

# The future in a bubble: Supporting Finnish early childhood professionals working in diverse settings

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the knowledge about early childhood education and care (ECEC) personnel's perception of the support structures that are most effective in assisting them in their work with culturally and linguistically diverse children. This qualitative case-based study examined one of Finland's most culturally diverse regions, near the capital Helsinki. The thematic analysis of interviews with 18 ECEC personnel working across five ECEC professional teams indicated that the support structures in place for ECEC personnel to work with children from immigrant and minority groups consist of a complex network of interconnected areas within the Finnish educational ecosystem, such as the national curriculum or the regional formalities and procedures. These interconnected factors are rooted in cultural and educational frameworks, local initiatives and unit-level interventions. Individuals' personal experiences (living abroad, teaching in multicultural childcare settings) and willingness to engage in professional learning as part of a team influence the effectiveness of these support structures aimed at providing in-service training and pedagogical support for the staff working in culturally diverse settings. The study contributes to the literature by utilising the voices of ECEC professional teams to identify the most beneficial and the most needed support mechanisms for educators to work effectively with culturally and linguistically diverse children. The study also

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highlights the critical role of reflection in uncovering educators' intentions to promote issues of equity and equality in their settings.

#### KEYWORDS

cultural diversity, early childhood education, multilingualism, professional teams

### Key insights

#### What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper uses a qualitative case study approach to explore the perceptions of early childhood education and care (ECEC) staff of the support structures most beneficial in their work in culturally and linguistically diverse settings. It also explores the support mechanisms that professional teams identify as lacking as they work towards linguistically and culturally inclusive ECEC.

#### What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The paper reveals that the support system for ECEC personnel is weak in certain areas and heavily reliant on others to develop teachers' capacity to build minority children's identities and sense of belonging in Finnish society. The use of guided critical reflection research with ECEC professionals was useful in identifying beneficial and needed supports for adapting to an increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse student population.

## INTRODUCTION

*I see that this job is the future in a bubble. We are moving towards this kind of [diverse] world, so it's important.*

(T4, Outi, Pedagogy development teacher)

Worldwide, participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) has increased steadily, including more children from vulnerable and marginalised backgrounds over the past few decades (OECD, 2023). In the last 10 years, the number of individuals from an immigrant background in Finland increased almost twofold (Statista, 2025). This has resulted in a substantial increase in the number of young children from immigrant and other marginalised backgrounds accessing Finland's public and private ECEC settings, especially in the capital city (Lastikka & Lipponen, 2016). Despite their overall increase in numbers, children from immigrant backgrounds and minority groups worldwide are less frequently enrolled in ECEC or tend to experience lower-quality and segregated ECEC settings (Bélanger et al., 2019; Blanden et al., 2023). In Finland and the other Nordic countries, the meaningful inclusion of children from immigrant and other culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in ECEC settings is increasingly being researched (Alstad, 2024; Arvola

et al., 2021; Garvis & Harju-Luukkainen, 2023). While there have been educational reforms in the last 10 years to promote equality, equity and social justice, ECEC teachers continue to lack clear pedagogical guidelines to support the inclusion of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Ginner Hau et al., 2020; Keles et al., 2021; Paavola & Pesonen, 2021).

According to the European Commission (2021) and OECD (2023), recommendations to increase the involvement of children from disadvantaged or minority groups in ECEC settings include reducing the density of diverse children in certain facilities, recruiting highly qualified personnel, encouraging family engagement and providing leadership support. To implement these recommendations, the European Commission (2021) recommends that plans should be informed by feedback from stakeholders.

Given the increased cultural and linguistic diversity in the Finnish ECEC, and in order to understand the existing support and the challenges of the Finnish ECEC personnel, we were guided in this study by the following research questions:

RQ1 What kinds of support do ECEC teachers and coordinators working in professional teams currently rely on in daycares with children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds?

RQ2 What additional support do these team members indicate they need?

## Finnish educational ecosystem

The Finnish ECEC system functions under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Culture. It is run by the Finnish National Agency for Education, which regularly revises and publishes the national core curriculum, which guides all provisions applicable to day-care providers across the country for children aged 9 months to 6 years. More recently, the Finnish ECEC started facing several challenges in realising the recommendations to recruit highly qualified personnel and meet the needs of children from immigrant and minority backgrounds. There is a lack of extensive ECEC teacher training to work with children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who may have different ways of dressing, customs, religious beliefs and attitudes about children's learning and development (Lastikka & Lipponen, 2016).

In addition to the lack of extensive training and tensions around working with culturally and linguistically diverse children, there are challenges within the Finnish ECEC system that may interfere with reform. Heilala et al. (2021) highlighted various challenges in attracting and retaining personnel, particularly qualified ECE teachers, to work in Finnish ECEC settings. One specific challenge the authors noted was the misalignment between prior legislation to consolidate the teams composed of multiple professionals and the realities of high turnover and staff member shortages that make it difficult to form these teams. Other challenges to ECEC retention noted across the literature include low esteem in the field (Perho & Korhonen, 2012), inadequate compensation, excessive workloads, limited resources (Eskelinen & Hjelt, 2017) and reduced time for pedagogical leadership (Onnismaa et al., 2017). The result of these systemic challenges is an acute nationwide shortage of ECEC teachers (4000 teaching positions), especially in the capital area. This shortage is expected to grow in the coming years due to the high retirement rate of ECEC teachers (Chydenius, 2024). The pronounced personnel shortage and the stated plans to increase the percentage of qualified staff from 39% to 60% by 2030 (Chydenius, 2024) underscore the necessity of implementing effective measures to better support ECEC teachers.

## Theoretical frameworks

Various theoretical frameworks may be used to conceptualise how to implement effective support for ECEC teachers as they educate an increasingly diverse population of young children. We opted for the conceptual tool of 'educational ecosystems', which originated in biological ecosystems (Niemi, 2021) and captures Finland's experience best. The concept uncovers the importance of three aspects: *interconnectedness* (Habermas, 1987); *information sharing* for increased policy legitimacy (Wheeler-Bell, 2017); and the role of *diversity* and diverse partnerships as a reform resource (Mason, 2016). Although Finland has demonstrated proficiency in all three dimensions, the evolving societal context and contemporary challenges necessitate research that accurately reflects the current educational landscape.

