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# Implementing multilingual pedagogy in Finnish ECEC groups – from monolingual practices towards more systematic approaches

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## ABSTRACT

The study explores the implementation of multilingual pedagogy in Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. Utilising the LangPeda assessment tool, data were collected from 82 ECEC groups across 47 centres. A qualitative content analysis was conducted to evaluate the pedagogical activities. Findings reveal that while systematic multilingual pedagogy can be implemented irrespective of children's ages or the proportion of multilingual children, only 10 per cent of the groups practiced it systematically. Many ECEC personnel showed narrow engagement with multilingual activities, often due to a lack of knowledge and confidence in supporting languages other than the institution's primary language, or English. Key features influencing the implementation of multilingual pedagogy include perspective to languages, parental engagement, the use of diverse languages, and multilingual activities. The research emphasises the importance of pedagogical choices and attitudes in creating supportive multilingual learning environments, underscoring the potential benefits of multilingual practices for all children. Despite the language policies, the study finds that many educators are not adequately prepared to implement these activities, often requiring self-reflection and adaptation of their teaching methods. The results underline the significance of supporting ECEC personnel through training and resources to meet the challenges of a linguistically diverse population.

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## 1. Introduction

The growth in the multilingual population has increased the need for countries to revise their language policies towards multilingual education. In Finland, which serves as the context of this study, there has been an increase of languages spoken alongside the

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increase of immigration (Ministry of Employment and the Economy, 2022). Currently, the population growth in Finland is due to immigration (Statistics Finland, 2023), and the number of multilingual children (ages 0–6) has increased from under 9000 children (year 2000) to over 35,000 children (year 2018) (Statistics Finland, 2019). Since 2018, the national core curriculum for early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland (The Finnish National Agency of Education and Care, 2022) has acknowledged the increase of multilingual population by containing the aim of supporting the development of children's linguistic repertoires, their linguistic identities, and curiosity about languages, texts, and culture. This is in line with the policy recommendations at European level, as well as the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child which both strive at language learning from a young age and promotion of multilingual education in ECEC (Bergeron-Morin et al., 2023).

To meet the challenges of multilingualism in Finland or other countries, personnel in ECEC are required to pay attention to the centrality of languages and multilingual pedagogy. This emphasises the active responsibility of the educator for the language learners' learning processes (Alisaari & Heikkola, 2020; Harju-Autti et al., 2022), and for understanding how to act pedagogically to support each child's language skills (Lucas & Villegas, 2013). However, it seems that the personnel in ECEC do not always have sufficient means to implement a successful multilingual pedagogy, and they may even be unfamiliar with the concept of language awareness, or multilingual pedagogy (Aalto, 2019; Alisaari et al., 2019; Lahti et al., 2020). According to Pontier et al. (2020), there is a need for research targeting ECEC contexts to enhance the understanding of enactments of dynamic bilingualism and multilingualism, as well as their utility in practice and pedagogy. For example, in Finland, there is still a limited number of studies looking at the multilingual pedagogy through the lenses of the ECEC personnel.

From these premises, the study explores the currently implemented multilingual activities in Finnish ECEC context. The data of this article is a part of the Assessment of Language-Aware Environments in ECEC (KOAVA in Finnish) study (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2022), investigating the language-aware and multilingual pedagogy in Finnish ECEC groups using the LangPeda tool (Developing Language-aware Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education and Care). LangPeda tool is designed to guide ECEC personnel in promoting and assessing their language-aware working environment, multilingualism in the pedagogy, and Finnish as a second language practices in ECEC groups. The tool consists of three assessment forms: (1) assessing the language-aware learning environment, (2) examining the linguistic environment of a multilingual child in cooperation with the guardians, and (3) monitoring the development of Finnish language proficiency of a multilingual child. The forms contain sets of statements that guide ECEC personnel to examine and report the status of multilingual activities and orientations, aiming at providing ECEC centres with concrete information on how to improve their pedagogy further. This LangPeda tool has been piloted in municipalities around Finland (see the KOAVA report, Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2022).

For this study, the data were collected from 81 ECEC teams around Finland using the first form of the LangPeda. The data collection was implemented as part of a university-level in-service training course and the members of the training acted as research assistants. Thereafter, the data was analysed via data-driven qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2012).

Two research questions guide this study:

1. How do ECEC teams describe the multilingual activities they take towards implementing multilingual pedagogy and what kind of multilingual pedagogy these activities illustrate?
2. How do the activities to multilingual pedagogy vary across different age groups and multilingual groups in Finnish ECEC settings?

## 2. Orientations towards multilingual pedagogy

Children from multilingual families bring richness to the ECEC groups as their full language repertoire supports children's holistic development, and the learning experiences of the other children (Bergeron-Morin et al., 2023). Studies on multi- and bilingual programmes have shown that effective multilingual pedagogy offer children cognitive advantages over monolingual pedagogy (Bialystok, 2018), and children with specific challenges (socio-economic, linguistic, developmental, and learning) experience no extra burden from multilingual pedagogy (Kohnert & Danahy, 2007). In general, multilingual pedagogy seems to lead to good results for both minority and majority children (Kirsch et al., 2020).

