

Nordic perspectives on linguistic diversity and multilingualism in early childhood education and care: An afterword*

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“When the idea had eaten itself deeply enough into my soul that it was despicable to be a Finn, I began to feel ashamed of my origins. Since going back was out of the question and the thought of going back was what had sustained me there was nothing else for me but to surrender. To survive, I had to change my stripes. Thus: to hell with Finland and the Finns! All of a sudden, I was overwhelmed by a desire to shed my skin and smash my face. That which could not be accepted had to be denied, hidden, crushed and thrown away. A Swede was what I had to become, and that meant I could not continue to be a Finn. Everything I had held dear and self-evident had to be destroyed. An inner struggle began, a state of crisis of long duration. I had trouble sleeping, I could not look people in the eye, my voice broke down into a whisper, I could no longer trust anybody. My mother tongue was worthless this I realized at last; on the contrary, it made me the butt of abuse and ridicule. So down with the Finnish language! I spat on myself, gradually committed internal suicide.”

(Jalava, 1988, p. 164)

Nordic Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is, today, frequently considered by practitioners, researchers and decision-makers working in education across Europe, if not around the world, as a model, an often idealised vision of research-based, quality, equitable and inclusive ECEC policies and practices. This, sadly, is not the case in many educational contexts and was not always the case in the Nordic countries, as the above testimony reveals. The current vision of Nordic ECEC, however, conjures up cosy concepts such as child-centred, play-based, holistic development, well-being, creativity, outdoor education, solidarity and emancipation (see Einarsdottir & Wagner, 2006 for further

discussion). The 14 articles included in this special issue collectively reflect these characteristics, all papers referring explicitly and/or implicitly to many of the aforementioned concepts, thus comforting the reader's understanding of how present-day Nordic ECEC looks and feels. Children creating play accessories out of the archetypal favourite: the cardboard box, walking out by a lake or playing in the forest, or simply playing freely without adult interference, are just some of the many examples contained in these contributions.

Yet, the practitioners/researchers involved in these papers also articulate a certain number of dilemmas and some discomfort, suggesting that perhaps all is not as rosy as our often stereotypical perceptions would have us believe.

Perhaps our idealised preconceptions of Nordic ECEC need to be questioned, perhaps there are time-honoured principles which need to be re-examined. The complex situations described and analysed by the contributors to this special issue mirror the challenges experienced in many other ECEC settings around the world. The questions they pose lead the reader to rethink ECEC policies, practices and priorities in an increasingly globalised world. Which languages should have a place in ECEC and how does this place manifest itself? Is it sufficient to display signs and messages in English and/or multiple languages in the ECEC setting to provide a more inclusive environment? How can educators achieve a balance between developing the language(s) of education and supporting the home languages? In the interests of child language development, should adults intervene and be more directive, shattering the Nordic free-play commandment and if so when and how? Is informal ECEC in danger of becoming more formal and school-like? How should "education", especially language education, at this early age be envisioned and enacted in our global era?

Clearly there are policies which are struggling to be enacted in practice in the wake of rapid societal transformation, brought about by globalisation and so-called superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007). But as society evolves, education too must surely evolve and adapt to the challenges of our age. In the Global North, linguistic and cultural diversity is on the increase, as exemplified by the contributors to this issue, admittedly with some contexts (Finland) experiencing a steeper rise than others in recent decades. This diversity represents a significant challenge to our societies, but it is not a new phenomenon. People have migrated out of choice or necessity since time immemorial (see Pavlenko, 2018). However, the complexification of linguistic and cultural diversity in our increasingly globalised, interconnected world presents societal organisation with a series of complex challenges, including education-specific challenges. How to support children for whom the language of the home is not the language used in the education context constitutes a key challenge. It is key because language lies at the heart of relationships, socialisation and learning. This specific challenge is neither new nor limited to contexts

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of migration. Linguistic borders have often not aligned with national borders, leaving some speakers minoritized, isolated from the larger group and/or straddling borders. The submersion of national linguistic minorities, such as the Sámi, is thankfully no longer officially endorsed by education authorities in the Nordic countries. Minority language education opportunities are now proposed in the form of minority language classes, language support and bilingual education. However, adequate educational provision in minoritised languages is still lacking for many. The language education offer has been further complexified by the arrival of families from further afield, due to conflict, environmental, professional, personal and economic reasons.

The papers in this special issue paint a variety of detailed pictures as to how linguistic and cultural diversity plays out in the Nordic ECEC context. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the dilemmas and difficulties faced by professionals working in such complex, intercultural, multilingual contexts are not dissimilar to those faced in other parts of the world (OECD, 2023). The context with which I am personally more familiar is the French one, but I have worked with colleagues from a number of other contexts and will compare and contrast the Nordic experiences related in these papers with these as I question the specificities related to the Nordic context.

Although some of the papers in this issue present data indicating that a number of ECEC centres are attempting to take what has been referred to as “the multilingual turn” (Conteh & Meier, 2014; May, 2014, 2019), it would appear that many are struggling to do so. The absence of the children’s languages in the linguistic landscapes of ECEC centres/preschools is a point in common between the Nordic and many other contexts with which I am familiar. Frequently they are not present and, when they are, they are often confined to certain areas, typically in written form at the entrance hall/door of the centre or classroom where children and their families congregate. The positioning of these written signs/displays indicates a desire to welcome linguistic diversity, to accord it a place, but at the same time remains somewhat tokenistic, delimiting this space to the peripheries of the learning space par excellence, the classroom. Languages other than the medium of instruction (MOI) are seldom present inside classrooms. There may be multilingual signs or translations posted for ease of communication with families on the fringes of classrooms, but the learning objectives of raising language awareness (LA) and promoting metalinguistic competence for all the children or to support meaning-making and learning through pedagogical translanguaging are rare occurrences. Furthermore, linguistic hierarchies can be observed through the positioning of signs in larger more colourful fonts for the MOI language(s), the misnaming or omission of some of the languages spoken by members of the community (carers, children, families), the use of English as a de facto lingua franca for families who speak languages other than the language(s) of education. Although well-meaning, the displays which are intended to signal the inclusive nature of the centre, sometimes may inadvertently cause offence to

