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# Teachers' views on students' multilingual resources - tracking the impact of curriculum reform

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** In 2016, Finnish core curriculum was revised, and teachers are now required to implement multilingual pedagogies in their classrooms. Objectives This study aims to examine how the national curriculum reform may have influenced teachers' views on the use of multilingual students' first languages in the classroom.

**Methods:** The data consists of 1855 Finnish teachers' responses in two surveys, which were gathered in 2016 and 2021. The data included responses to both Likert scale questions and an open-ended question.

**Results:** The results indicated a slight increase in the use of multilingual practices at school. However, approximately one-fifth of the respondents still held views that go against the national guidelines.

**Conclusions:** To conclude our results, it seems that the national policies have not yet been fully implemented at the grassroots level. This indicates that a curriculum change at a national level does not automatically result in changes in the classroom level instruction.

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Multilingual students; first languages; teachers' views; national core curriculum

## Introduction

Numerous studies have shown a significant gap in the learning outcomes of students with a migration background compared to those of majority-language speakers in many member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), including Finland Kilpi-Jakonen and Alisaari (2022); Pulkkinen et al. (2024); Ukkola and Metsämuuronen (2023). To address this disparity, a revision was made to the Finnish national core curriculum for basic education (Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2014) in 2014 to include that all teachers must be linguistically responsive, integrate both language and content in their teaching, and understand the role that languages play in socialization and identity construction. Furthermore, teachers should use the entirety of students' linguistic resources for learning, meaning teaching

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practices should embrace students' full linguistic repertoires. However, little is known about how this change in educational policy has affected teachers' views on using students' first languages as a resource for learning and identity construction.

Multilingualism is a growing phenomenon worldwide. Recently, the so-called multilingual turn in education has started to change somewhat monolingual ideologies into all languages being seen as valuable and as assets for learning (May, 2014). For example, the European Commission (2019) now recommends that its member states develop multilingual practices that use students' entire linguistic resources for learning. Studies from several countries, including Finland, have shown that teachers are positive about multilingualism, but they do not always consider students' first languages to be resources for learning (e.g. Agirdag et al., 2014, Alisaari, Heikkola, et al., 2019; Faneca et al., 2016; Iversen, 2019; Lundberg, 2019; Rodríguez-Izquierdo et al., 2020). Nevertheless, regardless of many studies regarding teachers' views on multilingualism, little is known how explicit changes in country specific educational policies are related to this aspect. This study thus offers a novel approach of tracking a potential change in teacher views on multilingualism in relation to a renewal of national core curriculum, i.e. a juridically binding steering document. In Finland, there have been significant changes in educational policies regarding the role of languages for learning (Alisaari, Vigren, et al., 2019). To examine how this change has affected teachers' views on the use of students' first languages, the following research questions were considered:

RQ1: What changes can be identified in Finnish teachers' responses regarding the use of students' first languages at school in 2016 and 2021?

RQ2: How did the teachers justify their responses?

In this study, *multilingual students* refers to students with diverse linguistic backgrounds, for example, students with migration backgrounds, although we understand that all students could be perceived as multilinguals. When necessary, *first languages* is used when discussing languages other than the *language of schooling*, which in this context refers to Finnish or Swedish (i.e. the official instructional languages in bilingual Finland<sup>1</sup>). We acknowledge the challenges and risks of categorizing students according to their assumed linguistic profiles or identities and that the terms that we have chosen are not entirely neutral (Krulatz & Christison, 2023; Seltzer, 2019).

## The Finnish national core curriculum

The Finnish national core curriculum is regularly revised. The latest revision of the entire document was conducted from 2012–2016, and the new core curriculum was enacted in autumn 2016 (Bergroth, 2016; Uljens & Rajakaltio, 2017). In Finland, educational reform can be described as a 'non-hierarchical educational leadership process' (Uljens & Rajakaltio, 2017) that encourages various policy actors, including teachers, to fine-tune local solutions in line with the national guidelines. As there are no national standardized tests or school inspections and teaching is a highly valued profession in Finland, teachers are given great pedagogical freedom and autonomy (Dražnik et al., 2022; Sahlberg, 2011;

Uljens & Rajakaltio, 2017). Curricular renewal is thus not a top-down process; for example, during the latest renewal, 33 different multidisciplinary working groups, supported by online consultative groups, were appointed by the National Agency of Education to reform the core curriculum, and public hearings were conducted (Bergroth, 2016).

Almost all children in Finland are enrolled in publicly funded schools, which are governed by the legally binding national core curriculum. This is expected to result in all children receiving a similar education no matter where in Finland they reside (Holm & Londen, 2010); however, indications of educational segregation have recently been identified (Bernelius & Kosunen, 2023). The curriculum includes the objectives and core content of the different school subjects as well as a central concept of learning and overarching core values, principles of a good learning environment, and pedagogical working approaches. The principles of pupil assessment, special education, pupil welfare, and educational guidance are also addressed in the curriculum. The legally binding role of the curriculum is clearly visible in the language of the text, which is written in the form of statements with no room for objections or conditions, for example, 'The [school] community recognizes the right to one's own language and culture as a fundamental right' (EDUFI, 2014). The curriculum is not solely an administrative steering document but also an intellectual and pedagogical one. In the curriculum, prevailing conceptions of knowledge are revealed, and culturally significant knowledge is recreated. Moreover, while the curriculum provides advice and establishes guidelines for teaching and learning, it does not regulate teaching methods or practices (Vitikka et al., 2012).

