

# Teachers' perceptions on multilingualism in the context of two national languages

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## Abstract

*This study examines teachers' views concerning multilingualism in Finnish-language and Swedish-language schools in Finland. Using the concepts of linguistically responsive teaching and sustainable translanguaging, the following research questions were posed: 1. How do teachers in Finnish-language and Swedish-language schools perceive multilingualism as reflected in their language use? 2. How do teachers in Finnish-language and Swedish-language schools perceive multilingualism as reflected in their guidance of the students' language use? The data were collected through an online survey (N = 2 865) conducted in schools located in 291 municipalities across Finland, covering the entire country. Participants included primary school teachers, subject teachers, and special needs teachers. Almost a third of the participating schools reported no students with home languages other than Finnish, Swedish, or Saami. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were adopted. The results reveal that the teachers in Finnish-language schools relate the concept of linguistic diversity to all languages, whereas the teachers in Swedish-language schools often embrace the national languages within that concept. Furthermore, the results confirm the outcomes of previous research, reporting that Swedish-language schools have a dual role: to safeguard the use of the school language, which has a minority position in the Finnish society, and to acknowledge growing linguistic diversity. Teachers in both school types partially embrace multilingualism but need further support to implement linguistically responsive teaching. The results also suggest that to help teachers develop strategies for linguistically responsive teaching, the connection between teachers' orientations and pedagogical knowledge needs to be further emphasised.*

**Keywords:** *linguistically responsive teaching; multilingualism; national languages; teachers' language use; students' language use*

## 1 Introduction

Although multilingualism in societies is more a norm than an exception (The Douglas Fir Group, 2016), school institutions throughout the world maintain a persistent tradition of monolingualism (Gogolin, 1994; Piller, 2016). Even countries with official bilingualism, such as Canada or Finland, often practise parallel monolingualism in their macro-level structures and have co-existing institutions for the two languages (From et al., 2024; Heller, 2007; Sterzuk & Shin, 2021). Ellis et al. (2011) demonstrate that in two distant linguistic contexts such as Germany and Australia, the monolingual habitus of the school institution is closely connected to the power structure of the local language conditions and fostered by the language regulation of the nation state. Thus, the language of instruction also has significant symbolic value for a multilingual society, and schools remain formally monolingual, whereas informally, a variety of languages is used. Societal shifts toward greater multilingualism challenge existing school institutions and necessitate systemic change.

An example of a bilingual structure based on two parallel educational systems from pre-school to university is the Finnish system which has two national languages, Finnish and Swedish and this is in compliance with the Act on Basic Education (2025). In addition to Finnish and Swedish, a third language, Saami, has an official status in the Saami native region with instruction offered in Saami (Institute for the Languages of Finland, n.d.). Most children in Finland attend Finnish-language schools, with Finnish as the language of instruction. Children from Swedish-speaking homes and most of the children from Finnish-Swedish bilingual homes are enrolled in the Swedish educational system in Finland. Compared to other multilingual countries, the quantitatively small Swedish language has strong formal rights and is de jure not defined as a minority language (Suksi, 2017). This means that the present authors avoid using terms such as majority and minority languages. Instead, we consider it important to address the languages' different societal positions by adopting the expression *minority/majority position*.

Swedish has historically been a prestigious language in Finland for over a thousand years, as it was originally the language of administration, the church, and the cultural elite. During Russian rule – the Age of Autonomy (1809–1917) – the position of Finnish strengthened. When Finland became independent in 1917, it was clear that Finland had two national languages, Finnish and Swedish, and their position is today mandated by the Constitution of Finland. The Swedish-speaking population in Finland remains small (5.2%). Nonetheless, from a legal perspective, both language groups have strong legal rights guaranteed by the Finnish Constitution. In reality, opportunities to use Swedish in society or in public service may vary. This means differences arise between de jure language policies and de facto language policies (Sopanen, 2022; Suksi, 2017). The strong legal position of both national languages is visible in the organisation of the education system: the parallel school system consisting of the Finnish-language schools and Swedish-language schools (Act on Basic Education, 2025).

It is well known that that bilingual education is recognised as a positive contributor not only to student proficiency levels in both languages but also to their metalinguistic abilities (Beauchamp & MacLeod, 2022; Bialystok et al., 2014). The only bilingual Finnish–Swedish programmes that currently exist are immersion programmes; other models have been discussed extensively but have not yet been implemented. An exceptional case is the new Nordic Comprehensive school in Helsinki, which began accepting first-grade students in Autumn 2024 (City of Helsinki, 2025). In this context, increasing migration in Finland since the 1990s has led to a new multilingual turn, which represents a second phase of multilingualism in the education system (Pitkänen-Huhta 2021, p. 365). This is reflected in a growing linguistic diversity among students in both Finnish-language and Swedish-language schools (for example, see Ahlholm et al., 2022; Bergroth et al., 2021; Hellgren et al., 2019). During the school year 2023/2024, 11.7% of the students in comprehensive schools had a first language other than Finnish, Swedish or Saami

(Vipunen, 2024). Recent years have seen a growing emphasis on educational language policy to support culturally and linguistically responsive teaching as well as on the need for all teachers to possess an understanding of language awareness (for example, see Aalto, 2019; Acquah, 2015; Bergroth et al., 2021, 2022; Paulsrud et al., 2020). The Finnish national core curriculum for basic education emphasises a multilingual approach more prominently than the prior policy document (Paulsrud et al., 2020; Zilliacus et al., 2017), a standpoint that is likewise visible in transversal international policy documents (ECML, 2022; Nordic Council of Ministers, 2007). A multilingual approach is adopted in recent policy texts concerning the identity of students, their language use in school and content learning. The curriculum adopts the term language awareness, stipulating that the use of various languages in the daily life of the school must be regarded as natural, and all students are to be able to use their full linguistic repertoire as a resource for learning and linguistically responsive teaching (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014; Suuriniemi, 2023).

