in relation to multilingualism, it is associated with perceptions of the use of different languages and needs to prepare children to navigate a rapidly changing world.

Education should give children the opportunity to think, learn and communicate in different contexts and for different purposes. This will lay the foundation for children in due course to acquire the knowledge that everyone in society needs. The ability to communicate, seek new knowledge and collaborate is essential in a society characterised by a high flow of information and continuous change.

(Lpfö18, p. 9)

On an individual level, preschool provides children with opportunities to “communicate in different contexts”, encouraging the use of multiple languages. The reference to “different purposes” implies that children should learn to use language in various settings, potentially involving different languages, depending on the situation. In such a society, multilingualism is a valuable asset, enabling individuals to access a broader range of knowledge. However, the ‘competence orientation’ incorporates significant emphasis on communication and language proficiency in the dominant language (Swedish), to prepare children well for formal education. Equipping children with the language skills needed to acquire information and collaborate in Swedish-speaking contexts is also consistent with broader socio-economic goals.

As already mentioned, inclusivity and social cohesion elements of the resource orientation are less strongly emphasized in Lpfö18 than in earlier curricula. Thus, the recent emphasis on the Swedish language and competence elements raises risks of accompanying losses of attention to linguistic diversity and associated benefits. This indicates a need for policymakers and practitioners to balance efforts to harness the benefits of linguistic diversity (as in the general resource orientation) and development of mainstream language proficiency (as in the detected competence orientation).

The competence orientation is evident and emphasized in both SOUs. However, there are differences between them regarding the role of competences, especially language

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competences, in terms of societal issues and functions of preschool. More specifically, the earlier SOU (1997:151) explicitly refers to the role of multilingualism in early years, connecting it to criticality and wider communication skills.

An important core of all pedagogy is to develop each child's abilities: to solve problems, communicate using different languages and forms of expression, take initiative and collaborate, reflect and think critically.

(SOU 1997:157, p. 80)

This indicates that preschool is an important arena for integrating various future competences and languages into a wider spectrum of social and communicative skills. Chapter 3 of the 1997 SOU, entitled "To Conquer the World Around You", emphasizes the roles of education in citizenship, democracy, diversity, and personal identity formation. It underscores the significance of empowering children to participate in change. The recent SOU (2020:67) indicates a shift in views of the function of different languages and role of multilingualism. It focuses on competence, particularly in relation to the Swedish language, with the aim of improving educational outcomes, enhancing future employability and promoting societal integration.

Children's participation in preschool is important for their learning and language development ... The proposals aimed at increasing children's participation in preschool can contribute to these children achieving higher results in school, which in the long run facilitates establishment in the labor market and integration into Swedish society.

(SOU 2020:67, p. 285)

In the past (as in the 1997 SOU), preschool was seen as an important arena for integrating diverse skills, including language skills, into a broader spectrum of social and communicative competences. The recent report signals a clear shift towards a narrower, socio-economically-oriented view of the roles of preschool education and languages, especially Swedish.

Discussion

The findings of this study, framed by Ruíz' language orientations approach, reveal the complexity of the policies and contextual factors that have shaped multilingualism in Swedish ECEC and preschools' varying practices, priorities and goals to address linguistic diversity. They also confirm previous findings about an ambitious and progressive language policy that is embedded in ideological dilemmas and competing perceptions of linguistic diversity in ECEC (Pripp 2018; Puskás & Björk- Willén, 2017).

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Moreover, Swedish ECEC policy has similarities with language policy in other Nordic countries, such as Norway, including ambiguous orientations and openness to interpretation (Alstad & Sopenan, 2021; Giæver & Tkachenko, 2020). While the rights-orientation is reinforced in the latest curriculum, Lpfö18, especially for the national minority languages and sign language, the resource-orientation towards other mother tongues has narrowed. This suggests a hierarchical view of mother tongues that becomes more pronounced as national minority languages gain prominence. Similar changes associated with mother tongue education have been identified in compulsory schools in the Nordic countries (Alisaari et al., 2023). The prominence of the English language in multilingual urban areas, with English used as a lingua franca in preschools (Larsson et al., 2023), adds another layer to the complexity of language hierarchies and status of various languages in the Swedish ECEC landscape.

Furthermore, the analysis of commission reports (SOU 1997:151; SOU 2020:67) and comparison of curricula indicates a shift from discourses focused on multiculturalism to an emphasis on second language development and literacy skills. In the Nordic context, Alstad and Sopenan (2021) have noted a similar shift towards focusing more on second language development and proficiency than on children's mother tongues in language policies. Despite the changes in official policy texts, the Swedish National Agency for Education's support material still treats multilingualism as a resource, emphasizing the competence dimension, reflecting the evolving priorities of language policies (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023). This highlights the crucial role of language proficiency for learning in a multilingual society.