The curriculum strongly promotes multilingualism and culturally sustaining pedagogy (European Education and Culture Executive Agency: Eurydice, 2019). In the curriculum, students are guided to see cultural and linguistic diversity fundamentally as a positive resource. Thus, the viewpoint of the curriculum approaches languages and multilingualism from the perspective of linguistic human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2017): it sees languages valuable per se. The aim is to educate democratic global citizens who are aware of their own multilayered linguistic and cultural heritage and open to and understanding of other cultures. For example, the curriculum requires that '[e]ducation supports the pupils' development as versatile and skilful users of language, both in their mother tongue and in other languages' (EDUFI, 2014, p. 19). With regard to the role of language in learning and identity development, the change between the previous and current curricula is remarkable (Alisaari, Vigren, et al., 2019).

Already in the opening meeting of the reform process, the importance of language aware content teaching and the view that all teachers are language teachers were stressed, and all 33 multidisciplinary working groups were asked to identify the core language needs in their subject areas (Bergroth, 2016). Indeed, acknowledging and using multiple languages in all teaching is strongly promoted throughout the curriculum (Alisaari, Vigren, et al., 2019). For example, according to the curriculum, '[e]ach community and community member is multilingual. Parallel use of various languages in the school's daily life is seen as natural, and languages are appreciated'. (EDUFI, 2014, p. 26.) Multilingualism is present also in the requirements of multiliteracy: every student needs to be able to interpret, produce and value various forms of information mediated by different media, using verbal, visual, auditory, numeric and kinaesthetic symbols using all the languages they know (EDUFI, 2014, p. 21). The curriculum is built on the strong ideological foundation of equity, equality, and diversity that is traditionally connected

with the Finnish and, in wider perspective, Nordic, framework of education. However, these views have recently been increasingly challenged by global neoliberal education policies and accountability (Frønes et al., 2020), which may potentially counteract the intentions of the curriculum renewal.

## The significance of first languages

The right to use one's first language is a part of linguistic human rights, and all languages have intrinsic value (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2017). Maintaining languages is significant for individuals' identity (Cummins, 2001; Hu, 2022). Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that first languages have an important influence on learning (Cummins, 2021). For example, in a study investigating the significance of first language instruction, Ganuza and Hedman (2018) found that reading comprehension in one's first language is more strongly related to learning other subjects than reading comprehension in the language of schooling. Moreover, strong first language skills are positively associated with learning the language of schooling (Relyea & Amendum, 2020). Thomas and Collier (1997) found that students who mainly used their first language (Spanish) for learning at school learned English better than those who studied in a monolingual English program. Furthermore, there is evidence that when students use both their first language and the language of schooling at home, their reading scores are positively affected (Kilpi-Jakonen & Alisaari, 2022). Thus, nurturing first languages at school can support multilingual students' educational performance (see also Cummins, 2021).

In addition to the positive influence strong first languages have on all learning, there is conclusive evidence that bilingualism is positively related to various cognitive outcomes, including working memory, metalinguistic awareness, increased attentional control, and abstract and symbolic representation skills in children (Adesope et al., 2010). Furthermore, a positive link between maintaining first languages in a family, educational performance, and labour market performance has been identified (Agirdag, 2014; Glick & White, 2003; Lutz & Crist, 2009). Using first languages also supports socio-emotional well-being (Chung et al., 2019). When students with a migration background primarily use their first language with their parents, they may achieve better learning outcomes than those who speak only the language of the society at home (Agirdag & Vanlaar, 2018). Moreover, using first languages may prevent dropping out of school (Feliciano, 2001).

At school, students' first languages can be utilized as resources for learning, even when teachers are not familiar with these languages (Krulatz & Christison, 2023). Teachers can treat the students as experts in their languages (Duarte, 2019). For example, students can be encouraged to seek information in their first languages or discuss themes of instruction with peers who share their language. Previous studies have indicated that when teachers encourage the use of first languages, students' identities and sense of belonging at school are affirmed (Tarnanen et al., 2017), and students are more engaged with their schoolwork (Paris, 2012; Taylor et al., 2008). Furthermore, encouraging students to use their first languages facilitates deeper understanding of a topic than when students are restricted to using only the language of schooling (Tharp et al., 2000). Duarte (2019) found that using multiple languages during lessons does not affect students' on- and off-task behaviours. Thus, using students' entire linguistic resources for learning does not hinder learning processes; rather, it seems to promote learning.

A significant number of studies, both international and Finnish, have found that teachers sometimes show anxieties, hesitation, or even prejudice against using students' first languages during lessons (Cummins, 2001; Dražnik et al., 2022; Lee & Oxelson, 2006; Rodríguez-Izquierdo et al., 2020). Moreover, many teachers are either not willing or not able to use their students' linguistic resources as assets for learning (Iversen, 2019; Lundberg, 2019; Sullivan, 2016; Taylor et al., 2008). For example, in the Finnish context, it has been found that teachers may feel uncomfortable when they are not familiar with the languages being used around them (Alisaari, Heikkola, et al., 2019). Thus, they might consider the use of students' first languages to be impolite and allow them to be used only if it does not bother others (Alisaari et al., 2021). In addition, teachers might worry about not being in control of students' learning if they do not understand the language(s) students use, or they may think that students are using their first languages to discuss off-task topics (Conteh et al., 2008) or bully others (Alisaari, Heikkola, et al., 2019). Moreover, many teachers fear that students will not learn the language of schooling or the content if multiple languages are used at school (Agirdag et al., 2014; Alisaari et al., 2022; Shestunova, 2019; Suuriniemi, 2023; Tarnanen & Palviainen, 2018).