Limited research exists regarding the support needs of teachers, mainly focusing on newly qualified teachers (Harju & Niemi, 2018). We could not identify any studies using the conceptual tool of 'educational ecosystems' to explore the perspectives of Finnish ECEC personnel about their work with predominantly multicultural populations. This is a gap in the research, as ECEC policy and reform efforts could benefit from hearing the voices of ECEC staff. When teachers' voices inform education improvement initiatives, such as meaningfully including children from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds in ECEC settings, those efforts are likely to be more efficacious and benefit both educators and their students (Cohen et al., 2013). Using the conceptual tool of 'educational ecosystems' to highlight the role of ECEC personnel turns teachers' roles as passive recipients of top-down reform directives into active bottom-up agents of change in the educational transformation process (Datnow, 2020).

Another important component to consider in the educational transformation process is the nature of professional development that should be in place for ECEC personnel. A key aspect of the professional development of ECEC teachers is the role of critical reflection in examining their practices to support all young children in their care (Anton & Aerila, 2024). Transformative learning theory involves a fundamental shift in perspective and understanding, anchored in a context and with social dimensions that have implications for fostering change (Taylor, 2017). According to Mezirow (2003), critical reflection is an essential component of the transformative learning theory and requires an intentional and habitual inward and outward process that complements other forms of reflection. It aims to authentically support teachers' development, improve teaching practices and contribute to a more just education and society (Zeichner, 2019). Considering the positionality of minority children and their families within Finnish society, the use of critical reflection enables educators to transcend superficial inclusion and work towards systemic change that benefits young minority children.

Liu (2015) identified four processes that define critical reflection:

[It] is a process of constantly (1) analysing, (2) questioning, and (3) critiquing established assumptions of oneself, schools, and the society about teaching and learning, and the social and political implications of schooling, and (4) implementing changes to previous actions that have been supported by those established assumptions for the purpose of supporting student learning and a better schooling and more justice society for all children.

(pp. 144–145)

In addition to its established focus on the individual, critical reflection includes more circumscribed aspects based on teachers' personal identity, beliefs, values and sense of agency (Escamilla & Meier, 2018). Further, the credibility, sustainability and effectiveness of critical reflection are significantly influenced by social collaboration (Escamilla & Meier, 2018; Philp-Clark

& Grieshaber, 2024). From this perspective, all educators would benefit from participating in critical reflection about their practice situated within the larger sociopolitical context. This could provide educators with guidance, resources and opportunities transferable to a positive learning culture and ongoing transformative reflective practice (Philp-Clark & Grieshaber, 2024).

## The role of ECEC professional teams

ECEC teachers in Finland work together in professional teams made up of members from various educational backgrounds to meet the needs of their learners, which provides a ready-made context for joint critical reflection. Teams consist of three staff members (one ECEC teacher and two nursery aides) per group of children, each working with seven children aged 3–5 years (Karila & Kupila, 2023). Starting in 2030, the staff structure mandates that two out of the three members of each team possess a bachelor's degree (Karila & Kupila, 2023). ECEC teachers with higher education are known as 'teachers in ECEC' or 'kindergarten teachers' if they graduated from a teacher education programme, or 'social pedagogues' or 'social welfare workers' if they graduated from a university of applied sciences (Act 540/2018, 2018; Karila et al., 2023). In addition to the three core staff members, each ECEC team receives dedicated support from special education teachers and special needs assistants to work on shared tasks or with particular groups of children (Karila et al., 2023; Onnismaa, 2017).

A number of studies in Finland have explored what occurs on ECEC professional teams, including studies focused on the responsibilities and division of labour among individual team members (e.g., Heiskanen et al., 2021), how well professional teams can meet the needs of children and their families (e.g., Äikäs et al., 2023) and the features of professional development to better enhance collaborative practices on ECEC teams (Furu & Valkonen, 2021). Limited research has been conducted on the kinds of support teachers working on these teams (Harju & Niemi, 2018) indicate they need. Such research could indicate the support structures that would help team members to provide high-quality ECEC to an increasingly diverse population of young children.

## Current study

This study sought to uncover the factors that ECEC professional teams perceive as supportive of their work in daycares with predominantly multicultural populations. Throughout the paper, we use the term 'multicultural' to indicate children from diverse linguistic and cultural populations. Building on the work of Niemi (2021), we collected narratives from these educators about their personal ecosystem, some drawing on their personal histories as migrants, as well as their experiences with cultural and linguistic diversity and the broader educational ecosystem. We considered possible power relations on teams involving ECEC professionals with different roles, and how ECEC teams interacted with the structures inherent within the current Finnish sociopolitical context, where there are polarised attitudes towards immigration (Rovamo et al., 2024).

## Study context

This study was conducted in one of the most culturally diverse communities in South Finland, which has undergone significant demographic changes in recent decades. Since 1990, the number of foreign language speakers has increased over 20-fold, with nearly

51,000 individuals in 2024 alone (Statistics Finland, 2025). The capital region serves most of it, resulting from both external and internal migration. The youngest generation (children in daycare) has the second largest percentage of foreign language speakers, surpassed only by individuals aged 30–50 years (Statistics Finland, 2025). This demographic shift has significant implications for Finland's educational system and societal integration efforts. The growing linguistic diversity among young children presents both challenges and opportunities for early childhood education providers and policymakers, who must adapt Finnish policy documents (Bergroth et al., 2022), pre-service and in-service teacher education (Alstad, 2024; Kahila et al., 2023) and teaching methods and resources (Arvola et al., 2021; Hofslundsengen et al., 2023) to accommodate multiple languages. Furthermore, this trend suggests that Finland's cultural landscape has become increasingly diverse and will continue to do so in the coming decades as these multilingual children grow into adulthood. In 2024, one-third of the children residing in the municipality where the research was conducted were documented as bi- or multilingual, the most significant percentage of non-native speakers among neighbouring regions in the Helsinki Metropolitan area (personal communication, May 2024). Projections indicate that by 2025, one out of every five residents in this area will speak a mother tongue other than Finnish (Tietopalveluyksikkö, 2013).

With the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of ECEC as a backdrop, our focus was on 'support structures' that ECEC staff working in professional teams identified as beneficial in their daily work in highly diverse ECEC settings. The discussion questions touched the educational ecosystem in order to cover crucial supports as widely as possible.

## METHOD

This research employed a critical case methodology (Diem et al., 2023) based on a semi-structured interview approach with professional teams. Critical case study research is 'a methodology that can help scholars and practitioners understand complex issues identified within various educational contexts' (Diem et al., 2023, p. 255) and provides an in-depth look at key processes. The aim was to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena occurring in one of the most culturally diverse cities in the capital area.

## Participants

Participants for this study were intentionally recruited from daycares located in this municipality in Southern Finland, chosen for its pronounced multicultural characteristics. Only 7% of the ECEC units in this municipality are not predominantly multicultural daycares (PMDs), and serve mainly Finnish or Swedish mother tongue speakers, the two main official languages of Finland. After obtaining a research permit from the municipal authorities, the study was promoted through the local department of education to local daycare centres. Potential participants were informed through an email sent by municipality representatives outlining the study's purpose and the interview procedures. The criterion for participating was that teams included at least two individuals working in the same daycare facility. The researchers contacted teachers who expressed interest and scheduled interviews with them in the spring of 2023 and 2024.