The concept of pedagogy in ECEC covers practice, teaching orientation, organisation of the learning environment, and the operational culture, and it is all shaped in the sociocultural context (Kangas et al., 2021). Further, it is connected with historic, political, and societal factors of the education context in question (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2021). According to Kangas et al. (2021), traditionally, ECEC pedagogy is viewed as a tool between the outcomes defined in the curricula and other guiding documents and children's learning. However, pedagogy as a concept can also be divided into underpinning 'categories' (van Oers, 2008) that are considered central elements of pedagogy. These are, for example, interaction and care, supporting and scaffolding, teaching and content-oriented learning, and teachers' and policymakers' expertise in understanding and transforming goals behind the curriculum (see Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2021; Kangas et al., 2021). Multilingual pedagogy is connected to all the above-mentioned central elements of pedagogy and therefore multilingualism affects the entire ECEC group and many of its functions (Kirsch et al., 2020).

According to Kirsch et al. (2020) and Alisaari et al. (2019), the language pedagogies in ECEC groups are still quite monolingual, they concentrate on the official languages of the countries, and the interest in promoting home languages is relatively low or restricted to free play. This indicates that multilingual pedagogy is considered challenging by the personnel in ECEC. This is not surprising as in order to promote multilingual pedagogy ECEC personnel must possess complex knowledge, skills and competences, as well as a deep understanding of child development and early childhood pedagogy from the perspective of multilingualism. (Bergeron-Morin et al., 2023; see also Kirsch, 2021) In a study by Norheim and Moser (2020) the challenges in multilingual ECEC groups seemed to concentrate on language, asymmetrical power relations and cultural differences or disagreements. It is safe to say that there is a recognised need for in-service training, readily available educational packages, increased and improved resources, and research-based information pertaining to multilingual pedagogy (Harju-Autti et al., 2022).

Multilingual pedagogy acknowledges children's linguistic repertoires and makes visible the different histories, identities, heritages, and ideologies of multilingual children and families (García & Wei, 2014), recognising the language resources of every child (García & Hesson, 2015). In multilingual groups, a linguistically and culturally sensitive learning environment increases the linguistic input and encourages multilingual children to interact (Kirsch, 2021). A sensitive learning environment where it is possible to implement multilingual pedagogy often requires employing bilingual staff, using translators, translating materials into different family languages, trans-languaging as well as taking time and showing patience and respect to children and their families (Norheim & Moser, 2020). Only then can multilingual pedagogy be present in everyday activities. In general, multilingual pedagogy is implemented in visual materials, body language or gestures, tone of voice, routines, and repetition in various forms (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2019). Other studies (e.g. Harju-Luukkainen, 2013a; 2013b; Koivula, 2021; Savijärvi, 2011) have shown that multilingual pedagogy usually consists of activities such as songs, rhymes, and conversations with teachers and peers. According to Kirsch et al. (2020) and Pontier et al. (2020) many ECEC teachers naturally support multilingualism by using their entire semiotic repertoire of mimes, gestures, postures, and intonation to communicate and make meaning (Kirsch et al., 2020).

One important element of multilingual pedagogy is reciprocal relationships with guardians (parents or other caretakers) (Ramirez, 2023). According to Chan and Ritchie (2016) and Cheatham and Santos (2011), cooperation with guardians is often neglected, and pedagogy is dominated by ECEC personnel's activities. However, cooperation with the guardians of minority language builds on children's linguistic strengths' while simultaneously highlighting how diverse languages and multilingual identities are respected and valued (García & Wei, 2014; Ramirez, 2023). According to García and Kleifgen (2010), pedagogy that focuses on connecting the language activities of families to the activities of the ECEC institution is transformative.

Language policies – such as the national core curriculum for ECEC in Finland – do not translate into activities and pedagogy without educators who are able to reshape their orientations towards language policy implementation (see, for example, Hornberger & Johnson, 2007; Repo et al., 2024). Ruiz's (1984) framework for language policy implementation illustrates how language policies and the role of language can be interpreted in pedagogy by the ECEC personnel (de Jong et al., 2016; Harju-Luukkainen, 2022; Macías, 2016). Ruiz's framework (1984) consists of three types of orientations to language policies: (1) language as right, (2) language as a resource, and (3) language as problem. Language as a right orientation refers to one's own language and culture as fundamental human rights. This means that individuals have the right to speak, preserve their home languages, and be protected against discrimination based on their language. Language as a resource refers to multilingualism and cultural diversity as valued resources for individuals and society. Language as a problem refers to the assumption that bilingual and multilingual children are slower to learn, are confused with languages, and that new languages are a burden on their brains. For example, the language policy in Finnish ECEC (the National Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland) highlights language as a right and resource orientation (The Finnish National Agency of Education and Care 2022).