## Methods

This study is part of a larger research project investigating teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and practices related to teaching culturally and linguistically diverse learners. For this sub-study, we focused on 12 Likert scale items and one open-ended question from two online surveys (conducted in 2016 and 2021) that elicited teachers' self-reported views on multilingualism and, in particular, on potential policies that would restrict the language used in lessons to only the language of schooling. The survey items used for this study can be found in [Appendix](#). We also investigated the participants' justifications for these policies. The focus was on tracking changes in teachers' views on the use of students' first languages after the revision of the core curricula.

### *Data collection and participants*

The data were collected in spring 2016 and autumn 2021 using two online surveys that included both Likert scale (1–5) items and open-ended questions. The survey used in 2016 was based on a preliminary version of a survey about linguistically and culturally responsive teaching by Milbourn et al. (2017). The original survey was shortened and adapted to fit the Finnish context by the first author and their colleague, Emmanuel Acquah. The survey used in 2021 was further developed by Research Group DiManDi based on the survey used in 2016. Items that were too ambiguous or otherwise not functional (based on the data gathered in 2016) were omitted. In addition, some aspects related to the revised Finnish basic education curriculum were added.

In both 2016 and 2021, the survey was shared via various email lists, social media, and the website of the Association of the Finnish as a Second Language Teachers. In addition, the link to the survey and a cover letter in either Finnish or in Swedish (depending on the language of the department) were sent to all the local education offices in Finland with the request that they share it with all teachers in the area. In the cover letter and on the first page of the online survey, information about the study, its purpose, and the

protection of the data were explained. Participants were informed that completing the survey implied consent. Neither in 2016 nor in 2021 was it possible to calculate participation percentages, as the number of people who received or saw the survey link is unknown.

In 2016, 820 teachers participated in the survey. Of these, 84–99% ( $n = 688$ – $814$ ) answered the Likert scale questions, while 684 (83%) answered the open-ended question. In 2021, 1035 teachers participated in the survey; of these, 85–100% ( $n = 877$ – $1035$ ) answered the Likert scale questions, and 71% ( $n = 736$ ) answered the open-ended question. The open-ended question was as follows: *Should teachers have a policy in their classroom to use only the language of schooling in lessons? Why or why not?*

The participants' demographics are presented in Table 1. In both surveys, most of the respondents identified as female, and the gender and age structures corresponded fairly well with the general Finnish teacher population (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2019). In 2016, Finnish was the first language of 91% of the participants, Swedish was the first language of 7%, and 2% of participants had other first languages, including Sami, Russian, Karelian, English, Croatian, Lithuanian, French, Somali, and Hungarian. In 2021, Finnish was the first language of 93% of the participants, Swedish was the first language of 6% of the participants, and 1% had other first languages, including Italian, Kurdish, French, Catalan, Ukrainian-Russian, Chinese, Hungarian, Thai, and German. The respondents included primary school teachers, subject teachers from lower and upper secondary

**Table 1.** Participants' demographics, teaching areas, and teaching experience and percentage of migration background students in schools

Background factors	2016 ( $n = 820$ )	2021 ( $n = 1035$ )
<b>Gender</b>	78% female 21% male 1% other	83% female 17% male 1% other
<b>Age</b>	$M = 41$ yrs	$M = 44$ yrs
<b>Training related to linguistically responsive teaching</b>	Yes 13% No 87%	Yes 40% No 60%
<b>Teaching areas</b> (somewhat overlapping for some respondents)	Primary school teacher 23.1% Subject teacher 44.3% Primary school and subject teacher 4% Special education teacher/Teacher of newly arrived migrants 14.9% Counsellor 2.9% Principal 5.7% Other 3.6%	Primary school teacher 31.2% Subject teacher 51.1% Primary school and subject teacher 4.3 % Special education teacher 15.7% Counsellor 2.3% Principal 4.4% Other 5%
<b>Subjects of subject teachers</b>	Finnish as a first language and literature Finnish as a second language and literature English, German, Swedish, French, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry ICT Healthcare sciences	Finnish as a first language and literature Finnish as a second language & literature English, German, Swedish, French, Russian, Estonian, Spanish Biology, Geography Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry ICT Healthcare sciences, Psychology, History, Philosophy, Philosophy of life, Religion Arts and crafts, Music, House economics, Physical Education

schools, principals, school counsellors, and special education teachers or teachers of newly arrived migrants. Based on descriptive statistics, it seems that the respondents in 2021 had more experience teaching students with migrant backgrounds and their schools had higher percentages of students with migrant backgrounds than the respondents in 2016. In general, the participants' teaching experience (in years) was similar in both 2016 and 2021: 70% of the participants had worked more than 11 years.

