

Language-aware operational culture – Developing in-service training for early childhood education and care

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This study examines how practitioners of minority-medium Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Finland reflect on language awareness (LA) in their professional learning communities (PLCs). The study is conducted within in-service training for ECEC practitioners and it also highlights how these practitioner reflections can be of use and support developing future in-service training within the action research framework. The data include nine group discussions on a reflection task, with 41 primary participants and 165 secondary participants from each primary participant's respective PLC. As a starting point, the researcher-trainers identified six language-policy themes on LA in national policy documents. These were presented for practitioners, who then discussed them both in their respective PLCs and within the in-service training. The in-service discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed for qualitative-content analysis. During the analysis, the focus was on the dynamics of minority-majority positions, with the following themes emerging: i) Language contacts; ii) bilingual children and multi-layered identity; and iii) developing multilingual pedagogies. The results showed that the same insights often were treated both as strengths and weaknesses, and that a need exists for support so that practitioners can implement language-aware educational policy into their operational cultures.

Keywords: language awareness, professional learning, early childhood education and care, educational language policy, operational culture

1 Introduction

This study examines how practitioners in Swedish-medium Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Finland reflect on language awareness during in-service training. Language awareness (LA) is a key concept in the core curriculum for ECEC in Finland, but the description of it is relatively vague, stating that *language awareness acknowledges that languages are present constantly and everywhere*. In order to capture the different aspects of LA we conceptualise it as a *collection of closely related concepts* that form a coherent whole about the language dimension in education. This means that the meaning of LA is dependent on the policy context and the situation in which it is used.

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Introducing LA into Finnish education policy has been realised in active interactions with wider European policies (Halinen, Harmanen & Mattila, 2015). Education itself can be considered to be a soft policy area because no binding legislation exists at the EU level. Despite this, ECEC has been identified as an important area for policy cooperation (Milotay, 2016). Similarly, the need to promote LA has been emphasised in recent education-policy documents, such as the European Commission's (2019) *Council recommendation on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages*, which states that LA in schools support reflections on the language dimension in all levels of school organisation, teaching and practice. It also promotes close cooperation among the different members of the school community. It highlights aspects such as "the school as a learning organization" and "a whole school approach", in promoting this broad understanding of LA. Although LA goes beyond language instruction, an ECEC practitioner who is not well-informed about LA might assume that it is a methodology for teaching languages (Lourenço, Andrade & Sá, 2018). In this article, we conceptualise LA as a democratic stance/perspective rather than as an add-on activity to normal pedagogical routines within ECEC. Language is a gateway to social rights, citizenship, social cohesion and education, a position that accentuates the importance of LA in education. It has proven difficult to provide a definition that covers all policy-related aspects of LA (cf. Candelier, 2017), as well as implement hands-on guidance for everyday ECEC practices.

2 Professional learning communities as language-policy agents of change

To understand the institutional transformation toward LA, we view ECEC as comprising professional learning communities (PLCs). It is stated in the Finnish core curriculum that an operational culture is "*a historically and culturally evolving way of doing things, which develops in the interaction of the community*" (EDUFI, 2017, section 3, paragraph 1). It is further concluded that ECEC centres are professional learning communities in which it is important for personnel to understand and assess the values, knowledge and beliefs underlying their actions to develop the operational culture (EDUFI, 2017). Thus, individual practitioners are not viewed as the only agents of possible change toward more language-aware operational culture, but rather a shared agency is needed concerning the "way of doing things" (cf. Kemmis et al., 2014). In their analytical report, Sharmahd et al. (2017, p. 5) define "*the purpose of PLCs is to support ECEC and school staff, both emotionally and professionally, by allowing them to critically reflect on their own teaching and to share concrete ideas on how to improve the wellbeing and the learning experience of children and families*". They rightfully point out that to be fruitful, PLCs need to be part of a competent system in which individuals, teams and institutions collaborate and have competent governance at the policy level (Sharmahd et al., 2017, see also Milotay, 2016). We thus argue for the importance of recognising the current "doings" of an operational culture, as well as recognising the ways in which the "sayings" and "relating" of the PLC sustain and potentially transform the 'doings' (cf. Kemmis et al., 2014).