### 3. Data and methods

This study used an assisted design research method (see McKenney et al., 2006; Repo, 2023; Stephan, 2014). The data were collected between October and November 2021 from 81 ECEC teams, including 239 members of personnel (in Finnish ECEC, a team consists of 1–2 teachers and 2 nurses) from 13 municipalities and 47 ECE centres from across Finland. All the groups participating in this study used Finnish as their official language. Further in the study, immigrant-background multilingual Finnish language learners are referred to as ‘multilingual children’, which means that these children speak other languages than the majority population as their first language(s). The concept ‘multilingual children’ was chosen as it provides a positive descriptor of what children ‘can do, rather than what they cannot do yet’ with their linguistic abilities (Perumal et al., 2020, p. 53).

The data of this study consisted of textual documents from ECEC teams, in which they illustrated their multilingual activities and pedagogy in the child group. Additionally, the data consisted of information (provided by the teams) about children’s ages in the groups and an estimation of the proportion of multilingual children in the group. In the study, the multilingual children used at least one other language in their everyday life alongside Finnish, but several children had more languages in their repertoires. Besides the official languages of Finland (Finnish, Swedish, or Sami), ECEC groups in this study had linguistic resources in Albanian, Arabic, English, Estonian, Farsi, French, German, Kurdish, Mandinka, Russian, sign language, and Spanish. The background data are presented in detail in Table 1.

The study was conducted in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Prior to collecting the data, informed consent was obtained from the municipalities and from all participants. Participation in this study was voluntary, and the participants were allowed to interrupt their involvement at any point. The data was anonymised by research assistants and to ensure anonymity, the teams were coded by the number of the group in the data (1–82), the age group (T = toddlers, Y = young children, P = pre-schoolers, and M = mixed ages), and the proportion of multilingual children (0–100%).

**Table 1.** Background data reported by age group and the proportion of multilingual children in the group.

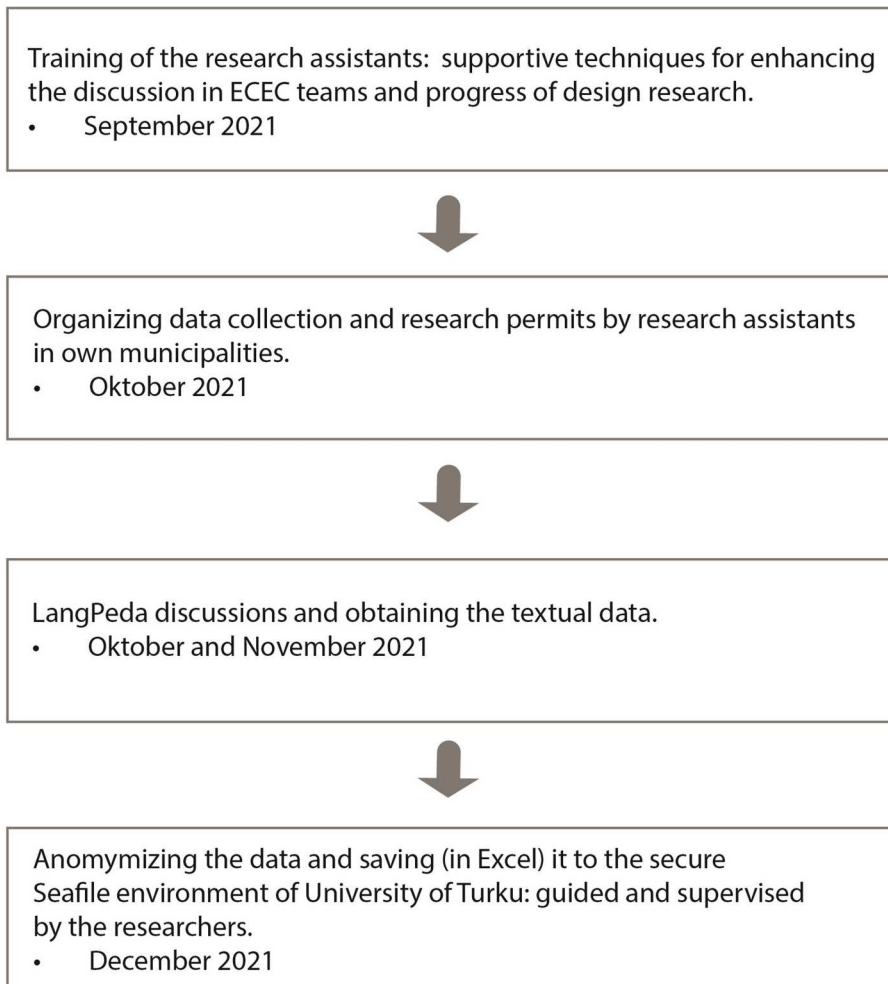
	Per cent of multilingual children in the group					Total
	0–20% none or hardly any of the children	21–40% minority of the children	41–60% approximately half of the children	61–80% majority of the children	81–100% all or almost all of the children	
Toddlers (0–2 year olds)	3	7	4	6	1	21
Young children (3–5 year olds)	9	8	10	11	4	42
Preschoolers (6 year olds)	3	6	2	1	3	15
Mixed ages (1–5 year olds)	2		1			3
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>81</b>