### **Data analysis**

The data included responses to both Likert scale questions and an open-ended question. The Likert-scale questions (see [Tables 2 and 3](#)) were analysed by comparing frequencies. When comparing the 2016 and 2021 results, it needs to be taken into account that some statements were rephrased aiming to increase the clarity of the meanings; these rephrased statements are discussed in the Results section when relevant. The open-ended question (see [Table 4](#)) was analysed using data-driven content analysis. Three levels were found in the data-driven content analysis (Krippendorff, 2012): 1) The use of the language of schooling only: yes, no, conditional yes; 2) Orientation towards the use of multiple languages: advocacy, allowance, denial; 3) Justifications given for advocacy, allowance, or denial. The Interrater values were measured by using intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC), and were over 95% for the 2016 dataset and 83–92% for the 2021 dataset.

First, we analysed the respondents' stances on restricting the use of first languages. The answers were categorized as *yes, it should be restricted*; *no, it should not be restricted*; and *conditional yes/no, it should be restricted, but only in some situations*. Second, the teachers' views on the use of students' first languages were analysed by categorizing their answers as advocacy, allowance, or denial. *Advocacy* and *allowance* were used to describe positive stances on using first languages, while *denial* was used to describe more negative stances. There was no clear-cut line between *allowance* and *advocacy*. However, in the *allowance* category, responses were either neutral statements concerning the use of students' first languages, or the answers included conditions related to when it was (not) possible to allow the use of students' first languages. Thus, the category of *allowance* did not necessarily include actively advocating for multilingualism: languages were allowed, at least sometimes, but their use was not necessarily encouraged. Answers with clearly identifiable, positively charged modal components, such as a 'desire' to support students' use of first languages, the 'ability' to implement multilingual practices, or a belief that this aspect is 'self-evident' or 'natural', were coded as *advocacy*. *Advocacy* included an awareness of the role of languages for learning, interaction, cooperation, and identity building, making languages not only allowed (see also EDUFI, 2014) but an important part of learning processes.

All survey data were coded by two of the authors. The 2016 data were coded by the first and third author, and the 2021 data was coded by the first and second author. In 2016, 10 categories of justifications given for advocacy, allowance, or denial were identified. In 2021, a new justification—focus on learning content (regardless of language)—was identified. After this, the first author reanalysed the 2016 data for consistency. Finally, 11 categories of justifications were grouped under three support categories: 1) school

**Table 2.** Teachers' responses to the Likert scale statements in 2016 and 2021 (R = reversed statement. When there were different statements used in 2016 and 2021, the alternative statement used in 2021 is presented in the Year column).

Statement	Year (n) (differing statement)	1 (%) Completely disagree	2 (%) Disagree	3 (%) I cannot say	4 (%) Agree	5 (%) Completely agree
<b>It is important for teachers to ask multilingual students questions about their first language.</b>						
	2016 (n = 811)	2.4	7.9	15.7	40.5	32.3
	2021 (n = 1028)	3.5	10.3	18.8	42.6	24.8
<b>Teachers should allow students to write in their first languages.</b>						
	2016 (n = 810)	10.1	31.6	30.5	20.2	6.3
	2021 (n = 1030)	4.2	15.6	30.6	33	16.6
	Teachers should allow students to write in their first languages, for example when students are writing notes.					
<b>It is important for teachers to ask multilingual students to teach others in the classroom words and/or phrases in their first languages.</b>						
	2016 (n = 812)	3.7	8.5	20	42.6	24.3
	2021 (n = 1028)	8.1	19.2	30.6	32.6	9.5
<b>Teachers should use materials in class that reflect the cultural, racial/ethnic, and/or linguistic backgrounds of their linguistically and culturally diverse students.</b>						
	2016 (n = 812)	3.9	12.8	22.3	44.1	15.9
	2021 (n = 1031)	5.2	13.6	26.7	37.8	16.7
<b>Teachers should advocate for Finnish language development support for their multilingual students.</b>						
	2016 (n = 791)	1.8	1.3	2.9	33.5	59.8
	2021 (n = 1030)	1.1	.3	3	19.6	76
<b>The responsibility to learn Finnish/Swedish well rests primarily on multilingual students. (R)</b>						
	2016 (n = 809)	13.2	41.7	14.8	22.6	6.5
	2021 (n = 1030)	18.3	42.1	20.8	15.1	3.7
<b>I feel uncomfortable when I am in a group and others are speaking a language I do not know.</b>						
	2016 (n = 814)	10.7	19.8	15.1	37.4	16.2
	2021 (n = 1031)	5.1	18.2	20.8	31.5	24.3
	I feel uncomfortable when students are speaking a language I do not know during a lesson.					
<b>Multilingual students who maintain their home language have difficulty in learning Finnish/Swedish. (R)</b>						
	2016 (n = 813)	56.1	29.3	7	3.2	3.7
	2021 (n = 1030)	68.7	22.4	5.9	1.8	1.1
	Maintaining their first languages does not prevent multilingual students from learning Finnish/Swedish. (R)					

(Continued)

**Table 2.** (Continued).

<b>A multilingual students' first language development is a valuable asset to his or her Finnish/Swedish language development.</b>						
2016 (n = 809)	1.8	3.2	11.1	37.4	45.1	
2021 (n = 1030)	1.4	2.4	14.9	30.7	50.7	
<b>It is beneficial for teachers to carefully examine school policies for their potential impacts on linguistically and culturally diverse students.</b>						
2016 (n = 810)	1.5	4.8	10.9	50.6	31.1	
2021 (n = 1035)	1.2	1.7	8.7	38.8	49.6	

language, 2) valuing first languages and multilingualism, and 3) classroom management and teacher control.