In all, 18 ECEC staff members (Table 2) were interviewed. They were members of five teams comprising a minimum of two and a maximum of seven individuals employed in various roles. All participants identified as female; 16 identified as Finnish, and two identified as non-Finnish, with experience in ECEC between 3 and 31 years. All worked in daycares with over 70% of the children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Table 1), with

TABLE 1 Sample interview questions.

Questions for teachers	Questions for coordinators
<b>RQ1: What are the current support structures identified by ECEC teachers and coordinators working in PMDs?</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How long have you worked with your current team?</li> <li>• When you encounter challenges related to cultural or linguistic differences, whose support do you seek out?</li> <li>• What resources, approaches or strategies do you use most in your work with culturally diverse groups? Who provides these resources or strategies?</li> <li>• Do you and your colleagues talk about your personal beliefs, values or cultural assumptions? Do you connect these conversations to your work with children and families?</li> <li>• How many years have you worked in early childhood education, and how long in multicultural daycares? Over time, has your worldview (thinking about diversity, fairness and inclusion) changed? If so, how?</li> <li>• When new staff join your team, generally how prepared (do you think) they are to engage in culturally responsive pedagogy? If/when they need support, how does the team help them learn and grow?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is hiring staff for PMDs different from hiring for regular daycares? Is it harder or easier? Do hiring practices show a clear focus on equity, cultural competence and linguistic diversity?</li> <li>• What are some of the unique needs of PMD teams compared to regular daycare teams, especially when working with different languages, cultures and inclusive approaches?</li> <li>• When new staff join a PMD, how prepared are they to engage in culturally responsive pedagogy? If/when they need support, how does the city provide it?</li> <li>• What training or learning opportunities have been the most helpful or eye-opening for PMD staff working with children and families from different cultural backgrounds? What made them effective?</li> <li>• How are unfair or discriminatory attitudes, like racism, handled in PMDs? What steps or systems are in place to ensure staff are treated fairly and that all families feel safe and respected?</li> </ul>
<b>RQ2: What additional support structures do ECEC teachers and coordinators working in PMDs indicate they need?</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kinds of barriers make it harder for you to include different languages, cultures and ways of thinking in your teaching as a team? Are there rules, systems or expectations that get in the way?</li> <li>• How do team roles and responsibilities affect how you and others share ideas or support each other in your team? Do some people have more say than others?</li> <li>• How do public opinions or attitudes about immigration and cultural diversity align (or clash) with your professional values and responsibilities in PMDs? How do you handle it when these views are in conflict?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What competencies do staff in PMDs need for further improvement in the local PMD teams to ensure equity and inclusion for all children and families? What kind of support (training or tools) would help them most?</li> <li>• How do local policies and resources affect how PMDs implement multilingual pedagogy in different areas? Do some areas get more support than others?</li> <li>• What are the implications of having some predominantly Finnish daycares and other PMDs in the city? Who gains the most from this setup, and who might face challenges or miss out?</li> </ul>

children from 20–30 different countries in each ECEC unit. Following the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity guidelines (TENK, 2023), the participants provided their informed consent to participate in the study, were assured of anonymity and were informed of their right to withdraw from the project at any time. Five separate interviews were conducted: three by the first author in English and two in English and Finnish, with the support of the second author.

## Interviews

Interviews were organised with each of the five ECEC teams of teachers and coordinators (Table 2). The interviews included 21 questions addressed to all team members

TABLE 2 Participants.

Team	Approximate percentage of CALD children in daycare	Name (pseudonyms)	Role	Experience in ECEC (years)
T1	70%	Aurora	Kindergarten teacher (3–5-year-olds)	4
		Beata	Pedagogy development teacher	7
		Cwene	Special education teacher (early childhood)	7
T2	85%	Dita	Kindergarten teacher (3–5-year-olds)	28
		Emma	Daycare centre director	20
T3	90%	Fiia	Practical nurse/Nursery aide	20
		Grete	Special education teacher (early childhood)	31
		Heli	Kindergarten teacher (3–5-year-olds)	18
T4	80%	Ilona	Kindergarten teacher (3–5-year-olds)	26
		Johanna	Kindergarten teacher (3–5-year-olds)	10
		Krista	Special needs assistant	3
		Lumi	Children's instructor/Childcare worker	10
		Maarit	Special education teacher (early childhood)	18
		Noora	Social welfare worker	5
5	N/A	Outi	Pedagogy development teacher	22
		Pirkko	ECE specialist	21
		Riitta	Language and culture coordinator	27
		Sari	Language and culture coordinator	7

Abbreviation: CALD, culturally and linguistically diverse.

present about their backgrounds and experiences, work contexts, culturally sustaining pedagogical competence, team support and future goals and needs (Table 1). Every team member responded individually to specific questions. In some cases, participants supplemented the contributions of others or indicated their agreement through words and gestures. The questions were intentionally worded to encourage participants to engage in inward and outward critical reflection and stimulate the exploration of their work context. The format provided a structured framework while allowing flexibility to adapt the questions based on the evolving nature of the conversation (Mauldin & Chambers, 2023).

The five interviews were conducted in the video-conferencing platform Zoom (<https://zoom.us/>), which allowed for the recording of audio and video files to create transcripts. Each interview lasted approximately 90 min.

The first and third authors developed the interview protocol, and a list of questions organised into separate areas. The original interview questions were prepared in English and translated into Finnish by the second author, a native Finnish speaker. Based on the participants' requests for clarification, some interview questions were refined to ensure 'leading with meaning' in order to compensate for power differentials that might ignore some voices or perspectives (Mauldin & Chambers, 2023, p. 570) and to address sensitive interview topics more effectively by, for example, contextualising the questions within the sociopolitical and spatial environment (Brown & Danaher, 2019). The data were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

## Data analysis

The analysis of the interviews was based on a hermeneutic approach, which considers the historical and cultural contexts mediated through language (Gadamer, 2013). The primary analytical method used was data-driven reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The initial phase comprised a thorough examination of the data by the first author to gain familiarity with the aspects of the 'support structures' received or needed by the professional daycare team members. Initial codes (e.g., support provided by colleagues, coordinators, people of diverse cultures) were generated and colour-coded in the text. The identified codes indicated a diverse range of workplace support with some repetitive patterns, which were organised according to the source of support. Four broader, descriptive themes resulted and in this phase, it was observed that some initial codes were closely aligned with one theme, whereas other initial codes were associated with more than one theme, generating overlaps (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The first author reviewed the themes, re-examined which responses were most frequent and layered the themes based on the identified commonalities of the main support aspects, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. The figures were used to visually represent the key themes identified during analysis, making the complex overlapping patterns more accessible to the reader. Subsequently, the results from the analysis were discussed among the three researchers, re-refined and validated by all three authors (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