### 3.1. Data collection and analysis

The data collection for this study was conducted via LangPeda tool's first form *Assessing a language-aware learning environment* using its' third statement: *The personnel encourage the child to use the languages they speak in various situations* (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2020; KieKu webpage, n.d.).

The data collection was implemented by research assistants who were trained for the task. They collected the data from different municipalities across Finland and assisted the local teams in their discussions while filling in the forms of LangPeda. They were guided to implementing the textual data in the form as well as asking pre-planned additional questions, if needed, to keep the discussion flowing. Each discussion session lasted 1–1.5 hours. A detailed explanation of the data collection progress is presented in [Figure 1](#).

The data was analysed in several steps following the principles of qualitative data-driven content analysis (Krippendorff, 2012; Schreier, 2012). In the first phase of the



**Figure 1.** The progress of the data collection.

analysis, the authors read the data individually, and in the second phase, the individual interpretations were merged. The analysis resulted in three main categories: (1) mostly monolingual pedagogy, (2) narrow multilingual pedagogy, and (3) systematic multilingual pedagogy. The main features of the categories were multilingual activities, languages used, parental involvement and perspective to languages. These four features in each category were then further investigated. The category with the least features was named 'mostly monolingual pedagogy', as it best described the observations of the implementation of multilingual pedagogy in these groups.

After confirming the categories for multilingual pedagogy (RQ1), the data was investigated in relationship to the background information, that is, the ages of the children and the proportion of multilingual children in the group (RQ2). The aim was to examine the relationship between the background information and the pedagogy implemented by the group. For this investigation, the ages and estimated proportions of multilingual children were compared with the categories of multilingual pedagogy. In the analysis, some quantifications were used to support the qualitative analysis (Krippendorff, 2012).

#### **4. Multilingual activities and pedagogy implemented in Finnish ECEC groups**

The first research question was to investigate the types of multilingual activities and pedagogy Finnish ECEC teams implemented described by the team members. Out of the 81 groups, 24 used a mostly monolingual pedagogy, 49 used a narrow multilingual pedagogy, and 8 used a systematic multilingual pedagogy. In the following sections, we describe the categories in detail. The results of the analysis are illustrated and supported by direct quotations from the data, the aim of which is to provide a representative example of an observation made.

##### **4.1. Mostly monolingual pedagogy**

About one-third of the groups implemented so few multilingual activities that the pedagogy was named mostly monolingual pedagogy. The teams in this category had several arguments for their pedagogical choices: they felt that learning Finnish as a second language was most important and that home languages should only be used in the home environment. One of the teams stated that even the children choose not to speak their home languages because they know that the personnel cannot comprehend their language: *'The children don't speak to us in their mother tongue because they know we don't know it'* (51Y5). Some teams were not aware of the languages the children spoke and especially in these teams, English was used alongside Finnish. The team explained their use of English by emphasising that most children comprehended simplistic English and, in some cases, using English was the only way to have contact with the child. The personnel described this simplistic English as YouTube English, referring to the fact that many children like watching YouTube and learn some English while watching: *There is also one child in the group who does not know his mother tongue (Bastu) or Finnish, but who has independently learned English from tablet games.* (34Y25).

The only specific multilingual activity mentioned by the personnel was verbally encouraging the guardians to use their home languages with the children. In some

groups, the teams also emphasised that they did not forbid the children from speaking their home languages, and they sang and greeted the children with the languages the personnel comprehended. In one group, they also indicated that they used non-verbal communication, such as making eye contact: *Everyone is equal, and there are new Finnish words all the time. We encourage them to speak up! We speak more clearly and with a smiling face. We make eye contact!*(63M10).

In many groups, the language-related practises seemed random and concentrated on individual events. For example, in one team, they had once read an Estonian book, but the children had not liked it, so this activity was discontinued. Further, in some teams, there were plans to increase and develop multilingual pedagogy. These plans focused on making the languages visible in the environment through books and individual words: *The languages that children know could be brought out more. For example, greetings in the hall.* (34Y25) and *Books in the children's own mother tongue on display. We are working on this.* (25T90).