## Findings

In this section, we first present the main differences between the 2016 and 2021 datasets concerning the responses to the Likert scale statements exploring teachers' views on multilingualism and using students' first languages. Second, we present an analysis of the responses to the open-ended question regarding the teachers' views on the use of the students' first languages. Finally, we compare the results from both datasets. Throughout the results section, the focus is on possible changes in the teachers' views from 2016 to 2021. To support our interpretations, we present examples of responses from the open-ended question, which include the running number of the respondent and the year of the survey. The examples were translated from Finnish or Swedish into English by the authors.

### *Teachers' views on multilingual practices in teaching*

Table 2 presents the frequencies of the teachers' responses to the Likert scale statements concerning multilingual teaching practices in the 2016 and 2021 surveys.

Overall, there were no significant changes in the teachers' views; rather, there were mainly slight adjustments. In 2021, the teachers agreed more strongly with the 'pro-first language' views compared to 2016, but they also agreed more strongly with the 'pro-school language' views compared to 2016. For example, in 2021, the teachers agreed that they should allow students to write in their first languages and that maintaining first languages does not prevent students from learning the language of schooling more often than in 2016. However, in 2021, an example situation (taking notes) was added, which may have had an impact on the responses. Furthermore, in 2021, the teachers disagreed that the responsibility to learn the language of schooling rests primarily on the multilingual student more often than in 2016. Somewhat surprisingly, in 2021, the teachers felt more strongly that they should not ask multilingual students questions about their first languages or ask them to teach others in the classroom words and/or phrases in their first languages compared to 2016. In addition, in 2021, the teachers felt more uncomfortable with others were speaking a language they did not know than in 2016. However, it should be noted that in 2016, this question posed a slightly different situation; the wording referred to a situation in which the respondent was in a group and others were speaking a

language they did not know, while in 2021, the situation described students speaking in a language that the respondent did not know during class. Thus, these responses are not entirely comparable. In general, the changes from 2016 to 2021 are not remarkable, although more emphasis was placed on students' first language use in 2021 than 2016.

Next, we examined the teachers' reported practices regarding the use of students' first languages (Table 3).

There was a positive development in the teachers' reported practices after the curriculum change related to the use of students' linguistic resources for learning—the teachers reported using both translations and dictionaries more often in 2021 than in 2016.

### **Using only the language of schooling?**

Next, we analysed responses to the open-ended question investigating whether the language of schooling should be the only language used in the classroom. In 2016 ( $n = 691$ ), 48.9% of the respondents answered that this would not be a good policy (see Example 1), while 26.9% stated that only the language of schooling should be used during the lessons. Meanwhile, 21.3% of the participants answered that it was dependent on the situation (Example 3). In 2021 ( $n = 736$ ), 56.6% of the respondents believed that languages other than the language of instruction should be used (Example 2), 22% responded that only the language of the instruction should be used (Example 4), and 17.6% responded that it depended on the situation. Thus, it seems that in 2021, more teachers perceived it to be unbeneficial to restrict the language used in the classroom to only the language of schooling. In addition, 3.6% stated that the question was not currently relevant to them for various reasons.

- (1) It shouldn't [be the only language used]. It does not support anyone's functional multilingualism. Instead, we should encourage the use of languages by all students in all lessons, e.g. for searching for information. #1/2016 *Not only the language of schooling*
- (2) It must not be [the only language used]. Using your own language and the concepts you understand through it is just a really important tool for structuring

**Table 3.** Teachers' reported practices in 2016 and 2021

Year ( $n$ )	1 (never)	2 (approximately once a week)	3 (2–3 times a week)	4 (multiple times a week)
<b>In a typical week, I translate (or have asked for help in translating) key concepts into the students' first language.</b>				
2016 ( $n = 688$ )	58.9	22.1	9.7	9.3
2021 ( $n = 877$ )	49.7	29.1	11.6	9.6
<b>In a typical week, I allow students to use bilingual or online dictionaries or search the meanings of words with picture search tools online.</b>				
2016 ( $n = 689$ )	25.7	19.3	16.8	38.2
2021 ( $n = 907$ )	13.3	23.2	24.6	38.9

and understanding things. #172/2021 *Not only the language of schooling*

- (3) In Finnish lessons, it can be good, especially if the students all come from the same language background. Otherwise, the use of Finnish can easily be left to discussions with the teacher. However, when doing independent tasks, I think it's fine to ask for help or discuss with a classmate in your own language, if it helps. #6/2016 *Depends on the situation*
- (4) You should. There are students who use their own language for the wrong purposes, for example, by speaking inappropriately or calling other students names. #187/2021 *Yes, only the language of schooling*

### **Stances taken toward multilingual practices**

Next, we analysed the teachers' views on multilingual classroom practices. Of the 653 responses elicited in 2016, 7.5% advocated the use of students' first languages in learning, and 59.6% allowed their use (Example 7). Thus, 67.1% of the teachers had a positive orientation. Of the 669 responses in the 2021 data, 79% were positive: 35.9% of the teachers advocated the use of students' first languages (Examples 5 and 6), and 43.1% allowed the use of multiple languages (Example 8). As can be seen in the following examples, the main difference between advocacy and allowance was often the conditional nature of the use of students' first languages (i.e. they should [only] be used under certain conditions). In contrast, active teacher agency in promoting multilingualism was visible in some of the answers coded *advocacy*.