## Positionality

Our positionalities and experiences are inseparable from our research and influence our epistemologies, assumptions and beliefs. Throughout the study, we sought to reflect on our identities as outsiders and insiders to Finnish culture, to 'power and inequity' (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017), and how our identities shaped our perspectives and the design and execution of this research. We all identified as white women with extensive experience working in ECEC settings globally with multilingual students from diverse cultural backgrounds and positionalities. One author was born in Finland, the others, while familiar with the Finnish context, were viewed by some as cultural outsiders. The lack of shared cultural background between the first author and the participants was particularly important to consider during interviews and in data interpretation. To address this, we engaged in continuous reflection and dialogue as a research team to check for misunderstandings and intentional questioning of dominant knowledge systems.

## RESULTS

### Research question 1

#### The current system: Four areas of support

Data analysis revealed that the multiple ways these teachers received support for educating young children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds could be organised as coming from four main sources: the Finnish education system; the local municipality; the ECEC units; and self- and peer support. Figure 1 presents a visual representation of the interconnectedness of these supports to their corresponding responsible entity. Representative quotations from the participants are included to illustrate these findings and confirm their trustworthiness.

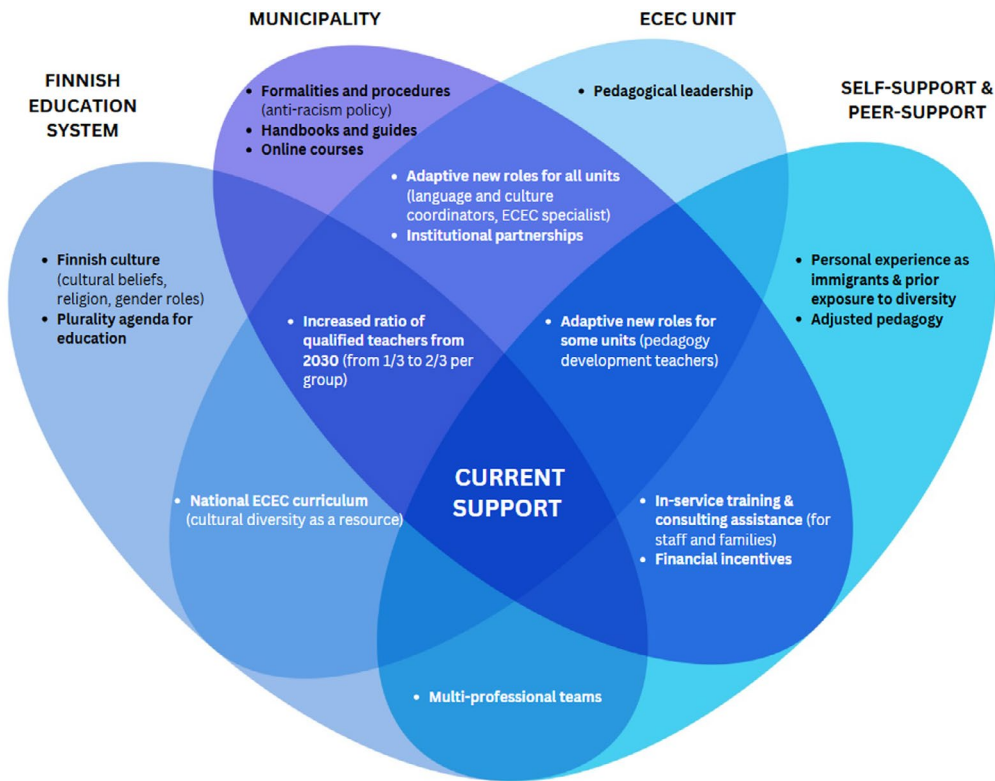


FIGURE 1 Four sources of support.

### *Finnish education system*

The Finnish education system provides the organisational structure and curricular guidelines for all ECEC programmes across the country and the basic principles of teacher preparation in higher education. This encompasses both the societal context and power dynamics, for example, as teachers called into question the ‘myth of a homogeneous nation’ (Tervonen, 2014). The educational framework and national curriculum design in Finland are deeply rooted in the country’s history and cultural values. The participants noticed the tensions between the two different approaches. On the one hand, they acknowledged that a standardised ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach was still present in teachers’ practices, and it originated from a unique cultural perspective where individuals are expected to fit into the Finnish mould. On the other hand, they promoted a ‘two-way’ process of integration that required cultural reinforcement. Teachers were aware that, when transitioning from a single cultural perspective to a dual perspective, they continued to rely on their own cultural foundations, on which they added new, inclusive pedagogical approaches and practices.

*The most common issue [is] that when you [immigrant] come to Finland, [ECEC] workers think that now you need to act like a Finn, and you need to accept our values and the things we do, and [have] no questions about it. But it's a two-way [learning process], we also have some rules... The coin has two sides, we must learn from each other, be accepting of... and be flexible both ways.*

(T2, Emma, Daycare centre director)