It seems that the reason behind the use of a mostly monolingual pedagogy was uncertainty and a lack of knowledge of multilingual pedagogy. The teams did not know how to start implementing a multilingual pedagogy, and they were afraid that they would not be able to give all the children equal opportunities to use their home languages. In some groups, there was also a lack of awareness of the importance of enhancing the use of children's own languages. For example, many teams did not view children's languages as a resource for the whole group but rather as a feature of individual children: *'I don't see the benefit in a child speaking a language that others don't know'* (51Y5). Some of them were aware of their lack of multilingual pedagogy but had no plans to improve their implementation: *'At the moment, this does not seem important in this group'* (44T25).

#### **4.2. Narrow multilingual pedagogy**

Over half of the groups implemented a narrow multilingual pedagogy. These groups had some multilingual activities and used language also other than Finnish and English. However, the use of other languages was still quite random and depended, in most cases, on the active agency of the children.

Compared to the groups that used a mostly monolingual pedagogy, there were more multilingual activities implemented, the teams were more aware of the multilingual pedagogy, and there were a lot of plans and discussions on increasing and developing them multilingual pedagogy: they had plans to add more words from different languages in the learning environment, to enhance parental involvement, to increase the use of the Lukulumo application, to have more multilingual books, and to increase the use of the children's languages outside of greetings or saying 'thank you'. It seems that the Lukulumo application was quite widely used (14 groups used the application at the moment and six groups want to start using it). It is a paid digital book service that offers multilingual children's audiobooks for ECEC and primary schools (ILT Education, 2022). However, the use of the Lukulumo application mainly concentrated on listening to stories in home languages without any specific pedagogical aim: *The children have the possibility of listening to Lukulumo; we sometimes use it in naptime, where a couple of children listen to a fairy tale in their native language (resting close to each other) and the others listen to a Finnish fairy tale* (54Y5).

Many of the teams focused on the insecurities of increasing the use of different languages in the group: *When you have worked in the field for a long time and only had to speak one language in a group as an educator, it is sometimes confusing how many different languages can be used in different situations and still support language development. I would like to know whether or not we have language immersion, and how much should we support the home language and how much we do it in Finnish.* (38P30) The teams felt that there was an imbalance between children who spoke Finnish as a first language and those who used Finnish as a second language, as the children who used Finnish as a second language were not heard equally. Further, they were unsure of how much of Finnish learning should be balanced with the home languages. Some of them worried that the increased use of home languages would create a threat to learning Finnish: *Now we have strong Finnish learning because the need to learn Finnish is now greater than children's interest in other languages* (39Y50).

All the teams collected information on the home languages of the children. However, they stated that they did not know anything about some languages. The teams also emphasised that the children were allowed to use home languages, and in some teams, the personnel actively encouraged it. However, the personnel themselves only used languages they comprehended: in one group, there was a member. In the ECEC team using Russian, and in another ECEC group, the director knew some Chinese. In most cases, the personnel used English or Finnish, but other languages were also present. For example, in one group, they had started using home languages as a tool for comforting the children: *The families have given safe words in their own mother tongue for the group to use* (28T30). They had asked the guardians to fill in the 'My Meaningful Words' form, which helped the personnel learn a few words in the children's home to comfort the children.

The multilingual pedagogy in these groups was often child-initiated. For example, in one of the groups, the personnel explained how during a visit to the library, one child found multilingual books and wanted to check out a book in their own language. After that experience, the personnel felt that the use of multilingual literature could be developed into permanent practice. Similarly, in many cases, the personnel illustrated that they only started conversing in and learning other languages if one of the children said something in his or her language: *We have a day-of-the-week board where Monday's character is a strawberry. Our Arabic-speaking boy told us what strawberry is in Arabic, and we wrote it on the blackboard. It was an important thing for the boy, and all the children learned that on Monday they always mentioned 'strawberry' in the boy's language* (7Y75) and *In dinner table conversations, the child may tell what a certain food is in her own language* (13Y50).

### **4.3. Systematic multilingual pedagogy**

About one-tenth of the teams implemented a systematic multilingual pedagogy and had several multilingual activities. Additionally, the learning environment showed that they valued all languages, and the use of home languages was actively encouraged in the groups. Further, the personnel indicated that they often compared and talked about languages with the children and among the personnel: *In my opinion, the interest in languages comes from adults' attitudes and exploratory attitudes, as well as children's interesting questions. In one week, the children compared which languages each of them knew,*

*and together, we admired the fact that many spoke a language other than Finnish at home and others had learned languages, for example, through games. Enthusiastic about this, one of the children brought home the days of the week written in Yoruba, and we learned them.* (12P33).