- (5) I have been involved a lot in this issue. My position is an absolute no. It is unreasonable to require, for example, two Russian-speaking pupils to speak Finnish to each other, for example, when one asks to borrow a pen. I would compare the situation to if I were in England taking a language course with a Finnish colleague, but we would speak Finnish in all kinds of bilateral situations, and it would be artificial and unworkable to speak English all the time. In pair work and group situations, we would of course speak English. #184/2021 *Advocacy*.
- (6) I think this rule only applies to Finnish language lessons. In other languages, using your mother tongue is helpful, and it's good if you can sometimes ask a friend for help in your own language. If asking for help hinders the progress of the students, it can be limited a little, if necessary. #357/2021 *Advocacy*
- (7) Depends largely on the level of language skills. For example, they can also use their own language to explain things to another person of the same language if their Finnish is not good enough. #227/2016 *Allowance*
- (8) You can speak many languages in lessons, provided that the language used is relevant to the subject being studied and that the foreign language is not used to make inappropriate comments, bully others, or exclude others from the group. The challenge is sometimes providing equal opportunities for all: Some have classmates who speak the same language, others are the only ones in the class who do. #376/2021 *Allowance*

**Table 4.** Justifications given for advocacy, allowance, or denial in the 2016 and 2021 datasets.

Main categories – Justification	Subcategories – Justification	2016 (%)	2021 (%)
<b>School language</b>			
	Main aim is to learn Finnish language	20.4	21.7
	Learning occurs only in Finnish	0.9	1.8
<b>Valuing first languages and multilingualism</b>			
	Curriculum requires it	0.1	0.5
	It supports learning	34.4	35.9
	Human rights require it	5.2	4.6
	Valuing first languages	2.8	2.7
	Everyone's freedom to expression	2.4	6.5
	Usefulness of multilingualism	5.2	3.2
<b>Classroom management and teacher control</b>			
	First languages are used for bullying	6.4	7.7
	Teacher has to understand the language	14.2	9.3
	Focus on learning content	7.9	6.7

In the 2016 data, 32.9% of the responses were categorized as *denial* of the use of students' first/own languages (Example 9). In 2021, 21% of the teachers' stances indicated denial of the use of multiple languages (Example 10), even though the national core curriculum advocates the use of multilingual practices.

- (9) Absolutely. A child learns language best in social situations and thus understands the different depths of language. #238/2016 *Denial*
- (10) Yes. This practice is in use as part of the school's operating culture. It promotes greater community among students. #446/2021 *Denial*

When examining the teachers' responses, in general, it is clear that the teachers' views related to the use of students' first languages for learning became more positive.

### **Teachers' justifications for their stances on multilingual practices**

In this section, we discuss the justifications identified in the responses regarding the teachers' stances on multilingual practices. In 2016, we were able to identify at least one justification in 522 responses; in 2021, justifications were found in 677 responses (see Table 4).

Most justifications for using only the language of schooling included fears that students would not learn the language of schooling if other languages were used (Examples 11 and 12), that using other languages would exclude others, that other languages would be used for bullying, or that they would cause other problems for classroom management (Examples 11 and 13).

- (11) In lessons, it is necessary to limit the language of schooling to Finnish because you can only learn a language by listening, speaking, and acting in a language environment. In addition, it is difficult to settle disputes between students when speaking a language that the teacher does not know. #315/2016 *School language and Classroom management and teacher control*

- (12) Yes and no. You can use your own language to help your friend to understand. Otherwise, the constant use of your own language will slow down the learning of Finnish and the establishment of friendships with Finnish speakers. #799/2021 *School language*
- (13) It is a good idea to use the language of the school so that everyone understands what is being said. If L2 students or migrant students use their own language for learning and studying, that's okay and positive, but if they use it for chatting amongst themselves or for one-on-one conversations that are not related to learning and are not understood by others, then I would advise changing the language. #870/2021 *Classroom management and teacher control*

Almost as many teachers in 2021 as in 2016 perceived that the main aim of school is to learn the language of schooling and that teachers had to understand the language used in the classroom. Interestingly, the percentage of teachers who were worried about the use of first languages for bullying purposes slightly increased in 2021.

In 2021, the overall percentage of teachers who perceived the value of first languages in supporting students' learning slightly increased compared to 2016. The main justifications for using students' entire linguistic resources for learning focused on the use of first languages being beneficial for learning: 'It is useful for students to use their mother tongues during the lessons, for understanding and learning' (#1030/2021). In addition, in both datasets, there were some teachers who considered all languages as valuable per se (Examples 14–16).

- (14) No. Multilingualism is also an asset. #356/2016 *Valuing first languages and multilingualism*
- (15) No, other languages are a source of enrichment, and comparing idioms helps to understand the concept. I often use English—Finnish comparisons but not students' first languages. #774/2021 *Valuing first languages and multilingualism*
- (16) Languages are a source of enrichment; we should be able to use them. #271/2021 *Valuing first languages and multilingualism*

In 2021, the teachers were often conditional in their language policies, and their responses reflected the belief that although the use of first languages supports learning, it is also important to pay attention to using the language of schooling so that it will develop optimally (Examples 17 and 18). The teachers also considered it important to use languages in an inclusive way, with the aim of supporting everybody's ability to take part in discussions (Example 19).