By law, the migrants in Finland have the right to select either Finnish or Swedish as their language of integration, which is promoted in the current Programme of the Government (Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration 2010; Finnish Government, 2021; 2023). Most children from migrant families enrol in Finnish-language schools (Forsgård, 2025; Oker-Blom, 2021). While Swedish-language schools also experience an increasing linguistic diversity that includes many languages, the differences in relation to the Finnish schools are noteworthy: 11% of all students in Finnish-language schools are from families who speak a home language other than either Finnish or Swedish. By comparison, in Swedish-language schools, this student group is only 5% (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2025; Vipunen, 2024).

Multilingualism in Swedish-language schools has traditionally been referred to as Swedish-Finnish bilingualism in the family. A considerable number of the students in Swedish-language schools are from Swedish-Finnish homes (Westerholm et al., 2016). During the last decades, the Swedish-language schools have strongly emphasised the need to support the Swedish of bilingual children – a stance that should be understood from the perspective of Swedish as a language that represents a minority position in the society. Consequently, Swedish-language schools in Finland often frame bilingualism as a means to support the less common national language, which in turn is linked to the necessity of maintaining the Swedish language in society (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020). This is also visible in the national core curriculum, which dedicates a paragraph to the specific mission of the syllabus of Swedish language and literature, observing that two priorities have arisen to support both the language of instruction and to continuously emphasise a multilingual approach (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014). Some teacher educators and student teachers continue to consider it more important to master and use Swedish in the classroom than to acknowledge and make use of students' multilingual skills and backgrounds (Paulsrud et al., 2020). For many decades, the idea of maintaining a monolingual norm in the Swedish-language schools has been strong (Slotte-Lüttge, 2005; Slotte-Lüttge, 2007) an understanding that is related to an interest in safeguarding Swedish in Finland (Boyd & Palviainen, 2014; From, 2020; Granskog & Nummela, 2021).

In a world of growing linguistic diversity, it is interesting to acknowledge the multilingual turn from the perspective of speakers of two official languages that have strong legal protection, even though one of the languages occupies a majority position. The number of students with a migrant background is significantly higher in Finnish-language schools than in Swedish-language schools. However, the latter have a considerably larger proportion of students from bilingual Swedish-Finnish homes. As all teachers are expected to adopt a multilingual approach, it is particularly interesting to analyse the similarities and differences between these two groups of teachers.

The aim of this study is to investigate teachers' views concerning multilingualism

in Finland. We pose the following research questions: 1. How do teachers in Finnish-language and Swedish-language schools perceive multilingualism as reflected in their language use? 2. How do teachers in Finnish-language and Swedish-language schools perceive multilingualism as reflected in their guidance of the students' language use?

## **2 Linguistically responsive teaching from the perspective of speakers of two different national languages**

Due to the growing linguistic diversity in society and schools, an increasing pedagogical research interest is emerging in teaching within multilingual settings. This is evident in the variety of the terms adopted in the research field (see Repo, 2022). Some examples of these are: linguistically sensitive teaching (see Bergroth et al., 2022), culturally and linguistically responsive teaching (Lucas et al., 2008; Lucas & Villegas, 2010, 2013; Vigren et al., 2022), critical (multilingual) language awareness (García, 2017) and multilingual pedagogies (García & Flores, 2012). In this study, we examine multilingualism on the societal level both from the perspective of speakers of a language in a majority position and speakers of a language in a minority position, in a school context. We achieve this by adopting the framework of linguistically responsive teaching (Lucas et al., 2008; Lucas & Villegas, 2010, 2013). We also broaden this framework by applying an understanding of the sustainable translanguaging approach that was developed by Cenoz and Gorter (2017).

The framework of linguistically responsive teaching includes both teachers' orientations, such as a socio-political perspective of language use, and pedagogical knowledge and skills to implement these orientations. Different manifestations of linguistically responsive teaching include valuing linguistic diversity, paying attention to students' whole language competence and including different languages in teaching. This means that working for an awareness of multilingualism in the classroom has implications on a larger societal level – to increase the sense of belonging of all language users.

From the perspective of speakers of a language in a minority position, as is the case for the Swedish language in Finland, research interest in linguistically responsive teaching is growing. In the Basque context, Cenoz and Gorter (2017) and Leonet et al. (2017) argue that minority languages need to adopt new strategies to protect and develop the language in a more globalised and mobile society, embracing multilingualism. From the Welsh perspective, Jones (2017) emphasises the need to both create space for the use of the language in a minority position and simultaneously take into account multilingualism. Cenoz and Gorter (2017, 2021) have developed guiding principles for considering the perspectives of regional minority languages and have introduced the concept of sustainable translanguaging. In sustainable translanguaging, as in linguistically responsive teaching, an interrelation is drawn between the teachers' orientations and pedagogical knowledge and skills. The concept of sustainable translanguaging emerges in response to the diverse interpretations of translanguaging, which are contingent upon contextual nuances.

Within a broader societal framework, educational settings that offer a language of instruction in a language in a minority position, this language faces concerns related to the space and protection of the marginalised language. This means that translanguaging needs to be related to the specific characteristics of the socio-linguistic context (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017). Nonetheless, one aspect of implementing linguistically responsible teaching is to actively promote the use of multiple languages (for example, see Repo, 2022). Multilingual children use several languages spontaneously. To mediate learning, different strategies could be implemented to shift from spontaneous translanguaging to pedagogical translanguaging. Pedagogical translanguaging emphasises the multilingual repertoire of multilingual speakers and thus supports the use of different languages at different levels (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021).