Compared to the other categories of the study, the main perspective on language use in these groups was communication, not vocabulary or language skills, as in the other categories: *Children's languages are present in songs and in everyday conversations; for example, when eating, we think what potato is in everyone's own language, or we go over the numbers in everyone's own language. We listen to songs in children's languages and music from one's own culture. Caregivers play an important role here as well; they are asked for a lot of help, for example, to link songs.* (76P98) The groups in the category of a systematic multilingual pedagogy kept words and phrases from different languages on the walls of the ECEC centre, and they were used pedagogically. For example, the phrases on the walls were created together with the guardians, and they were constantly developed in accordance with the current themes in the groups: *Last time, we asked the guardians via WhatsApp to write certain vegetables and fruits in their own languages so that we could put them together into a common language wall for the group.* (76P98) It seems that these groups were dialogical (Rojas-Drummond et al., 2013) and participatory communities (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Rausku-Puttonen, 2006) with a constant aim to develop and increase the implementation and visibility of languages in the group.

Positive cooperation with guardians was highlighted in the teams, and the personnel described how happy the guardians were and how the guardians had also started to suggest cooperation. For example, one French guardian translated a French story into Finnish, read the story to the group, and presented France as a country through illustrations, videos, and other stories. Most of the groups greeted each other in several languages – including the children's home languages – and the languages were implemented actively in a conscious manner: *'Greetings in several languages – the languages whose speakers are not present this year are still maintained'*(40Y10).

The teams illustrated several activities they employed to encourage children to use their languages: play-based activities in small groups, activities in which the children and the personnel together investigated and compared the languages the group knew, activities in which the children could act as interpreters of their own language, and activities in which the children taught languages to the other children and adults in the group. Overall, the pedagogical culture of these groups was child-initiated and focused, but it was further enhanced by the teams: *Children teach adults the words of their mother tongue, which is fun for them. Sometimes, the group stops together to think about, for example, what the word 'apple' means in different languages. If there is a child who knows a different language but doesn't want to say it in the languages they know, the educators look for the word in, for example, Google Translate* (10Y65).

In these groups, the activities were well planned, and the focus of the activities was on the interactions. The children and adults communicated in versatile ways, for example, using overlapping languages or any language if it supported the communication of the group: *'Children boldly use languages they know. Sometimes a child can "interpret" what another child wants to say, for example, in the morning circle, when the other child doesn't know Finnish yet'*(12P33). The teams were not afraid or reluctant to use children's home languages, even though they felt somewhat bad since they knew that they did not

pronounce everything correctly: *'We adults could have more courage. Uncertainty emerges if you say the words incorrectly in the children's own languages'* (19P40).

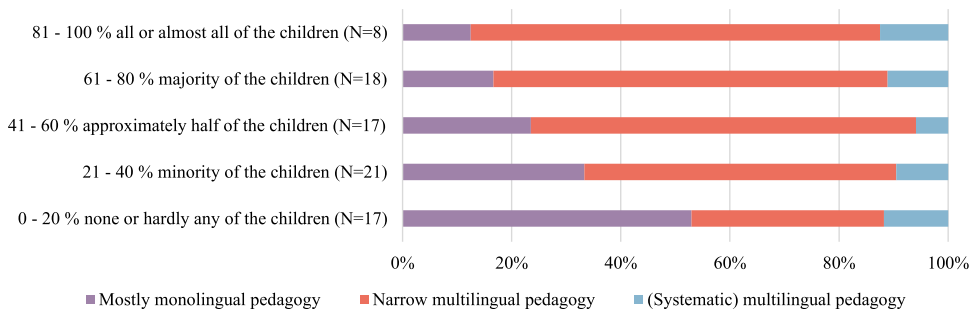
In this category, the teams were very active and flexible. They had plans to increase the use of languages in the group, and the current and future activities involved the support and cooperation of families. Ideas and activities flowed from homes to groups and from groups to homes. For example, one of the groups implemented a lending library practise (Aerila et al., 2021) as a family reading programme, which included books written in multiple languages: *'There is a pop-up library in the foyer of the daycarecentre with books in different languages. The goal is to encourage and support guardians to read to their children in their first languages'* (76P98). These groups of multilingual pedagogy also utilised the Lukulumo application more purposefully than in the category of a narrow multilingual pedagogy. For example, if there were plans to read a story in the group in Finnish, the application was sent home so that the family could listen to or read the story in their own language in advance. Notably, English did not play a central role in these groups.

## 5. The multilingual pedagogy in different age and multilingual groups in Finnish ECEC

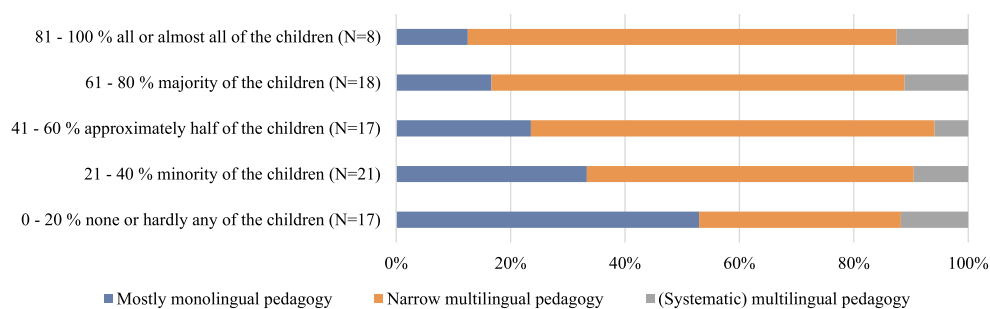
The second research question assessed the types of multilingual pedagogy implemented with different ages and multilingual groups in ECEC.