- (17) In my opinion, students are allowed to speak their own language in lessons if they can also speak Finnish. Then they will be able to explain things in Finnish if necessary. #689/2021 *School language*
- (18) No, because explaining/reading/listening to the matter in the strongest language helps to understand the concept. Of course, learning Finnish terminology is also important. I think it is smartest to use languages side by side and to provide

pictorial support. #1016/2021 *Valuing first languages and multilingualism; School language*

- (19) I think there are situations in lessons during which students can use all the languages they know as a resource for learning. It is also justified that in general group situations, people speak languages that are understood by everyone present, i.e. the language of schooling. #1018/2021 *Valuing first languages and multilingualism; School language*

The respondents emphasized the significance of learning the content of a lesson regardless of the language used (Examples 20 and 21).

- (20) Depends on the situation. Finnish develops better when you speak it. Also, you cannot say obscenities out loud in Finnish as easily as in a language that the teacher does not speak. When working in a foreign language is feasible and makes learning easier (e.g. a peer with the same mother tongue), then of course it should be used. #645/2016 *Focus on learning content*
- (21) I've been in situations where there are five students in a class, two of whom speak their mother tongue, which interferes with the learning of others. From their expressions, gestures, and tone of voice, I interpreted that the conversation was not related to the tasks and that the students' tasks were not going well. In such situations, I do not think that discussion is allowed. I have also been in situations where two students are discussing a common task. You can hear Finnish words in between the speech, and clearly the students are thinking about the task. Here, I think you are allowed to speak in your mother tongue. My policy has been that during breaks and transitions, you can speak, and whenever you ask permission, you can speak in your mother tongue. #232/2021 *Focus on learning content*

Most of the responses in this theme had a slightly negative orientation towards students' first languages, and the respondents were highly conditional in their answers: languages other than the language of schooling may be allowed, but only if they clearly support learning and do not disturb anyone. Thus, these responses were related to classroom management.

## Discussion

In this study, we examined two data sets (from 2016 and 2021) to identify the potential impact of changes in educational policy text (i.e. national core curriculum) on teachers' responses regarding multilingual practices at school. First, we investigated teachers' views on using all of students' linguistic resources at school. Second, we studied how the teachers justified their responses. Our results showed that there has been some development towards more positive views on using students' first languages as resources for learning. In 2021—five years after the curriculum change (EDUFI, 2014)—the teachers seemed to have moderately more positive views on multilingual practices in the classroom. Interestingly, when examining the teachers' views with Likert scale items compared to an open-ended question, the latter revealed even bigger changes towards more

positive stances. The responses to the open-ended question elicited more detailed perceptions and thus provided a more realistic and detailed picture of the teachers' views.

Overall, the results indicated a slight adjustment towards using multilingual practices at school (see also Alisaari, Heikkola, et al., 2019). Fewer respondents took a stance of denying the use of first languages in 2021 compared to 2016; however, it is concerning that approximately one-fifth of the respondents still held views conflicting with the national guidelines. Thus, it can be concluded that the national policies have not yet been fully implemented at the schools of the participants in this study. The results align with previous international research indicating that teachers' do not always consider first languages to be resources for learning (Agirdag et al., 2014; Faneca et al., 2016; Iversen, 2019; Lundberg, 2019; Rodríguez-Izquierdo et al., 2020) or know how to incorporate multilingual practices in their teaching (Dražnik et al., 2022; Iversen, 2019).

In both datasets, many responses coded as *allowance* offered negative or conditional justifications for the stance taken. The findings from the 2021 data are somewhat contradictory; although a slightly more positive stance on using first languages was identified, more responses included additional conditions for the allowance of the use of first languages, which were often related to the importance of learning the language of schooling, a teacher being in control of the classroom, or that languages should be used in an inclusive way. While these aspects support students' academic learning in the language of schooling, such conditional orientations could send messages that reproduce monolingual norms and harm students' identities by restricting or even denying their multilingualism (Cummins, 2001). Thus, students' first languages are not always seen as having intrinsic value (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2017).

The Finnish core curriculum has a strong focus on interaction, identity, and socialization through the use of multiple languages at school (EDUFI, 2014); thus, it was surprising to find that support for students' identities was scarce in the responses. Previous research has shown that teachers sometimes experience uncertainty when facing conflicting demands from different stakeholders. For example, the nexus of students' language related expectations, guardians' expectations, curricula, and public debates may result in teachers opting for what they perceive to be the easiest solution—not advocating for the use of first languages (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; Dražnik et al., 2022; Iversen, 2024). The topic of supporting multilayered linguistic identity growth requires focused research in the near future.

Teachers of this study seem to have a strong awareness of the significance of first languages in learning new languages (see also Cummins, 2021; Ganuza & Hedman, 2018; Relyea & Amendum, 2020). However, many statements emphasizing the significance of learning content regardless of the language used had a significantly negative tone regarding the use of first languages. The conditionality of the teachers' views may be linked to uncertainty about how to concretely use languages as resources for learning (see also Krulatz & Christison, 2023) or fears of othering multilingual students (see Dražnik et al., 2022). The fear of othering may partly explain why the teachers felt more often in 2021 than in 2016 that they should not ask multilingual students questions about their first languages. The same reason might be behind the decreased perception that students could teach others in the classroom words or phrases in their first languages. Indeed, sometimes questions that seem benign can create a sense of exclusion. However, the teachers' more conditional stances may also have been due to more experience with

working with multilingual students and thus having a better understanding of the effort and attention required during language development.