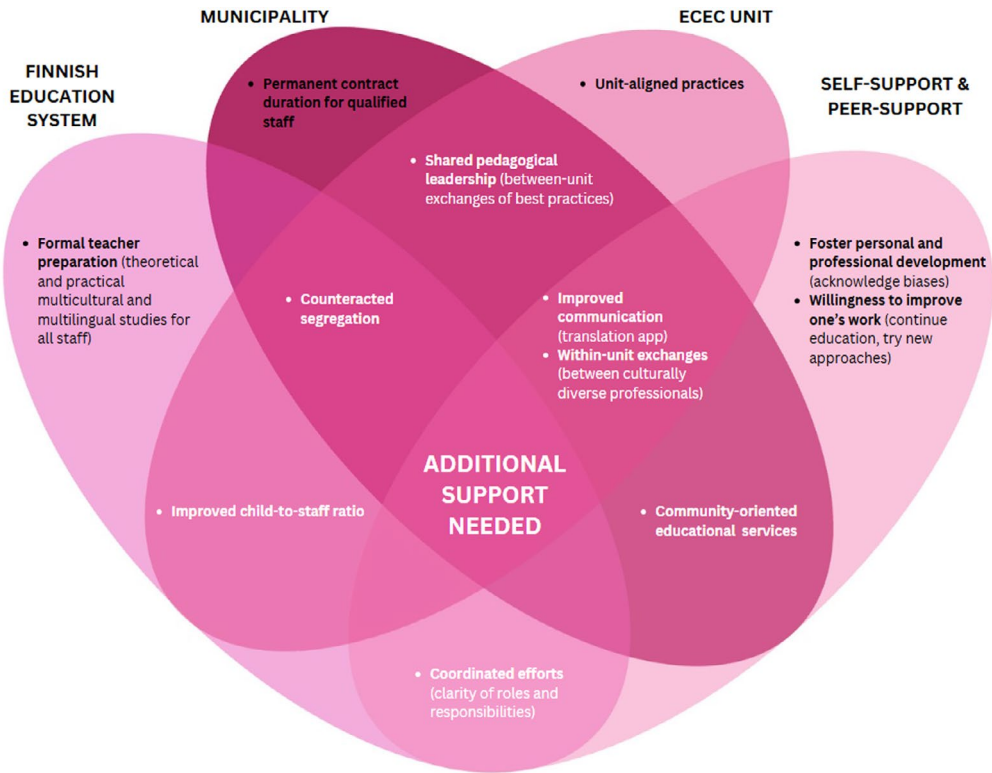


FIGURE 2 Additional support needed.

The national curriculum's emphasis on the principle of plurality and inclusivity, defined as 'society in diversity', was seen as a challenge for some ECEC staff, especially those new to working in daycares with predominantly multicultural populations. Those staff with greater experience and cultural exposure have shifted away from conventional categorisations or differentiations, moving closer to the notion of the 'unity in diversity' characteristic of inclusive ECEC environments. Unlike other educational systems, the Finnish system is driven by a pluralistic agenda (Millei, 2019). Acknowledging and accepting the individual and team challenges that come from implementing this agenda functions as a driving force for the staff we interviewed. They worked and strived to achieve it, even if they were not entirely aligned with it yet.

*Some families are resistant [to the idea] that their child can or cannot do that because it's either a boy or a girl. [We need] to be respectful of their culture but still firm that we do things differently here and try to find a balance between those things; this discussion is the hardest one for me.*

(T4, Noora, Social welfare worker)

*In 2015, when a lot of Syrian refugees came, my mom worked with them, and we actually have two or three families that we have befriended. They're still our friends, and we've learned a lot from their cultures. It benefited me in my work... Like... some cultures really don't see children as competent individuals 'till they're like seven, and that's something that I've discussed with a lot of my coworkers here when they're frustrated. My [our] way isn't always the only right way to do it.*

(T1, Aurora, Kindergarten teacher)

The current national curriculum highlights that cultural diversity is perceived as a resource (FNAE, 2022). In practice, ECEC staff must adhere to these principles by incorporating children's linguistic backgrounds while simultaneously ensuring that children acquire sufficient Finnish language proficiency to be school-ready.

*One of the main things at this moment is that we have to notice all the different cultures and religions we have in this kindergarten. It's not a choice; we can't choose whether to do it [or not].*

(T2, Emma, Daycare centre director)

### *Municipality*

Finnish municipalities usually provide over half the funding required for organising ECEC services and receive one-third as governmental funding. The researched municipality initiated preliminary actions to align with the country's professional competency requirements. The new legal standards for staff structure were anticipated to lay the groundwork for an enhanced support system in the coming years, increasing higher-qualified job opportunities, specialised personnel and policies aligned with an anti-racist approach.

*We have already raised the positions and vacancies in daycare, so we've already tried to reach the numbers the law requires in 2030. The system has been slowly changing, and some teams are already formed according to the law, which will be official in 2030.*

(T5, Pirkko, ECE specialist)

The highly diverse municipality where the study was conducted has progressively implemented more adaptable approaches to existing staff duties and responsibilities. In 2011, the municipality employed three language and culture coordinators. Since 2022, two additional language and culture coordinators have been recruited to offer training assistance during transitions between daycares, oversee the development of handbooks and guides tailored to the Finnish context, and provide in-person in-service training and assistance and online courses for teachers and nursery nurses. In 2020, a new position was created when a group of ECEC educators took on the role of pedagogy development teachers, focusing on multicultural or multilingual aspects within single ECEC units under the same pedagogical leadership. Beginning in 2023, the ECEC specialist role was introduced to assist the language and culture coordinators. Those who received their support described these newly established positions with great enthusiasm.

*The main reason [for having five language and culture coordinators] is that the number of children whose mother language is not Finnish or Swedish has increased in [municipality]. If we look at the official statistics, that is 34%. But if we ask the headmasters or the teachers in daycare centres, it's much bigger, it's almost 40%.*

(T5, Riitta, Language and culture coordinator)

*She [the pedagogy development teacher] is a very valuable resource in houses such as ours [with 70% culturally and linguistically diverse populations]. In an ideal world, every [ECEC] house would have one.*

(T1, Aurora, Kindergarten teacher)

*I try to support language and cultural coordinators. We work together to develop a system to cover the whole city and be more effective. It [ECEC specialist] was needed to take a little bit of the administrative load away from the language and culture coordinators so that they could focus more on consulting teachers and helping families and children.*

(T5, Pirkko, ECEC specialist)

Among the formalities and procedures, teachers felt that the zero-tolerance racism policy was instituted to protect children, families and the team's efforts, thus creating a safe and inclusive environment for all.

*They [racist teachers] don't stay that long here because this is a workplace where you have to be open, not racist. It's such a diverse house, and you have to work with it every day.*

(T1, Beata, Pedagogy development teacher)

*We have zero tolerance for racism. This matter is discussed when people are hired for their positions. Racism is considered unprofessional behaviour in all forms. We have a clear protocol to follow if we suspect that someone is not following professional ethics in their work.*

(T5, Pirkko, ECE specialist)

The financial rewards offered were believed to potentially make the job more attractive, especially for qualified teachers working in daycares with predominantly multicultural populations.

*We have two different percentages: you [qualified teacher] get one raise for 50% [of the children in daycare being multicultural], maybe 150 [euros] per month, and if you have over 70% multilingual children in the daycare, you get a slightly higher raise.*

(T5, Pirkko, ECE specialist)

Institutional partnerships at the municipal level provided daycares, teachers and families with additional educational materials that exceed those available at the unit level.

*At the library, there are a lot of books in different languages. The librarians are coming to the daycare centre, and they [children] can make their own library cards so that they can go and borrow books from the library. It's made easy this way. [...] The librarians are very flexible because they think that if some books are getting lost [...], the benefits are bigger than not lending any books.*

(T3, Fiia, Nursery aide & Heli, Kindergarten teacher)

### *ECEC unit support*

The third area of support was the ECEC unit, which is characterised by daycare centres organised in single large or multiple small locations. These units share a unified pedagogical leadership and are collectively responsible for approximately the same number of children, as determined by the municipality.