Figure 2 illustrates how the age groups were distributed among the multilingual pedagogy categories. The data showed that a systematic multilingual pedagogy was implemented in all age groups. However, the systematic multilingual pedagogy was slightly more common in the preschool (i.e. 6-year-olds) groups, and there were no preschool groups that used a mostly monolingual pedagogy. This might indicate that the age of the children was relevant to the multilingual pedagogy that the teams chose to implement, but age did not hinder the use of a systematic multilingual pedagogy.

Figure 3 illustrates that all three kinds of multilingual pedagogies were implemented, regardless of the proportion of multilingual children. The implementation of systematic multilingual pedagogy was not influenced by the proportion of multilingual children in the groups, however the lower the proportion of multilingual children in the group the more likely it was for a mostly monolingual pedagogy to be implemented.



**Figure 2.** The relationship between children's age groups and multilingual pedagogy.



**Figure 3.** The relation between multilingual children and the multilingual pedagogy.

## 6. Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate what kind of multilingual pedagogy and activities Finnish ECEC groups implemented and what was the relation of these activities and pedagogy to the ages of children and the amount of the multilingual children in a group. As a result, three categories of multilingual pedagogy emerged: a mostly monolingual pedagogy, a narrow multilingual pedagogy, and a systematic multilingual pedagogy. These categories were based on the perspective on languages, parental engagement, the languages used, and multilingual activities. In addition, the children's participation varied in the different categories, so that in the ECEC groups implementing a mostly monolingual pedagogy, the children were more passive, and in the ECEC groups implementing a systematic multilingual pedagogy, the relationship between personnel and children was more dialogical.

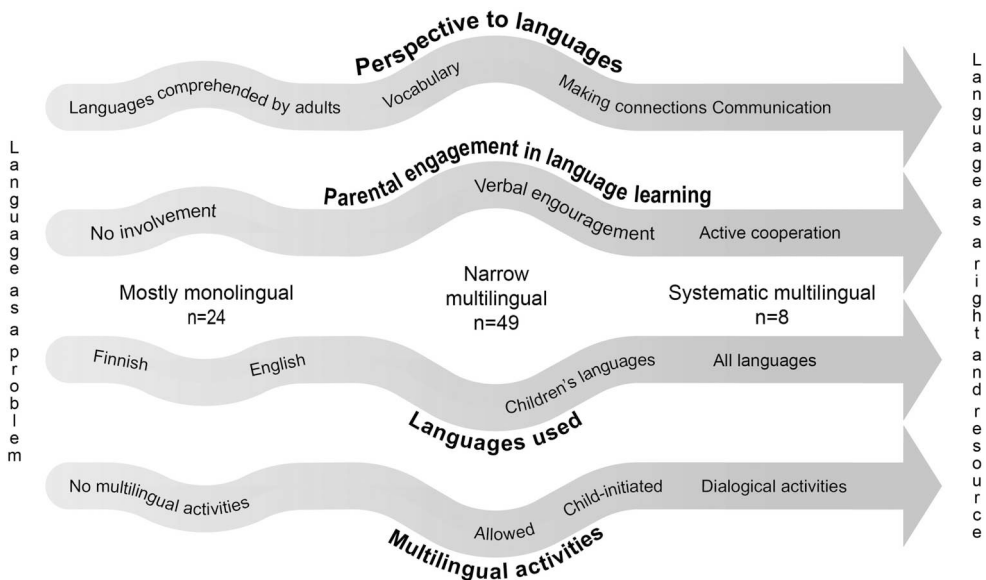
In the research, a systematic multilingual pedagogy appeared as an active and dialogical relationship between different actors – ECEC personnel, the guardians and the children. It also seemed that the implementation of multilingual activities was very conscious and goal-oriented as well as all languages were acknowledged and present in the learning environment on many levels. Further, in these ECEC groups the view of language changed from vocabulary management or language skills to communication, in which case the focus was on building a common understanding and interaction, not so much on individual language skills. The mostly monolingual and narrow multilingual pedagogies had the same features, but they were less, more superficial or random and the activities were based above all on choices of the ECEC personnel or just in the future plans.