The Finnish context has a concept of breathing spaces for its Swedish-speaking minority, which are referred to as “Swedish-speaking spaces” (*svenska rum*). This concept is often used to emphasise “safe” and sufficient spaces for the language in a minority position, and the school is often considered the most central organisational structure (for example, see From, 2020; Slotte-Lüttge et al., 2013). This type of linguistic context enables the teachers to support the use of the minority languages, which Cenoz and Gorter (2017) observe to be one of the guiding principles for sustainable translanguaging. When a society has two official languages, with one occupying a minority position, it is difficult to balance between embracing growing linguistic diversity while safeguarding and supporting the decreasing and significantly smaller of the two languages. Thus, the concept of linguistically responsive teaching needs to include sustainable translanguaging in this context.

Teachers are in a key position to implement multilingualism, which means that their choices in their daily work are important (Saarinen et al., 2019). However, teachers may struggle to recognise diversity issues and adapt to linguistically responsive teaching, and their teaching practices can be based on a monolingual ideology (Iversen, 2021; Wei, 2018). The need for research and practical development is obvious: an OECD study determined that half of the surveyed teachers in the affiliated countries report their being unprepared to teach in multilingual and multicultural settings (OECD, 2019). Despite the teachers' use of practises that support the learning of students with other home language(s) than the language of instruction, such as using visual clues or giving both oral and written instructions, teachers might lack the confidence to regularly utilise their students' home language(s). Furthermore, teachers can consider the students' lack of proficiency in the language of instruction as a problem in the classrooms instead of their first language(s) being recognised as valuable (Suuriniemi, 2023). Another challenge is that teachers do not necessarily learn to use different strategies while on the job (Heikkola et al, 2022). Research on schools with a language in the minority position as the language of instruction reveals similar challenges (Hellgren et al., 2019).

### **3 Material**

The sample constitutes a part of the data gathered by the research project titled KUPERA - Cultural, Word View and Language Awareness in Basic Education - which was conducted cooperatively by the University of Helsinki Centre for Educational Assessment 2019-2021. The aim of this project was to provide research-based perspectives on cultural, worldview and language awareness in education. For this purpose, an online survey was administered to collect data. The research items were developed by the multidisciplinary research team and steering group of the KUPERA project. A questionnaire was formulated in collaboration with statisticians, and electronic versions were created. The surveys were validated through a pilot study, after which the questionnaires were further developed and refined (Jantunen et al., 2021). The link to the survey in Finnish and Swedish was sent to 1,916 schools in Finland and the school headteachers or headmasters were requested to forward this survey to the teachers who taught grades of 2, 6 and 9 in the Finnish school system (children at the age of 8, 12, and 15 years, respectively) (Tamm et al., 2021).

The total number of survey responses consisted of 2,865 teachers in 833 schools of which 34 respondents did not specify a school. The schools were located in 291 (95%) out of the 309 municipalities (Vipunen, 2024) throughout Finland, covering the whole country. Only those municipalities that participated in the pilot study or were about to participate in another study conducted by the University of Helsinki's Centre for Educational Assessment were excluded from the sample. The large municipalities in the Helsinki metropolitan area (Helsinki, Espoo, and Vantaa) were included in the sample (Jantunen et al., 2021, p. 79). Of the teachers, 39% worked as primary school

teachers (grades 1–6), 49% as subject teachers (teaching one or several subjects primarily in grades 7–9) and 9% as special needs teachers (teaching individual students or groups of students, mostly in class, in grades 1–9). Four percent of respondents held other professional titles, including student counsellor. Of the participating schools, 29% had no students with home languages other than Finnish, Swedish or Saami. In almost half of the schools, the percentage of students with other languages was 0.01–5% and in one fifth of the schools, it was 5.01–15%. Of the participants, 4 % reported that the number proportion of students with other languages was 15.01– 25% and 5% reported that the amount was greater than 25% (Suuriniemi et al., 2021). To understand the teachers' perception of multilingualism in both school types, we focussed on two sets of statements, six statements each that were the last questions in the survey. For the questions we analysed in this study, the range of valid responses was from  $n=2308$  to  $n=2338$ . We divided the data into two categories of teachers according to their language of instruction. The first category consisted of teachers who worked in Finnish-language schools (FT)  $n=2581$  (90.7%) with valid responses for the questions we studied ranging from  $n=2076$  to  $n=2105$ . The second category of teachers comprised those who worked in Swedish-language schools (ST)  $n=265$  (9.3%) with valid responses for the questions we studied ranging from  $n=222$  to  $n=223$ . The proportion of students speaking other home languages than the school language was reported by 90.7% of FT and 81.5% of ST to be between 0 and 20%.

#### 4 Data analysis

The analyses of the quantitative data were conducted in the IBM SPSS Statistics version 27. To distinguish the difference between the means of FT and ST, we used the Student's *t*-test designed to detect any overlaps in the distributions of the scores within the compared groups (see Tolmie et al., 2011). We determined whether the distributions were normal or non-normal (skewed). The Student's *t*-test (normal distribution) and the Mann-Whitney U test (non-normal distribution) were performed to compare the effect and significance of the school language on the teachers' perceptions on multilingualism (see Beatty, 2018; Tolmie et al., 2011). Even though the Likert-scale responses were ordinal, we considered them as continuous variables in the analysis and used parametric tests. Parametric tests have been demonstrated to be a robust method to detect violations of interval assumptions (Norman, 2010). To control for error rate, Holm-Bonferroni post-hoc tests were used by ranking p-values and adjusted significance thresholds (Holm, 1979). One difference that the initial analysis revealed as being statistically significant became insignificant (S10). In addition, many respondents did not complete the questionnaire. Reasons for this varied: responding to the questions was not obligatory and the questionnaire was rather long.