In the past, professional teams were not always seen as a support mechanism, but rather as threats. However, attitudes have changed over time, and ECE staff members have become more willing to collaborate with professionals from different backgrounds.

*When we started to work [in professional teams] some years ago, it felt like a threat. [We thought] 'Somebody is coming to my group telling me what to do, to look at what I am doing.' 'Are you doing [something] wrong?' But as of now, we have learned that they mean good. But yes, before, it was [seen] like a threat.*

(T4, Ilona, Kindergarten teacher)

The team's capacity to foresee and grasp the origins of insecurity and the requirements for building confidence indicated that diverse teams could demonstrate pedagogical leadership. They could create a safe space to facilitate the necessary guidance and pedagogical support for successfully adjusting one's pedagogy to a multicultural childcare setting.

*It's not easy to say, 'I need a bit of help'. And, of course, it's understandable. We have many years of experience and are quite confident in what we do and how we do it. But it doesn't go like this if you haven't been working for a long time, or you don't have an education, or you don't know the [Finnish] language... or you didn't have any contacts with different cultures.*

(T2, Emma, Daycare centre director & Dita, Kindergarten teacher)

### *Self-support and peer support*

Although external support was viewed as crucial, it was not the only factor that mattered to the ECEC teachers. Self-support refers to all previous personal experiences and exposure to diversity, while peer support refers to individual teachers' peer feedback and shared experiences. While we lacked compiled data on the percentage of personnel with migration backgrounds or experience in diverse ECEC settings in Finland, on each team we interviewed a member shared a personal narrative related to their own identity (Finnish national living and studying abroad). They also spoke of working in racially and ethnically diverse ECEC spaces, which motivated their choice for adjusting their pedagogy.

*I am [was] myself an immigrant, I've been moving around, and I've been an ESL [English as a second language] student. So, it's very easy for me to relate to these parents, the families, and the children when everything is new.*

(T1, Aurora, Kindergarten teacher)

*When I started in '96, I worked in an Islamic kindergarten, so I had multicultural families only. All of my team members were also from other countries, so I was the only Finnish worker. I have always worked with multicultural children, team workers, and families. [...] It has helped a lot in my work. I feel very confident among Muslim people.*

(T2, Dita, Kindergarten teacher)

## **Additional support needed**

Data analysis revealed that the teams would benefit from additional support in the four areas which are represented in [Figure 2](#). This visual representation retains the four core areas represented in [Figure 1](#) and the role of *interconnectedness*, *information sharing* and *diversity* of voices specific to the educational ecosystem in areas where support is needed. Teams' responses suggested that the strengthened support mechanisms extend beyond immediate professional requirements and target a broader societal objective of integration that requires coordinated efforts across the educational ecosystem.

*We want to support them [children and families] to manage to live here. Of course, it's also for us. We do it for us and our country in a way. [...] Our focus is always on the child; we want the best for the child. Wherever he or she comes from, we treat him or her as our own child, and that's the goal.*

(T2, Emma, Daycare centre director)

## Additional support needed from the Finnish education system (authorities)

The comments below are indicative of the three key areas where daycare professionals expressed a need for additional support: mandatory theoretical and practical multicultural education for ECEC professionals; efforts to reduce segregation; and an improvement in the child-to-staff ratio. All interviewed teams identified a crucial need for thorough initial training of educators in PMDs, encompassing compulsory theoretical and practical aspects of culture and language awareness. They felt that this would help ECEC teachers in their jobs and potentially increase the appeal of the teaching job.

*I've noticed in our [formal] studies that we don't have a lot of courses that prepare you for this [working with culturally and linguistically diverse children]. So, you have to learn it [by] yourself.*

(T1, Aurora, Kindergarten teacher)

*When the percentage of multilingual children [in the hiring daycare] rises up to 50% or more, then it becomes more difficult [to recruit].*

(T5, Pirkko, ECEC specialist)

The interviewed teacher groups observed that geographic and educational segregation were closely linked issues that affected equity. The coordinating team and the ECEC staff had different perspectives and insights. The coordinators alluded to the existence of educational segregation but believed that it was beyond their control. In contrast, the staff felt that the consequences were too significant to ignore without getting into details about whether or how the adverse effects of segregation could be counteracted.

*If the people living around that daycare are multilingual, they will apply for a place at a nearby daycare, and that's usually why it is offered. They kind of naturally become more multilingual than in areas where there are fewer multilingual people living.*

(T5, Pirkko, ECE specialist)

*There is a lot of inequality in the [ECEC] environment in [the capital area]. They have these different parts of the city with different numbers of immigrants. These areas are not equal. For example, they have difficulties in employing Finnish-speaking personnel because some Finnish people do not like to work in this diverse environment.*

(T3, Grete, Special education teacher)

One team raised the concern that the child-to-staff ratio, which was decided at the national level for all daycares across Finland, should be adjusted to consider specific local needs. This team detailed the reasons for their daycare's constant requirement for a larger workforce so that each adult could provide more attention to individual children. They contend that a lower child-to-staff ratio is particularly crucial for PMDs.

*Somebody has to wake up somewhere! This kind of children need [to be taught in] much smaller groups. We need this kind of people [special needs teachers, assistants] working with us all the time so that we can separate the children into smaller groups and give them more... because they need more.*

(T4, Ilona, Kindergarten teacher)

## Additional support needed from the municipality

The analysis identified three areas where these daycare professionals indicated they needed additional support from the municipality: job stability; the need for interpreters or other translation tools; and reaching out to parents. Some qualified and highly experienced teachers among the interviewees discussed the difficulties of lacking permanent job positions. This issue affected not only their own stability and well-being, but also the entire professional team they collaborated with, creating uncertainty about the continuity of support in the future.

*We [some of the non-permanent staff] have just a year at the time [contracts], so it would be better if we were the whole-time [permanent staff] so that we can look far to the future, and they [colleagues] can know that we are going to be there next year.*

(T4, Outi, Pedagogy development teacher)

The allocation of interpreters for daycare centres through a centralised system (Tulka services) was considered essential for effective communication with families. However, this service often fell short of meeting their current demand. Participants suggested that alternative digital solutions (e.g., Talking Points) could offer direct and quick access to translation services, facilitating both verbal and written exchanges.