English in the ECEC groups seemed to be meaningful regarding the implementation of multilingual pedagogy. In the ECEC groups implementing a mostly monolingual pedagogy and a narrow multilingual pedagogy English seemed to serve as the first shared language resource between the personnel and the children. It was often used alongside Finnish, even though English is not an official language in Finland or commonly spoken by Finnish immigrants as a home language. Thus, the ECEC teams illustrated how multilingual children comprehend English as they have learned it via video games and other materials of popular culture. Further, the personnel are often skilled in English as it is the most popular foreign language in Finnish schools (Aro, 2017). The results of the study show that as the quality multilingual pedagogy developed, the role of English demised and other languages became more prominent. A more detailed investigation

of the role of English in ECEC pedagogy is needed as the results of this study might indicate that the extensive use of English reduces the motivation and the need of the personnel to make the children's languages visible in education, and take advantage of them. The notion is particularly relevant because alongside the balanced use of English and children's languages, the position of the Finnish language and learning as a second language challenged the implementation of children's languages. This challenge has also been recognised in other studies (e.g. Bergroth et al., 2021).

The mostly monolingual and the narrow multilingual pedagogy differed from each other as the narrow multilingual pedagogy was already more communal, more conscious and more planned. The ECEC teams implementing a narrow multilingual pedagogy also had more plans to increase multilingualism and multilingualism was seen as important. Instead, in some ECEC teams implementing a mostly monolingual pedagogy, it was felt that there was no time or need to develop pedagogy in a multilingual direction. In addition, the implementation of multilingual activities was very superficial, problem-oriented, and there was also a lot of uncertainty and ignorance regarding all the features of multilingual education in the teams implementing a mostly monolingual pedagogy. This accords with previous studies, which state that implementing successful multilingual pedagogy means tolerating uncertainty (Kyckling et al., 2019) and that there is a need for in-service training, materials, and information about multilingual pedagogy (Harju-Autti et al., 2022).

Figure 4 illustrates the practical implications derived from the study's results. It presents the categories identified in the study, along with their associated characteristics and details, as a pedagogical framework for planning and evaluating multilingual activities in ECEC. The figure also depicts how these categories form a dynamic continuum in practice, showing that they are not rigidly defined. Additionally, it highlights how the study's practical implications align with Ruiz's framework of language policies. The predominantly monolingual education approach reflects Ruiz's (1984) 'language as a problem'



**Figure 4.** The pedagogical framework for planning and evaluating multilingual activities in ECEC.

orientation, while systematic multilingual education aligns with his 'language as a resource' and 'language as a right' orientations (see also de Jong et al., 2016; Harju-Luukkainen, 2022; Macías, 2016).

According to the results, it seemed that many of ECEC teams thought that multilingual activities were only needed if the children had learned to speak and that the implementation of multilingual activities related to the proportion of multilingual children. However, one of the main results of this study is that a systematic multilingual pedagogy could be implemented regardless of the ages of the children or the proportion of multilingual children. Nevertheless, children in ECEC groups encounter varying levels of quality and quantity in multilingual activities, and therefore (especially multilingual) children in early childhood education are not educated nor cared equally. The results of this study do not only apply to Finland, but can also be generalised internationally (see similar results Bergroth et al., 2021; Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Meier, 2018). The ECEC personnel and in training of ECEC personnel can find the features of multilingual activities and their qualifications beneficial when developing the pedagogy in a multilingual direction.

This study highlights, how the implementation of language policies in ECEC is gradually transitioning to more multilingual pedagogy. However, as only about 10 per cent of the ECEC teams in this study describe using a systematic multilingual pedagogy, many ECEC teams are not adequately prepared to implement multilingual activities, often requiring self-reflection and adaptation of their teaching methods as well as activities. The results underline the significance of supporting ECEC personnel through training and resources to meet the challenges of a linguistically diverse population.

In terms of the study's limitations, we relied on self-reports from personnel rather than direct observations in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) institutions. Because self-reports may not always accurately reflect personnel behaviour in learning environments (Borg, 2006), there could be aspects missing from the data. Especially, as according to Pontier et al. (2020) multilingual practices are rarely planned or not reported as such. Additionally, the study couldn't explore changes in the implementation of language-aware education policies due to the non-recurrent nature of the data collection, which involved snapshot-like textual documents capturing experiential testimonies from ECEC personnel. Despite these limitations, the analysis sheds light on the gradual process of educational institutions adopting multilingual approaches in their agendas.

## 7. Conclusion

Pedagogy is a multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon (Kangas et al., 2021), and ECEC groups are social and cultural arenas where people (i.e. children, teachers and parents) with various agendas, aims, views and desires meet (Pesch, 2021).

Although teachers seem naturally use practices that support multilingual children and they feel that they are role models for solidarity and cooperation, equality and coexistence as well as implementation of multiple communication strategies (Juaristi et al., 2023), and even if the current language policies promote and accommodate multilingualism (e.g. Baker, 2011), the mindset from monolingual pedagogical practices to multilingual ones is challenging, as multilingual pedagogy is an outcome of a broader shift in educational linguistics regarding how scholars theorise and understand language, learners, and language learners (cf. May, 2014).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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