The analysis of the respondents' comments was conducted as a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2021) using the NVivo 12 Plus programme. The data were inductively classified and organised into categories that described teachers' perceptions on multilingualism as reflected in their language use and in their guidance of their students' language use. To avoid research bias, the categories were discussed with the first author and the final categories were subsequently defined.

To identify the similarities and differences between the views of FT and ST respectively, the analytical categories were compared between these two types of schools. Quotes from the data are presented as illustrative examples from the analysis.

#### 5 Results

The results are divided into two parts to correspond with the research questions. Both parts are constructed similarly. Firstly, to provide an overview of the sample, we present

the frequencies, means, medians and standard deviations for each statement. We then analyse the differences between FT and ST which is followed by a qualitative analysis. Further discussion regarding the results is found in the discussion section.

### 5.1 Perceptions of teachers' language use

Three statements (1-2 and 6 and 7-11) had a normal distribution with a skewness coefficient value between 1 and -1. Statements 3, 4 and 5 were negatively skewed. Thus, the skewed statements were unevenly distributed (see Tolmie et al., 2011).

TABLE 1. The Statistics of the full sample regarding the statements of teachers' perceptions of multilingualism from the perspective of teachers' language use

| Teachers' perceptions of teachers' language use |   |         |      |      |                |
|---|---|---------|------|------|----------------|
|   | Statements  | N Valid | M    | Mdn  | Std. Deviation |
| S1  | The teacher needs to continue to use only one the language of instruction during the whole lesson.  | 2338    | 3.25 | 3.00 | 1.744          |
| S2  | Mixing several languages when teaching is harmful for the students' linguistic development.   | 2337    | 2.72 | 3.00 | 1.453          |
| S3  | The teacher or teaching assistant can help a group to understand a difficult word or phrase by using e.g., English or another common language other than the language of instruction. | 2337    | 5.90 | 6.00 | 1.304          |
| S4  | The teacher or teacher assistant can help individual students when teaching them individually in other languages than the language of instruction.                                    | 2330    | 6.05 | 7.00 | 1.207          |
| S5  | The teacher can occasionally use words in their speech when teaching e.g., in Russian presuming it could help some students.  | 2332    | 5.81 | 6.00 | 1.397          |
| S6  | Every teacher is also a language teacher of the discipline being taught.  | 2333    | 5.35 | 6.00 | 1.703          |

Differences were detected in perceptions of teachers' language use between FT and ST. For four statements (S1, S2, S3, and S6), the differences were statistically significant (Table 2). The differences between the groups on statements 4 and 5 were not statistically significant (see Table 2). Unless otherwise indicated, the Holm-Bonferroni corrected p-values are primarily presented in the text.

TABLE 2. Inferential statistics of teachers' perception of teachers' language use

| Statements 1-6 by the teachers in Finnish-language (FT) and Swedish-language schools (ST)  |    |         |      |      |      |                 |                                   |        |  |
|--|----|---------|------|------|------|-----------------|-----------------------------------|--------|--|
| Statements   |    | N valid | Mean | Mdn  | SD   | <i>p</i> value* | <i>p</i> value after correction** | Effect |  |
| S1 The teacher needs to remain using only one teaching language during the whole lesson  | FT | 2105    | 3.11 | 3.00 | 1.65 | < .001          | < .001                            | 0.870  |  |
|  | ST | 223     | 4.58 | 5.00 | 2.03 |                 |                                   |        |  |
| S2 Mixing several languages when teaching is harmful for the students' linguistic development  | FT | 2105    | 2.68 | 2.00 | 1.41 | .001            | .008                              | 0.298  |  |
|  | ST | 222     | 3.11 | 3.00 | 1.80 |                 |                                   |        |  |
| S3 The teacher or teacher assistant can help a group to understand a difficult word or phrase by using e.g., English or another common language other than the teaching language | FT | 2104    | 5.87 | 6.00 | 1.32 | .002            | 0.014                             | 0.064  |  |
|  | ST | 223     | 6.14 | 7.00 | 1.18 |                 |                                   |        |  |
| S4 The teacher or teacher assistant can help individual students when teaching them individually in other languages than the teaching language                                   | FT | 2098    | 6.06 | 7.00 | 1.27 | .138            | .552                              | 0.031  |  |
|  | ST | 222     | 5.95 | 6.00 | 1.31 |                 |                                   |        |  |
| S5 The teacher can use in their teaching speech occasionally words e.g., in Russian presuming it could help some students  | FT | 2100    | 5.80 | 6.00 | 1.40 | .936            | 1                                 | 0.002  |  |
|  | ST | 222     | 5.82 | 6.00 | 1.34 |                 |                                   |        |  |
| S6 Every teacher is also a language teacher of the taught discipline   | FT | 2101    | 5.29 | 6.00 | 1.72 | < .001          | < .001                            | 0.406  |  |
|  | ST | 222     | 5.97 | 7.00 | 1.46 |                 |                                   |        |  |

\*Values for normally distributed statements (1,2 and 6) from *t*-test (effect = Cohen's *d*), Values for skewed statements (3-5) from Mann-Whitney *U*-test (effect = *r*)

\*\**P*-value after correction with Holm-Bonferroni post-hoc tests.

For the statement on teachers using only one instructional language (S1), ST agreed on an average of  $M_{ST} = 4.58$ ,  $SD = 2.03$ , whereas FT disagreed on an average of  $M_{FT} = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ . Student's *t*-test revealed that this difference between the groups was statistically significant with a large effect  $t(254.07) = -10.461$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.87$ . This suggests a substantial difference between the groups. In addition, the teacher groups had varied perceptions regarding the mixing of several languages being harmful for their students' linguistic development (S2). FT disagreed ( $M_{FT} = 2.68$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ) with that statement more than ST ( $M_{ST} = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ). This finding was statistically significant with the values of  $t(250.077) = -3.459$ ,  $p = .008$ , with a medium effect size, indicating a meaningful difference:  $d = 0.30$ .