Introducing two new abstract policy concepts – LA and operational culture – into the Finnish core curriculum requires guidance within local policy processes, as it is essential for transferring the policy into meaningful practice through active and engaged teacher agency (Priestley, Minty & Eager, 2014). Acting on a policy is always a creative and interpretive practice, and practitioners might end up

creating a new policy situated in their own operational culture (Levinson, Sutton & Windstead, 2009). Therefore, the role of the PLC and co-reflections is critical for empowering educational staff to deal with growing linguistic diversity within ECEC (Sharmahd et al., 2017), but the task of group reflection and collaborative feedback is by no means a skill that can be taken for granted. Being involved in this kind of critical transformative dialogue requires collectively shared agency (Daniel, Auhl & Hastings, 2013; Melasalmi & Husu, 2018).

In this study, we approach teachers' agency for change toward a language-aware operational culture as a process that includes moving back and forth between micro-, meso- and macro-levels, thereby taking different kinds of discursive positions in their agency. This process of policy change, as pointed out by Schwartz and Yagmur (2018, p. 216), is not a question of "*an individual agentic enactment of a one sole teacher*", but rather a question of creating collaborations in the form of full-fledged partnerships with families, children and wider communities. Rather than seeing practitioners as change agents of language policy with an internal drive to develop their own classroom practices, we understand them as agents of change on multiple levels, an understanding that requires focusing on collectively shared agency. Vähäsantanen, Paloniemi, Hökkä and Eteläpelto (2017) define *professional agency* as an action-based phenomenon, while Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2017) take an ecological approach to agency, concluding that agency is both a temporal and relational phenomenon. Thus, we conclude that agency is not necessarily about actively taking a stand to act on the norm or against it, but rather is about being involved in the process/phenomenon as it changes/evolves over different time frames and in different spaces of action entailing collaboration among different policy actors.

To combine shared agency with LA and teacher training, Buschmann and Sachse (2018) conclude that transferring training of language-related interactions into daily ECEC routines requires that the focus not lie on individual practitioners, but rather the whole PLC, including ECEC management. In the US context, da Silva Iddings and Reyes (2017) described how they, by reforming initial ECEC teacher education, managed to promote a paradigmatic shift toward an asset-based orientation regarding linguistically diverse children. An essential part of this reform was to make strong connections to the linguistically diverse communities by visiting children's homes. These kinds of visits helped students better understand the interconnectedness between language and literacy learning and cultural identity, and how they were shaped by ethnicity, first language and social class. The authors point out that no shortcuts exist to a more asset-based language and cultural awareness. In a British context, Bailey and Marsden (2017) approach teachers' views from the opposite perspective, questioning how diverse language pedagogies could operate in schools with a monolingual majority, situated within a largely monolingual and monocultural community to utilise linguistic knowledge as a means of enhancing monolingual children's education. They call for more research and teacher training so that teachers can become confident in using diverse language pedagogies within a range of geographical, social, cultural and economic aspects of educational contexts. In the present study, working for a shared language-aware agency by practitioners, working together with diverse families and finding ways to enhance the education of both monolingual and multilingual children are all relevant issues that are visible even within policy documents.