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some, for example by featuring flags. This is an issue brought to the fore recently due to the ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Flags are symbolic representations of nation states, of political power and by extension government policies. The display of certain flags can be construed as provocative or offensive to some. Furthermore, languages and flags do not always match (see Pesch, 2021). A language can be spoken in many different countries, some linguistic minorities are discriminated against by the ruling regime of a country and some languages are not officially recognised. What exactly are we valuing when we display flags, the language competencies of the children and their families or the nation states where these languages are spoken? Are flags an appropriate means of promoting intercultural education, developing LA, affirming identity and nurturing a sense of belonging in a multicultural, multilingual context (see also Aleksić & García, 2022)?

Another point which Nordic contexts share with other comparable education contexts is the difficulty of translating policy into practice. European frameworks and recommendations, calling for greater inclusion of linguistic and cultural diversity in educational settings and conceptualising the children's languages as a resource and an enrichment for all, have been in circulation for several decades now. What is surprising is that although officially, in terms of national ministerial documents which often incorporate research-based recommendations, directives have been issued for some time regarding the inclusion of children's languages and cultures in ECEC, this does not seem to have percolated down into practice. Top-down policy in line with European directives does not automatically guarantee the enactment of these policies in classroom practices. This gap between policy and practice may be due to multiple contextual constraints, each nation influenced by its own historical, linguistic, political, social and economic development. However, initial/continuing professional development seems to be a common concern amongst researchers and practitioners alike, who complain of insufficient or inexistant training (Tobin, 2020). Educators who have not benefitted from appropriate training and support are left at a loss as to how to handle challenging linguistic and/or cultural situations. Without the knowledge to appreciate the importance of these issues both for the minority language children and their families, but also for all the members of the learning community who make up their linguistically and culturally diverse society, they may believe these questions to be unimportant. More than ever, faced with challenging situations of linguistic and cultural diversity, teachers need to be language aware, knowledgeable, sensitive and understanding of the complex needs of the children and families with whom they work. They need training and support in order to be in a position to transform policy into research-led practices. They cannot simply be left to rely on personal experiences and general beliefs. To do so is to risk reducing their actions to token acknowledgements, leaving no place for real LA raising and losing the potential positioning these languages as learning resources not only for individual emergent bilingual children, but for the whole learning community.

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There is an opportunity here for researchers and practitioners to join forces, as many of this issue's contributors have demonstrated. Collaborative/participative research can be a powerful tool to both develop in-service training and generate research data which may in turn inform policy, creating a virtuous circle (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020). With this twofold objective, we are not just dealing with models and materials, but also with knowledge, beliefs and attitudes (Paulsrud et al., 2023) in order to co-create innovative, research-based practices. Such approaches necessarily take more time than the habitual few hours of talks and questions. They require commitment from both sides and a willingness to understand the positions and viewpoints of others. However, I firmly believe that such collaborations are a surer, richer and more reassuring way to promote LA leadership, build teams and close the gap between policy and practice.

Having outlined some of the similarities and challenges shared between Nordic and other ECEC contexts, let us turn our attention to a difference. It is clear to me, after reading the contributions, that Nordic ECEC practitioners and researchers fully appreciate the importance and therefore implementation of one-on-one interactions. This is more than likely facilitated by the comparatively high staff-child ratio in Nordic contexts. By way of comparison, in 2022 a limit of 24 children aged 3–5 was introduced in French classrooms (it was previously 32), often with one part time teaching assistant in addition to the class teacher. In such circumstances, with so few adults and so many children, one-on-one interactions are rather limited and demand a very energetic teacher to constantly fly around the class, stopping to hover like a pollen-seeking bee, for a few minutes with each child, before flying off to the next one. One of the contributions calls for “a systematic focus on teacher interactional strategies” and language-stimulating activities within teacher education. I would add that this focus on interaction, should espouse the good practices which already exist concerning one-on-one interactions and should be extended to ALL adults, both professionals and families working and playing with children. As Cummins (1997, p. 111) states “micro-interactions between educators, pupils and communities are never neutral; in varying degrees, they either reinforce coercive relations of power or promote collaborative relations of power.” Just as researchers and practitioners may collaborate together to support innovative, research-based practices, families/carers and communities may also choose to pool their linguistic, cultural and pedagogical skills to collaboratively create powerful learning situations which empower not only the children but all those who participate.

As educators we have choices, in spite of the constraints under which we operate. We determine the goals we want to achieve in our classrooms. We define our own identities in interactions with pupils and communities. We cannot outsource our responsibilities to other professionals (be they speech therapists, language support staff) or to families/guardians who have their own responsibilities to shoulder. However, it is worth remembering that educators also need support in enacting new approaches. Staff agency

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to take the multilingual turn does not develop on its own, nor does top-down policy guarantee implementation. Staff are not recipients of ministerial decrees which they automatically transform into practice. Support may come from a collaborative/participatory research project, it may come from a collaborative home-school approach and/or a whole team/ECEC-unit approach. Collaborative power contributed to and shared by all participants (children, educators, families/guardians, researchers) will allow us to progress further down the pathway of (critical) language awareness, so that harrowing, disempowering and socially unacceptable experiences such as the one related in the opening testimony are no longer lived by anyone.

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