Both groups agreed strongly that the teacher or teacher assistant can help a group to understand a difficult word or phrase by using a common language, such as English or some language other than the language of instruction (S3). FT had a median of 6 (and  $M_{FT} = 5.87$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) and ST had a median of 7 ( $M_{ST} = 6.14$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ). The difference was statistically significant according to the Mann-Whitney *U* test:  $U = 262472.5$ ,  $p = .014$ , however, the effect size  $r = .06$  was very small, which indicated that the practical significance was minimal. Moreover, both FT and ST agreed that every teacher is also a language teacher in the discipline taught (S6). ST agreed ( $M_{ST} = 5.97$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ), whereas FT had a slightly lower mean ( $M_{FT} = 5.29$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ). Student's *t*-test revealed that this was also statistically significant  $t(289.15) = -6.532$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , with a medium effect of  $d = 0.41$ .

The differences between the groups on statements 4 and 5 were not statistically significant. However, the groups agreed that the teacher or teacher assistant could help

individual students when teaching them individually using other languages than the language of instruction. For these statements, FT had a mean of 6.06 and  $MdnFT = 7$ . ST had a mean of 5.95 and  $MdnST = 6$ . The results of the Mann-Whitney U test were  $U = 219896.5$ ,  $p = .552$ ,  $r = .03$ . Furthermore, both groups had noticeably similar means for the statement that the teacher can occasionally use words in other languages in their teaching speech, presuming it could help some students: FT had a mean 5.80 ( $MdnFT = 6$ ) and ST a mean 5.82 ( $MdnST = 6$ ). Nonetheless, the difference between the groups was statistically highly non-significant  $U = 232376$ ,  $p = 1$ ,  $r = .00$ .

To summarise, the participants as a whole group slightly disagreed with the idea of limiting their use to only one language of instruction. However, the analysis revealed a difference between ST and FT regarding this matter. The ST were slightly more in favour of using only one language of instruction, even if it was not a strong opinion. Yet, according to the analysis, FT indicated that they agreed on an average less with that statement. The teachers as a whole and the different groups ST and FT slightly disagreed with the statement that mixing several languages would be harmful for the students' linguistic development. Both groups of ST and FT strongly agreed that every teacher has a role as language teacher of the discipline taught. However, FT opinions on this issue were less strong than those reported by ST.

Even when differences arose in the perceptions of multilingualism between the two types of schools, the qualitative analysis revealed that the teachers in both types of schools appeared to be somewhat positive toward a teacher's use of several languages. Furthermore, they emphasised the role that language plays in learning. Their responses acknowledged their strong will to support students with other home language(s) to ensure that the content would be comprehensible and to support learning. Nevertheless, the use of the language of instruction was considered as the learning goal, as this teacher in a Finnish-language school pointed out:

Mielestäni muita kieliä voi tuki käyttää apuna asioiden ymmärtämisessä, mutta suomenkielen oppiminen on päätavoitteena. Muuten on vaara, että oppilas kyllä oppii asian, mutta ei pysty kertomaan siitä yhteisellä opetuskielellä (joka kuitenkin on tavoitteena). Välitunti on oppilaiden vapaa-aikaa, jolloin pitää saada käyttää haluamaansa kieltä. (FT 1854)

[I think that other languages can be used to help the students to understand, but learning Finnish is the main goal. Otherwise, there is a risk that the student will learn something but will not be able to communicate it in the language of instruction (which is the goal). Break time is free time for pupils to use the language of their choice.]

It is interesting that when commenting on the use of several languages, teachers in Finnish-language schools referred to the students' several home languages but teachers in Swedish-language schools only mentioned Finnish, the national language that has a majority position in Finland, which can be linked to the lower proportion of students with home languages other than Finnish. The following quote illustrated this difference:

Om jag talar om organ i samhällsläran – riksdag, regering – så är det bra om jag också nämner deras finska namn. (ST 1296)

[If I speak about governing bodies in social studies – the parliament, the government – it is good that I also name their Finnish names.]

This teacher taught in a Swedish-language school and emphasised that using Finnish terms was important in particular when discussing matters related to Finnish society. This can be considered as one means of supporting bilingual students in their use of both national languages.

Concerning the use of several languages, teachers in the Finnish-language schools expressed their concern regarding the expectations for the language skills of teachers:

Itselläni ei ole minkäänlaisia edellytyksiä opettaa oppilaita heidän äidinkielellään (latvia tai mahdollisesti venäjä). En myöskään näe, miten tähän haasteeseen voidaan opettajankoulutuksessa vastata, sillä esimerkiksi arabiankielen, venäjän, latvian tai liettuan kielen oppiminen elämäntiedon opintojen yhteydessä olisi varmasti pelkästään ajankäytön näkökulmasta kohtuuton ponnistus. (FT 1235)

[I myself do not have any qualifications to teach students in their mother tongues (Latvian language or possibly Russian language). Neither do I see how to respond to this challenge in teacher education because, for example, learning the Arabic language, Russian language, Latvian language or Lithuanian language in addition to ethics studies would most surely be an unreasonable effort from the perspective of our use of time.]

This teacher felt that they lacked skills in the students' home language(s) and were therefore reluctant to engage in linguistically responsive teaching (see Dražnik et al., 2022). Furthermore, having a command of all students' home languages would be an unrealistic goal both in terms of a teacher's language skills and the time management of the teaching arrangements.

The qualitative analyses highlighted the difference between Finnish-language and Swedish-language schools regarding the teachers' use of the language of instruction. As teachers in Finnish-language schools appeared to support the use of several languages, in Swedish-language schools, the use of languages other than Swedish was even viewed as being problematic:

Undervisningsspråket är ett minoritetsspråk för vilket skolan är den viktigaste användningsdomänen. (ST 515)

[The language of instruction is a minority language for which school is the most important domain of use.]