3 Swedish-medium ECEC in bilingual and diverse Finland

Finland is, by constitution, a bilingual country with two official national languages: Finnish and Swedish. Even the rights of speakers of other languages are mentioned in the constitution. Both language groups have constitutionally guaranteed equal linguistic rights in society, including the education realm. Municipalities are obligated to arrange ECEC for children aged 0–6 years old in parallel school systems for each language group (Williams, 2013). Both ECEC language tracks have the same task: to provide service that promotes equality and equity among children and prevents their social exclusion. ECEC aims to strengthen children's participation and active agency in society, and it is characterised by professional staff. At least one third of personnel responsible for caring and education tasks at an ECEC centre must be qualified as kindergarten teachers, with qualifications for other personnel as well (EDUFI, 2017). Furthermore, Finnish kindergarten-teacher education is research-based, i.e., it conceptualises teachers as researchers of their own actions and practices, thereby providing a solid foundation for PLCs (see e.g., Melasalmi & Husu, 2018). The provision of Swedish-medium ECEC secures linguistic rights to receive education in the lesser-spoken national language--only 5.2% of the population is registered as Swedish speakers (OSF, 2018)--providing an important mechanism to prevent language shift in the minority group (Kovero, 2011). However, it simultaneously must cater to growing diversity needs within Finnish society. Linguistic diversity in Swedish-medium ECEC comes in many forms, e.g., immigration, Finnish-Swedish bilingualism and mediated multilingual communication.

Immigrants are entitled to choose Swedish as their first integration language, but municipal authorities do not encourage it. As a consequence, immigrants are often directed toward Finnish-medium integration paths, especially in regions where Finnish has a strong majority position (Creutz & Helander, 2012; see Sabaté-Dalmau, 2018 for similar findings in Catalonia). Finland has recently deemed to stand out on the European level in terms of having educational policies with a strong emphasis on both the diversity dimension and the whole-child approach (Eurydice, 2019), but an alarmingly high proportion (63%) of immigrants of African origin have reported experiencing harassment in Finland (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2018). The Finnish Ministry of Justice stated in 2016 that efforts to change people's attitudes must start within ECEC. Citizens need to become more aware of discrimination and be encouraged to intervene when they witness discrimination, harassment and/or hate speech. Furthermore, equality-related themes should be included in the continuing education of various professional groups, including those working within ECEC, to ensure that they are addressed in working communities (Korhonen, Jauhola, Oosi & Huttunen, 2016). A recent survey on local ECEC policies in Finland (Repo et al., 2018) concluded that encountering and fostering cultural diversity comprised mainly of copying activities suggested in the national core curriculum, such as festive traditions, stories and games. The survey's authors argue that linguistic and cultural diversity should not rely solely on knowledge of a child, group or guardians, but rather on the cultural and linguistic knowledge and awareness of personnel. However, only a few service providers have described how they aim to add on the knowledge base for their educational personnel (Repo et al., 2018).

Another form of linguistic diversity in Swedish-medium ECEC is the growing number of Finnish-Swedish bilingual children is (Bergroth & Palviainen, 2016,

2017). Furthermore, Finnish-speaking parents may choose Swedish-medium education for their children, adding to the linguistic heterogeneity of Swedish-medium ECEC (see Cenoz & Gorter, 2017, for similar findings on the Basque Autonomous Community in Spain). Yet another aspect to linguistic diversity in Swedish-medium ECEC is mediated multilingual communication. As Vincze and Joyce (2018) point out, the local linguistic arena should be considered together with mediated contact with physically distant foreign languages. Regarding English, the dominant language online, they conclude that for minority-language speakers living in bilingual environments, such as those in this study, the local majority language often is a second language, while English may act as a third language. In Finland, home and school have been found to be strongly Swedish-medium domains for Finnish-Swedish-speaking youth, while Swedish and English are used predominantly online. However, the use of majority-language Finnish is almost nonexistent online, especially for youths who are not from bilingual homes (Stenberg-Sirén, 2018, see also Hansell, Engberg, Pörn & Heittola, 2016, for similar findings).

We argue that it is not meaningful to refer to any clear-cut majority-minority or multilingual-monolingual dichotomy in understanding how language policies are enacted in practice despite the fact that policy documents generally tend to treat citizens as monolinguals and as belonging to either Swedish- or Finnish-speaking population (cf. Pöyhönen & Saarinen, 2015). Instead, we suggest that to explore national, regional and local language policies in multilingual minority contexts, a more dynamic perspective on languages and speakers of those languages is needed.