Systematic support for the language of schooling is crucial for students. However, encouraging the use of first languages does not diminish the value of the language of schooling in any way. As many recent studies from Finland have shown (Kuukka & Metsämuuronen, 2015; Pulkkinen et al., 2024), the development of migration background learners' school-language skills is not always sufficient for academic success, even for the children of immigrants born in Finland. Moreover, migration background learners do not catch their majority language peers in learning outcomes during the first years of school (Ukkola & Metsämuuronen, 2023). At the end of basic education, the difference between multilingual students' and majority language students' academic outcomes is remarkable (Pulkkinen et al., 2024). Furthermore, many teachers are concerned about students' integration and learning of the language of schooling (Alisaari et al., 2022). Thus, the Finnish national core curriculum, which is legally binding, requires advocating the use of students' entire linguistic resources, both for learning and for building a multilayered linguistic identity, and the document leaves no room for either objections or conditions. The participants of the 2021 survey had received significantly more training in multilingual practices than the 2016 participants, and this training is likely to have included topics related to the use of students' first languages in the classroom; however, what they learned in the training was not noticeable in their responses. Thus, there is a need for intervention studies on how advocacy for multilingual practices can be optimally implemented in daily practices at school (see Decristan et al., 2022) so that teachers can have access to more scientific evidence related to using students' first languages in their teaching practices.

## Conclusions

This study indicates that there was at least a small change in teachers' views related to the use of students' first languages as resources for learning; however, not all teachers adopted a stance of advocating or allowing the use of multilingual practices in the classroom. In addition, despite a strong focus on identity and interaction in the national core curriculum, the teachers who were surveyed tended to focus on learning the language of schooling or subject-matter content in learning situations at school. This result is relevant also in global context, indicating that a curriculum change at a national level does not automatically result in changes in the classroom level instruction.

Our results may indicate neoliberal education policies (Frønes et al., 2020) focusing on learning outcomes at the expense of educating students to be(come) healthy, creative, and democratic citizens who are aware of their own and other's rights. Thus, there is a global need for a critical examination of the ideological direction and democratic values guiding education, as well as for extensive professional training to instruct teachers in implementing educational policies that promote the use of multiple languages in practice (see also Turner & Tour, 2025). Moreover, the current lack of intervention studies on the use of students' first languages in different educational contexts must be addressed. As evidence-based pedagogical decisions can only be made if the necessary evidence is readily available, intervention studies are urgently needed to examine learning outcomes in the language of schooling and

outcomes related to interaction and intergroup relations, student wellbeing, and identity growth.

## Note

1. The language of instruction may also be Sami, Roma, or sign language. In addition, some teaching may be done in other languages, provided that this does not impede with students' ability to follow.

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## Appendix. The survey items used for this study (R = a reversed item)

Statements in 2016 survey	Statements in 2021 survey
It is important for teachers to ask multilingual students questions about their first language.	It is important for teachers to ask multilingual students questions about their first language.
Teachers should allow students to write in their first languages.	Teachers should allow students to write in their first languages, for example when students are writing notes.
It is important for teachers to ask multilingual students to teach others in the classroom words and/or phrases in their first languages.	It is important for teachers to ask multilingual students to teach others in the classroom words and/or phrases in their first languages.
Teachers should use materials in class that reflect the cultural, racial/ethnic, and/or linguistic backgrounds of their linguistically and culturally diverse students.	Teachers should use materials in class that reflect the cultural, racial/ethnic, and/or linguistic backgrounds of their linguistically and culturally diverse students.
Teachers should advocate for Finnish language development support for their multilingual students.	Teachers should advocate for Finnish language development support for their multilingual students.
The responsibility to learn Finnish/Swedish well rests primarily on multilingual students. (R)	The responsibility to learn Finnish/Swedish well rests primarily on multilingual students. (R)
I feel uncomfortable when I am in a group and others are speaking a language I do not know.	I feel uncomfortable when students are speaking a language I do not know during a lesson.
Multilingual students who maintain their home language have difficulty in learning Finnish/Swedish. (R)	Maintaining their first languages does not prevent multilingual students from learning Finnish/Swedish. (R)
A multilingual students' first language development is a valuable asset to his or her Finnish/Swedish language development.	A multilingual students' first language development is a valuable asset to his or her Finnish/Swedish language development.
It is beneficial for teachers to carefully examine school policies for their potential impacts on linguistically and culturally diverse students.	It is beneficial for teachers to carefully examine school policies for their potential impacts on linguistically and culturally diverse students.
In a typical week, I translate (or have asked for help in translating) key concepts into the students' first language.	In a typical week, I translate (or have asked for help in translating) key concepts into the students' first language.
In a typical week, I allow students to use bilingual or online dictionaries or search the meanings of words with picture search tools online.	In a typical week, I allow students to use bilingual or online dictionaries or search the meanings of words with picture search tools online.
Should teachers have a policy in their classroom to use only the language of schooling in lessons? Why or why not?	Should teachers have a policy in their classroom to use only the language of schooling in lessons? Why or why not?