This teacher emphasised that the minority language must be used in school to maintain the language skills of the minority language. Thus, this teacher used Swedish, the language of instruction, to preserve the language in a minority position.

## 5.2 Perceptions of multilingualism from the perspective of the teachers' guidance of their students' language use

Regarding the perceptions of multilingualism from the perspective of the teachers' guidance of their students' language use, six statements were analysed. Five statements (7-11) had a normal distribution with a skewness coefficient value between 1 and -1. Statement 12 was positively skewed.

TABLE 3. Statistics of the full sample regarding the statements of the teachers' perceptions of multilingualism from the perspective of their guidance of their students' language use

| Teachers' perceptions of multilingualism from the perspective of their guidance of their students' language use |  |         |      |      |                |
|---|--|---------|------|------|----------------|
|   | Statements   | N Valid | Mean | Mdn  | Std. Deviation |
| S7  | The students' other language proficiency is used as learning support only as long as it is necessary for learning the language of instruction. | 2312    | 4.08 | 4.00 | 1.601          |
| S8  | Using many languages during classes/lessons should be avoided because it causes arguments and bullying.  | 2310    | 2.67 | 2.00 | 1.402          |
| S9  | Other languages than the instructional language of the school may be used during classes/lessons.  | 2312    | 5.07 | 5.00 | 1.565          |
| S10   | The students' many home languages make teaching more challenging.  | 2314    | 5.28 | 5.00 | 1.447          |
| S11   | The students should also be encouraged to use the language of instruction during recess.   | 2308    | 5.29 | 5.00 | 1.405          |
| S12   | The student can be forbidden to use any other languages than the school language.  | 2310    | 2.18 | 2.00 | 1.467          |

Statistically significant differences were detected on the perceptions of students' language use between FT and ST for three statements (S7, S9, S10; Table 4). The differences between the FT and ST on statements 8, 11 and 12 were not statistically significant (see Table 4).

TABLE 4. Inferential statistics of the perceptions by teachers of multilingualism from the perspective of the teachers' guidance of their students' language use

| Statements 7-12 the by Finnish-language (FT) and Swedish-language (ST) medium school teachers |   |    |         |      |        |      |          |                            |        |
|---|---|----|---------|------|--------|------|----------|----------------------------|--------|
|   | Statements  |    | N valid | M    | Median | SD   | p value* | p value after correction** | Effect |
| S7  | The student's other language proficiency is used as learning support only as long as it is necessary for learning the teaching language | FT | 2079    | 4.03 | 4.00   | 1.59 | < .001   | < .001                     | 0.359  |
|   |   | ST | 223     | 4.60 | 4.00   | 1.57 |          |                            |        |
| S8  | Using many languages during classes/lessons should be avoided because it causes arguments and bullying                                  | FT | 2078    | 2.66 | 2.00   | 1.39 | .815     | 1                          | 0.018  |
|   |   | ST | 222     | 2.69 | 2.00   | 1.50 |          |                            |        |
| S9  | Other languages than the teaching language of the school may be used during classes/lessons   | FT | 2080    | 5.19 | 5.00   | 1.49 | < .001   | < .001                     | 0.834  |
|   |   | ST | 222     | 3.92 | 4.00   | 1.77 |          |                            |        |
| S10   | The students' many home languages make the teaching more challenging  | FT | 2082    | 5.30 | 5.00   | 1.44 | .039     | .234                       | 0.146  |
|   |   | ST | 222     | 5.09 | 5.00   | 1.51 |          |                            |        |
| S11   | The students should be encouraged to use the language of instruction during recess  | FT | 2076    | 5.32 | 5.00   | 1.37 | .097     | 0.485                      | 0.138  |
|   |   | ST | 222     | 5.12 | 5.00   | 1.67 |          |                            |        |
| S12   | The student can be forbidden to use any other languages than the school language  | FT | 2078    | 2.18 | 2.00   | 1.47 | .713     | 1                          | 0.008  |
|   |   | ST | 222     | 2.21 | 2.00   | 1.46 |          |                            |        |

\* Values for normally distributed statements (7-11) from t-test (effect = Cohen's d), Values for skewed statement (12) from Mann-Whitney U -test (effect = r)

\*\* P-value after correction with Holm-Bonferroni post-hoc tests.

The greatest difference was detected in the statement “other languages than the language of instruction in school may be used during classes/lessons” (S9). FT agreed ( $M_{FT} = 5.19$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ), whereas ST neither agreed nor disagreed ( $M_{ST} = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ), which the median 4.00 supports. This difference was highly statistically significant with a large effect:  $t(255.77) = 10.305$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .83$ . However, when examining the statement of “teachers’ perception on the use of the student’s other language proficiency as learning support only as long as it is necessary for learning the language of instruction” (S7), the groups averages were different from those in the previous statement (S9). ST slightly agreed on average ( $M_{ST} = 4.60$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ), whereas FT neither agreed nor disagreed ( $M_{FT} = 4.03$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ). Student’s  $t$ -test revealed that this difference was highly statistically significant  $t(2300) = -5.091$ ,  $p < .001$ , and it had a medium effect of  $d = 0.36$ . As for the statement “the students’ many home languages make teaching more challenging” (S10), the groups had fewer differences in viewpoints. Both groups agreed on the statement, with FT having a mean of 5.30 ( $SD = 1.43$ ) and ST had a mean of 5.09 ( $SD = 1.51$ ). The difference between the groups was statistically significant in terms of the initial  $t$ -test results:  $t(2302) = 2.062$ ,  $p = .04$ , with a low effect of  $d = 0.15$ . However, when correcting with the Holm-Bonferroni test, the difference became non-significant ( $p = .23$ ).