*It's so different to speak to a parent that you can't communicate with on a daily basis because we have this language barrier. And then you get the interpreter [via Tulka services], and you get understood, and the parent is understood. I would like to have it [direct communication] every day with all the parents. But we can't use our interpreter resources every day. [...] So, we try to find these different [digital] ways.*

(T1, Aurora, Kindergarten teacher)

In Finland, parents are invited to actively engage in daycare activities. Some study participants observed that sometimes immigrant families do not easily step outside their comfort zones when in a foreign country. When asked about the prior practices of making home visits to check on the children's health and welfare, intended to strengthen the connection between families and ECEC, practitioners noted that home visits were already being discontinued even before the COVID-19 pandemic, which eliminated them. This cessation was attributed to constraints on time and resources, and the prevailing cultural norm in Finland of distinctly separating professional and personal life. The need for community-oriented educational services that connect families and ECEC was identified.

*It's very hard to motivate our parents to come and tell us about their culture themselves. Maybe it's because we don't have a common language, and they find it hard. Maybe it's hard for them to come during the day, or sometimes they*

*don't really understand what we're asking for. We've been trying to develop this, [...] but it's been kind of hard.*

(T1, Beata, Pedagogy development teacher)

*I think in Finland, we also have this strong mentality that work life is work life, and then private life is private life.*

(T1, Aurora, Kindergarten teacher)

## ECEC unit: Additional support needed

Two main aspects indicate that additional support professionals are considered essential from the ECEC unit in which they work: a collective understanding of teaching methods and the exchange of effective practices within and across daycare units. Data from the interviews indicated that experienced educators recognised the need to invest substantial time and effort in reinforcing unit-aligned practices. One example was using visual aids to collaborate with parents and in pedagogical activities.

*I can see and I can feel the resistance that 'Oh no, that's so difficult. We don't know how to use the pictures [visual support]!' It's so easy actually, you don't have to do anything, you just have the pictures. But I have felt it, and it always gives me some emotions that are not that nice because I know that they should do it, but they're rejecting it. But I'm going to do it again and again.*

(T2, Emma, Daycare centre director)

Two of the interviewed teams tangibly addressed the immediate changes they plan to implement, such as within-unit and between-unit exchanges of best practices. These would require more experienced team members to discuss current challenges and possible approaches with colleagues from the same ECEC unit, including the perspectives of the culturally diverse personnel.

*And now that we were speaking about this, I think that maybe you [referring to Dita, Kindergarten teacher] could come there [to the other ECEC unit under the same pedagogical director] and talk about it [best practice].*

(T2, Emma, Daycare centre director)

## Additional self-support and peer support needed

The analysis revealed two primary responsibilities the interviewees believed are held to enhance their personal and team awareness: professional behaviour in interactions with children, families and coworkers; and active broadening of professional knowledge and understanding. Teachers emphasised the importance of reconsidering their instructional approaches when describing the criteria for a successful ECE instructor in PMDs. Personal history and political views that were not fully aligned with the principles of a diverse world should be left outside the work spectrum.

*We are working with our own characters and our own history; we have our own thoughts and political ideas, and of course, we can't change all of them. And when you are working, you are professional, and you should not show some things that might show that you are not as accepting as... maybe some other workers.*

(T2, Dita, Kindergarten teacher)

An individual's prior experience, competence and willingness to improve were seen as fundamental. Staff members who actively and regularly sought opportunities for professional updates during their careers tended to be more effective in their roles and better equipped to handle evolving challenges and challenge their own biases. When ECEC professionals collaborated with culturally diverse team members, it was essential to be aware of subtle factors that may impede the utilisation of diversity as a valuable resource.

*We have teachers without formal training, but they are really skilled because they are curious to learn and eager to try new things. Sometimes, people who have formal training and work experience from working in multicultural child groups have not educated themselves over the years, so it might be that their way of working is a bit old-fashioned.*

(T5, Riitta & Sari, Language and culture coordinators)

*I still have to work on my biases. And I do notice that I have some notions that pop up, and then I'm like, [to herself]: 'That's not how you think about things. Where does this come from?'*

(T1, Aurora, Kindergarten teacher)

*It starts with us adults, and we show it so easily to kids, and we show it to [culturally diverse] workers. What is our opinion about things? [...] How is your face and body language? All that matters.*

(T2, Dita, Kindergarten teacher)

## DISCUSSION

This study provides valuable insights into the perspectives of the ECEC staff by directly incorporating their voices, thereby elucidating the support mechanisms they perceive as most effective in facilitating their work with culturally and linguistically diverse children. This section begins with an overview of the key findings linked to the guiding theoretical frameworks and the research literature, followed by recommendations for each area of support and conclusions. We also touch on how the methodological choice to develop questions that encouraged critical reflection contributed to the findings and implications for future research and practice.

An overall concern highlighted in the findings is that the support system that attracts and retains ECEC professionals working with multicultural populations is weak in certain areas and heavily reliant on others. For example, ECEC teachers in this community rely heavily on language and culture coordinators provided by the municipality and peer support at the unit level because they lack formal preparation to work with culturally and linguistically diverse young children. In this way, the Finnish decentralised education system demonstrates a remarkable capacity for reorganisation to compensate for the shortcomings of other areas. We observed an overlap between the resulting *four sources of support* (Figure 1), the *additional support needed* (Figure 2) and the broader guidelines proposed at the European and global scales, which we detail next.

The findings illustrated in Figure 1 show that the *four sources of support* represent the initiators, responsible entities or persons providing support. Using the conceptual tool of 'educational ecosystems' (Niemi, 2021) as a guiding theoretical framework, this study provides new insights into how structures in the four aspects influence each other. For instance, the elements of Finnish culture and its pluralistic agenda interacting with the national curriculum's anti-racist policies impact how willing ECEC professionals are

to continue learning and improve their inclusive practices. Most support structures were made visible as procedures and resources available at the municipal or unit level of the ECEC system. The societal context and power dynamics are significant in executing the top-down plurality agenda in municipalities and individual ECEC centres. For instance, to accomplish the national agenda, new adaptive roles—such as pedagogy development teachers—were developed at the municipal level, and additional financial incentives were provided to make the job more attractive, along with pedagogical leadership available in each daycare unit. This exemplifies how the various spheres interact and influence each other in the 'educational ecosystem'.

The ECEC professionals perceived their personal experiences and prior exposure to diversity as supporting the adjustments they made to their pedagogy when working with culturally and linguistically diverse groups of children. Analysing their own experiences as immigrants or as minorities in their teams, the interviewees discussed how they knew they had to adjust their pedagogies to better fit the needs of culturally diverse children and families. Similar findings by Gide et al. (2022) indicate that ECEC staff members who have experienced migration themselves may be better equipped to show empathy and understanding towards new families during their integration process. Additionally, participants in our study emphasised the importance of providing a safe space, along with facilitated guidance and pedagogical support for newly employed or less experienced staff members who are unfamiliar with working with predominantly multicultural populations.