Regarding the language-as-problem orientation, the findings suggest that although multilingualism itself is not seen as a problem, concerns about achieving proficiency in the Swedish language have led to an increased emphasis in recent policy documents. Policy reports focused on multilingualism in ECEC, such as the Swedish Schools Inspectorate [SSI] (2017), and previous literature have shown that in some preschools the role of the Swedish language is either undervalued or taken for granted (Björk-Willén, 2018). Structural challenges, such as difficulties in recruiting qualified staff with strong Swedish language skills, hinder provision of scientifically-grounded preschool education, particularly in socio-economically disadvantaged areas (Sandell Ring, 2021). Understanding these complex aspects of children's linguistic development is crucial, especially in segregated areas where limited interaction with Swedish-born children and families can complicate establishment of a sense of unity and belonging for multilingual children (Eek-Karlsson & Emilson, 2021). Unequal access to resources and inadequate language support, in either children's mother tongues or Swedish, also raise exclusion issues in preschool settings. The emphasis on the Swedish language portrayed in policy documents also has implications for the emergence of language hierarchies in ECEC settings and their intersection with socio-economic factors.

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In line with Ruíz' (1984) language-as-problem orientation, the emphasis on the Swedish language can raise risks for adoption of a school readiness approach while potentially overemphasizing its instrumental value. At the same time, the lack of access to, and knowledge of, the Swedish language poses challenges that policymakers must address. Recent recommendations in SOU (2020:67) provide responses to language development challenges for linguistically diverse children that reflect changes in the broader societal context. These include an acknowledgement of increases in linguistic diversity, and a call to action, particularly following the 2015 refugee crisis. They also signal shifts in the objectives of ECEC related to its potential educational and social mobility-fostering roles in the labor market and education sector (Alexiadou et al., 2022), which may be significantly mediated by multilingualism and associated factors. The analysis suggests that the emphasis on the Swedish language for addressing both educational and socio-economic challenges underscores the interconnectedness of language development, educational outcomes, and social integration in preschool settings. On a similar note, kindergartens are treated in Norwegian ECEC policy as a means of preparing children to engage with Norwegian as the primary language of instruction in school (Alstad & Kulbrandstad, 2017).

The change in language policy priorities can be regarded as a shift from a resource-orientated view of multilingualism towards a competence-orientated prioritization of proficiency in languages, especially Swedish, in preschool settings. In accordance with arguments by Hult (2004), despite Sweden's multilingual ecology, language policy developments seem to have involved negotiation of a balance between protecting the status of the Swedish language and ensuring language rights for minorities. This also confirms the complexity of the resource-orientation and its multidimensionality, as various languages can be assigned distinct roles as resources in the same context (de Jong et al., 2016).

The impact of the complexity of language policy in the macro level is also manifested with challenges in the implementation of the curricula goals. As previous research suggests, there can be divergent approaches to language between language policies and educational policies at various policy levels (Bergroth & Palviainen, 2017). A study by Puskás and Björk-Willén (2017) revealed that the practical implications of the explicit language policy outlined in the Swedish preschool curriculum give rise to ideological and pedagogical dilemmas. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate (SSI, 2012; 2017) also confirms persistent challenges in supporting children's mother tongues in preschool, lacking an intercultural approach that considers children's diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The discrepancies that arise between the intended policy and the realization of the curricula goals, call for a deeper understanding of the interplay occurring between formulating policies by policymakers and the adopted policies at preschools. Another perspective points to early childhood teacher education that often

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receives too little attention, despite its importance for the quality of early years education, also in relation to language development issues and reflective teaching practices (Alstad, 2020). Hermansson et al. (2022) argue that students in Swedish teacher education programs are unlikely to be well prepared to address the challenges of promoting equal educational opportunities in linguistically and culturally diverse settings. Addressing the multifaceted issues related to linguistic diversity in the various layers of ECEC language policy becomes a tall order and therefore 'language-aware policies' are important (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020) to ensure equitable educational opportunities in preschools.

Conclusion

The findings of this study illuminate various aspects of the language policy landscape related to multilingualism in the Swedish ECEC context, how language policies have evolved over time, and the discursive positions that shape them. The framing of the analysis through the three language orientations identified by Ruíz (1984) highlights the challenges facing policy makers regarding linguistic diversity and the support of multilingualism. All of Ruíz' orientations are present in the Swedish policy documents of this period. Yet, there are two key observations on the basis of the findings. First, the emphasis on each orientation changes depending on the shifting societal and political priorities. Second, in the more contemporary period and in the context of increased diversity when Sweden received in 2015 a high number of refugee children (Nordic Statistics Database, 2022), there is significant attention to questions of language competence and its links to future social and economic integration. These are particularly connected to Swedish language proficiency and shifting social priorities that affect the role of preschool. The analysis also indicates the emergence of a new 'competence orientation' as part of language-as-resource concrete policy objectives.

Considering the tension between policy and multilingual practices in ECEC settings, the implications of the study suggest more comprehensive policy measures that will equip educators to navigate the challenges and opportunities in Sweden's culturally and linguistically diverse preschools. This study focuses only on the language policy orientations that underpin relevant policy document material at the macro level. Further research is needed to examine the roles of municipalities and local policy actors in implementing and providing resources to enact language policies within preschools in order to enrich understanding of the multifaceted linguistic landscape.

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