The results of the analysis of the differences between FT and ST on statements 8, 11 and 12 were not statistically significant. Both FT and ST moderately agreed on the statement of encouraging the students to also use the teaching language during recess. FT had a slightly higher mean ( $M_{FT} = 5.32$ ,  $SD = 1.368$ ) than ST ( $M_{ST} = 5.12$ ,  $SD = 1.669$ );  $t(253.77) = 1.668$ ,  $p = .49$ ,  $d = 0.14$ . Nevertheless, the majority of FT ( $Mdn = 2$ ) and ST ( $Mdn = 2$ ) disagreed with the statement that the student can be forbidden to use any other languages than the school language;  $U = 233878.0$ ,  $p = 1$ ,  $r = .01$ . FT and ST also disagreed with the statement of students using many languages during lessons should be avoided because it causes arguments and bullying (S8). FT had a mean of 2.66 ( $SD = 1.39$ ) and ST:  $M = 2.69$ ,  $SD = 1.5$ ; but the  $t$ -test revealed that this was highly non-significant statistically ( $t(263.13) = -0.234$ ,  $p = 1$ ,  $d = 0.02$ ).

To summarise, the teachers of the full sample minimally agreed on average that during lessons, students could use other languages than the school language when it is necessary for learning the school language. However, when viewed separately from what FT and ST thought, the FT neither agreed nor disagreed, that is, they were less in favour for it than ST, who slightly agreed with that statement. FT also agreed more with the statement supporting the use of other languages during the classes than ST, who neither agreed nor disagreed. Thus, the overall analysis reveals that ST agreed slightly less than their FT colleagues concerning the use of other languages in teaching practice unless they were used to learn the school language.

The qualitative analysis confirmed the differences in the teachers’ perception as reflected in their guidance of the students’ language use that arose. Nevertheless, concerning **the students’ use of several languages**, teachers in Finnish-language schools foresaw a dilemma. The use of the home language is important for feeling secure but speaking Finnish with friends would help their Finnish skill as illustrated in the following quotes:

Jos opettaisin suomenkielisessä luokassa, en pakottaisi oppilasta, jolla on heikot suomen kielen taidot, puhumaan suomea; heidän oma kielensä on varmasti hyödyllinen uuden kielen oppimisessa. (160, FT)

[If I were teaching in a Finnish-speaking class, I would not force a student with poor Finnish-language skills to speak Finnish; their own language is certainly useful in learning a new language.]

Oppilaan kielen oppimista auttaisi todella paljon, jos hän puhuisi kavereiden kanssa suomea. Omankieliset kaverit ovat kotoutumisen ja turvan tunteen takia tärkeitä, mutta kielen oppimista he voivat hidastaa. (1456, FT)

[It would help the students' language learning a lot if they would speak Finnish with their friends. Friends with the same languages are very important for integration and the feeling of security, but they might slow down their language learning.]

As the first respondent remarked, the use of the students' home language(s) constitutes the students' right and the use of these languages should therefore be supported. Nonetheless, as the latter respondent observed, when students use their home language(s), this might not support them in their learning the language of instruction and students should not therefore be encouraged to use their home language(s). It is interesting that teachers in Swedish-speaking schools appeared to further emphasise the importance of their **students' use of the language of instruction**, namely the language in the minority position, Swedish:

Ruotsinkielisissä kouluissa on jo vähemmistökielen aseman perusteella haasteita pitää yllä koulukieltä, joka useimmilla ei ole heidän äidinkieltänsä. (1100, ST)

[In Swedish-language schools, it is already a challenge related to the minority language position to keep up the school language that is not the native language of most.]

This teacher expressed concern regarding the students' Swedish skills and referred to the current situation in Swedish-language schools. This was because students might not have necessarily used Swedish in their spare time (see Korkala et al., 2021). According to this teacher, this is reflected in students' declining skills in Swedish.

## 6 Discussion and conclusion

This study offers insight into teachers' perceptions on multilingualism in a country with two national languages and a parallel school system, as reflected both in the teachers' language use and the teachers' guidance of the students' language use. This research provides valuable insights by specifically examining approaches to multilingualism within a country where different languages serve as the medium of instruction. By analysing the situation in both types of schools, the distinct need to enhance multilingualism becomes particularly prominent and underscores the specific role of Swedish-language schools in creating space for languages in a minority position. The questionnaire administered in this study was conducted both in Swedish and Finnish. As a consequence, respondents might have interpreted the statements differently, particularly concerning their understanding the concept of multilingual students, which in turn, might have led to biased responses (see Dörnyei, 2007). The respondents might also have had considerable differences in their knowledge and understanding of the topic as well as varied experiences of linguistic diversity (see Bryman, 2012). To provide additional information to compliment the statistical analysis, this study incorporated the teachers' comments. However, we have taken into consideration that these statements might not have offered deeper insights because the open responses were rather short (see Dörnyei, 2007). In this article, we investigated linguistic context by examining the specific language used for teaching in schools. We are aware that a limitation of this study is that the language of instruction is only one of the factors explaining the differences between the two groups of teachers.