The representation in Figure 2, which illustrates the *additional support needed*, highlights the importance of coordinated efforts that guide the allocation of resources and support towards a common social goal. The participants analysed the political and social implications of early childhood participation. The sociopolitically polarised attitudes that exist in Finnish society are mirrored in the unaligned views within ECEC teams. For example, the interviewed ECEC professionals discussed the existence of different attitudes towards immigration that professionals who work in PMDs might have. This matches other research findings in Finnish ECEC settings that note a range of negative attitudes towards immigrant teachers, children and their families (Alemanji, 2024; Eerola et al., 2023; Loukola, 2025). In the participants' view, this should not conflict with their work and should not represent an obstacle in prioritising the child's interests or continuously improving their practices, in order to meet the 'ethical code of diversity competence' (Melasalmi et al., 2022, p. 606).

Many adjustments emphasised by ECEC professional teams we interviewed referred to the need for improved quality interactions between professionals and children through more reasonable child-to-staff ratios and unit-aligned practices, improved communication with families through permanent translation solutions, community-oriented educational services (Vesely et al., 2017) and counteracted segregation (Lobato & Bernelius, 2023). All interviewed teams highlighted that formal teacher preparation should provide theoretical and practical multicultural and multilingual studies for all staff, complemented by in-service training and support provided by dedicated professionals provided by the municipality (e.g., pedagogy development teachers and language and culture coordinators). The findings also align with expectations from existing literature, highlighting the importance of training Finnish ECEC personnel to work with culturally and linguistically diverse children and their families (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; Lamminmäki-Vartia et al., 2020). The needed support structures identified in this research that were seen as more urgent and potentially easy to address included: within-unit perspective exchanges between ECEC professionals; between-unit exchanges of best practices; and the re-evaluation of the contract duration for qualified staff.

A final aspect of the discussion is in relation to the role of critical reflection in uncovering participants' views and suggestions. In our interviews with the five professional teams, we used critical reflection guiding questions (Table 1) to design a collective journey rather than a

collective destination. This approach revealed the existing and necessary support across all aspects of the educational ecosystem to tackle issues of equity and equality (Niemi, 2021). Critical reflection reinforces the moral connection between the enacted educational policies and ECEC professional teams' contribution and policy translation into practice. Although it has previously been suggested by Romijn et al. (2021) that it is hard to trace critical reflection in practice, the data here show that teams tangibly addressed the immediate changes they planned to implement, such as between-unit exchanges of best practice.

## Limitations

In this study, four daycare units participated out of 125 predominantly multilingual daycare units located in the researched municipality in Southern Finland. Drawing on such a small sample, generalisations cannot be drawn from the findings of this research (Diem et al., 2023). However, it resembles what one participant termed the 'future in a bubble' and initiates a conversation that necessitates further investigation through ongoing research. Further research should involve ECEC professionals who work in daycare settings with predominantly multicultural communities. We propose employing the two frameworks, which reflect the existing support and additional support, to foster further discussions initiated by local decision-makers and national policy-makers, who have the capacity to engage significantly more respondents among Finnish and non-Finnish ECEC staff members. Through qualitative and quantitative applications, these frameworks might identify existing issues and the necessary adjustments to enhance job attractiveness and improve teacher retention in PMD environments. Another limitation of this study is the insufficient representation of participants from minoritised populations. Among the 18 participants, only two identified as belonging to a minority group. Consequently, the findings may not accurately reflect the experiences or needs of these populations. This limited representation may diminish the study's capacity to capture the diversity of perspectives across cultural or racial lines and suggests using caution when generalising the findings to more diverse populations. We concur with Chydenius (2024) that it is particularly important to conduct research with ECEC personnel with migration backgrounds. Incorporating their experience as both migrants and ECEC specialists can provide data that are currently untapped or overlooked (Alemanji, 2024). This is particularly relevant when considering the recently revised curriculum (FNAE, 2022), which describes the ECEC professional staff composition as 'an asset for quality early childhood education and care when everyone's training and skills are in use' (p. 9).

## CONCLUSION

Equity has historically been the driving force behind Finland's education system and the Nordic context more broadly (Alstad, 2024; Garvis & Harju-Luukkainen, 2023). Owing to the recent shifts in population demographics, new approaches and enhanced support structures have become increasingly necessary in order to serve the increasingly diverse population of children in ECEC. This study provides a perspective on how professional teams working in daycares with culturally and linguistically diverse children in Finland engage in critical reflection to enumerate the support structures that are most effective in assisting them in their work and to surface what additional support structures are needed. Critical reflection shifts the focus from the general purposes of education to specific aspects that address equity and justice for all. We advocate using critical reflection, not as an end in itself, but rather as a skill that can be fostered and developed during pre-service and in-service training. In this

way, educators working in increasingly diverse settings can more easily bring to light the issues that they and their students face, allow for their deliberate consideration and provide more visibility in the public sphere of education.

An important insight is that guided critical reflection generated clarity of one's work purpose and agentic role, described by one participant as '*this job is the future in a bubble*'. The concept of a 'bubble' is complex and can be interpreted in various ways. One interpretation is that the scale of the support structure model can be considered limited to the reality of one highly diverse Finnish municipality, secluded from the broader Finnish society (Lobato & Bernelius, 2023). Another interpretation could be that the 'bubble' contributes to the discussion of whether immigrant families living in Finland are caught between two contradictory messages: their children are accepted for who they are in ECEC (as the national curriculum and the agenda rhetoric state, along with the efforts employed by municipalities and staff), but once they step out of the daycare, society might burst the 'bubble'. Overlooking the need to analyse similar isolated contexts in (eco)educational systems worldwide could restrict the opportunity to gain insights from communities with more extensive experience in cultural and linguistic diversity and impede the advancement of existing support systems.

The analysis thus shows that support structures exist not in isolation but within an educational ecosystem and sociopolitical context. Therefore, sustained and coordinated efforts that incorporate all four aspects of the educational ecosystem are necessary to develop support mechanisms tailored to each community globally. This involves consciously navigating the path from assimilative and supportive principles to what Chumak-Horbatsch (2017) calls truly inclusive principles. Through inwards and outwards critical reflection across the educational ecosystem, with ensured *interconnectedness*, *information sharing* and a *diversity of voices* being represented, this approach would foster proactive teams involving all members in constructive dialogues, yielding immediate and long-term results that would benefit mainstream ECEC, not just the diverse 'bubble'.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The survey was conducted and disseminated in line with the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity guidelines – TENK's privacy policy. All data were supplied anonymously and with the consent of participants. No data were collected that could be used to identify individuals or daycare units.

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