The aim of teachers in both Finnish-language and Swedish-language schools was to support the students who had home language(s) other than the language of instruction. In other words, the students' linguistic repertoire was, to some extent, considered and made visible in both Finnish- and Swedish-language schools. This means that up to

a point, teachers embraced an understanding of linguistically responsive teaching as defined by Lucas and Villegas and other scholars (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017; Jones, 2017; Leonet et al., 2017). The teachers' responses appeared to indicate their understanding of the societal aspect of linguistically responsive teaching as well as the meaning of language skills in society. This was the intention of teachers in Swedish-language schools when they mentioned the correct word in Finnish for important social phenomena. The teachers' perceptions also reflected the aim of the current Finnish national core curriculum (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014). The use of various languages in the school's daily life was partly considered as being natural and the use of one's entire linguistic repertoire as a resource for learning was partly taken into account. One important aspect of linguistically responsive teaching was raised by the teachers in both types of schools. This concerned educational opportunities and promoting equality for all students (Lucas et al., 2008; Lucas & Villegas, 2010, 2013). According to the teachers, linguistic skills can both support the students in their learning in different subjects and their possibilities to cope in society. This position supports the approach that every teacher is also a language teacher of the taught discipline (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014), a position that was promoted by most respondents from both types of school. As we understand it, this need for good linguistic skills concerns all students, but in particular those who face challenges with the language of instruction.

Although teachers in both types of schools expressed their wish to reinforce linguistic diversity in their daily work regarding both their own language use and their guidance of students' language use, they considered teaching multilingual groups to be somewhat demanding due to the greater range of languages, particularly in Finnish-language schools. This confirms the results of previous research (Heikkola et al., 2022; Suuriniemi, 2023). Teachers in Finnish-language schools might not necessarily have a command of the students' home language(s). This obviously can lead to the teachers not considering their students' home language(s) as a resource. This is rather contradictory in the light of the current position that teachers do not necessarily need to understand their students' home language(s) to support their students' learning process. Moreover, it is important to recognise that proficiency in one language supports language learning in general. This also helps teachers to envision their students' linguistic backgrounds as a resource in all learning (Cummins, 2000, 2007), which is a central tenet of linguistically responsive teaching.

It is also important to note that teachers in the two school systems held different views on multilingualism. Teachers in the Finnish-language schools reported encountering many students who spoke different home languages, whereas according to the results of this study, linguistic diversity in the Swedish-language schools appeared to primarily concern the national languages in Finland, Finnish and Swedish. Teachers in the Swedish-language schools were slightly more in favour of the teachers continuing to use the language of instruction. These differences can be explained by the fact that in the local context, the children in migrant families often attended the Finnish school system. Furthermore, Finnish-Swedish families had the possibility to select the Swedish-language schools for their children (Westerholm et al., 2016). The results suggest that teachers in Swedish-language schools continued to emphasise the importance of guaranteeing the students' opportunities to use Swedish during the school day. Thus, teachers maintained their position that a Swedish-language school is an important domain for maintaining the Swedish language (see Bergroth et al., 2021; Slotte-Lüttge et al., 2013) and these schools can adopt a fairly strong monolingual (Swedish) norm similar to the ideas espoused at the beginning of the twenty-first century (see Slotte-Lüttge, 2005; 2007). In addition, according to the results of this study, safeguarding Swedish in the Swedish-language schools appeared to remain more crucial than supporting multilingualism. As From and Sahlström (2017) observe, the minority language position creates a need for a more homogenous space for the language, a call for "the Swedish

space" (From & Sahlström, 2017). In a limited sense, this position also justifies the norm of monolingualism. The specific tension that arises in the encounter between a perceived necessity to safeguard a language in a minority position and the expectations and needs to approach multilingualism openly is certainly relevant to contemplate in other multilingual countries with similar language dynamics.

To summarise, firstly, while teachers in both Finnish- and Swedish-language schools somewhat reinforced multilingualism in their daily work, they did not appear to fully recognise the possibilities of linguistically responsive teaching. These findings are consistent with several previous studies (Aalto, 2019; Alisaari et al., 2019; Bergroth et al., 2021, 2022; Heikkola et al., 2022; Sopanen, 2022; Suuriniemi et al., 2021; Thomassen, 2021; Vigren et al., 2022). Although the multilingual turn has already been addressed in research and in policy documents, the practical implementation in schools takes time. To further enhance an understanding of linguistically responsive teaching in daily schoolwork, the connection between the teachers' orientations and their pedagogical knowledge, that is, developing teachers' strategies to take advantage of linguistic diversity in their teaching practises (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Lucas & Villegas, 2013) needs to be developed both in terms of pre-service and in-service-teachers.

The second point is that research needs to further emphasise the dual role of schools that have a language in a minority position as the language of instruction – supporting both the use of a language in a minority position in society and acknowledging growing linguistic diversity. It is also important that this dual role is reflected in policy documents, public discussion and particularly in the teachers' daily work. In the future, an increasing number of students might be integrated into the Swedish-language schools, and this needs to be considered. There is a need to encourage further discussion and research on what it means to educate newcomers to integrate through the less spoken language. Schools with a language in a minority position as the language of instruction can be considered as important linguistic domains, that is, "safe spaces" for the smaller language in society. In Finland, multilingualism is a growing phenomenon and it is likewise increasing in Swedish-language schools. In this current societal state, it is essential to balance between two goals: supporting multilingualism as well as the language of instruction, that is, the language in a minority position in society. This position is also promoted in the research of other European countries that have minority languages (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017; Jones, 2017; Leonet et al., 2017). This is also clearly stated in the Finnish core curriculum (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014). It is important to understand sustainable translanguaging, in other words, to support the use of minority languages (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017) as an important part of linguistically responsive teaching. Furthermore, to enhance learning in a multilingual environment, it is essential to foster the use of several languages by students and teachers, including the language of instruction, language(s) in a minority position and the other home language(s) of students. The teachers likewise need support in their move from spontaneous translanguaging towards pedagogical translanguaging with a pedagogical purpose. This again requires that teachers carefully plan their teaching to support linguistic diversity in their daily pedagogical choices (see Cenoz & Gorter, 2021). This should be a fundamental principle in all multilingual educational contexts but is particularly significant in countries that combine the mission of fortifying vulnerable languages with a linguistically responsive approach.

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