4 The study

In Finland, the national core curriculum is a legally binding regulation for ECEC providers (EDUFI, 2017). The requirement to build on language-aware operational cultures is mentioned in the core curriculum, i.e., language-aware ECEC cannot be treated as an ideological choice for individual practitioners to make. It requires commitment and involves transforming whole operational culture of the ECEC centre. However, *how* to achieve this change is not regulated. This decision is to be made on the local level curricula (cf. Meier, 2018 p. 113). As Zilliacus, Holm and Sahlström (2017) have pointed out, the discourse on language-aware and multicultural education has been strengthened from a policy perspective in Finland, but an institutional transformation still is needed to bring the policy into practice. This study explores how the first stages of this transformation process can occur in Swedish-medium contexts. Two research questions guide the analysis:

- 1) How can in-service training for pedagogical practitioners be further developed so that it better promotes LA within the whole professional learning community, and
- 2) What kind of dynamics of minority-majority language positions can be identified in the audio-recorded practitioner group discussions?

In order to develop in-service training on language awareness (RQ1) we authors as researcher-teacher educators utilise action research approach (Kemmis,

McTaggart & Nixon, 2014). In planning the intended change we draw on our prior experiences of having actively participated in working groups on national and local education policies and recommendations and in various national and international policy-intervention projects regarding the early start for language learning, immersion- and tandem-pedagogy and mainstreaming multilingual pedagogies on a European level (see Bergroth, 2016; Bergroth, Storås & Björklund, 2020; Pörn & Hansell, 2019). Thus, the focus of RQ1 is not to observe the “doings” of the ECEC practitioners in their classrooms, but rather the “doings” of the authors as they engage in transforming some aspects of their own educational practices for the purpose of improving those practices (Kitchen & Stevens, 2008). However, none of the educational actors work in vacuum and as such the action-research approach adopted in this study includes practitioners, researcher-educators and policy makers in close partnerships. Therefore, in order to situate the data analysed for RQ2 (i.e. group discussions) in the surrounding policy context, we start by discussing the different phases of action research for developing in-service (RQ1) in following sections.

5 Findings

5.1 Developing in-service training to better promote LA within the whole professional learning community

In the following sections, we use action research approach (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014) in organising the action research data in three phases: 1) planning the change; 2) acting the change; and 3) reflecting the change.

Planning the change

The in-service training *Language Pearl* (2018–2020) was financed by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and organised in three bilingual cities in Finland. The overall objective of the training was to examine the concept of LA from various perspectives and support children and families with Swedish as a first, second, or immersion language to help create balanced plurilingualism in which all languages are viewed as resources. The data were collected during the first module of the total four modules, which focused on the concept of LA in the educational context of Finland.

Prior to the in-service training a close reading of policy documents, publications and press releases related to LA, early language learning and ECEC by the Ministry of Education and Culture, Ministry of Justice and Finnish National Agency for Education was conducted by the first author. In addition to national core curricula, other policy documents read included *Strategy for the National Languages of Finland – Government resolution* (2012); *Report of the Government on the application of language legislation 2013 and 2017*; *Action plan of the Strategy for the National Languages of Finland* (2017); *Multilingualism as a strength: Procedural recommendations for developing Finland’s national language reserve* (2017); and *Finland, a land of solutions: Government Action Plan 2018–2019* (2017). The documents were retrieved from the Institutional Repository (<http://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi>). The reading resulted in identifying six broad themes of LA relevant for Swedish-medium ECEC in Finland. These themes were

named as *Language development*, *Bilingual education*, *Finnish-Swedish bilingualism*, *Early language instruction*, *Linguistically and culturally diverse society*, and *Swedish S2-language X bilingualism*.

Three of the identified themes can be connected with teaching and learning of languages: *Language development* refers to a child's development of metalinguistic awareness mainly with regard to school language. However, both monolingual and multilingual language development are occasionally mentioned in the documents. *Bilingual education* refers to additive content and language-integrated programmes. Language immersion is recommended as a model for multilingual pedagogic practices that supports early second-language acquisition. *Early language instruction* is part of a governmental effort to reverse a decline in the study of various foreign languages. ECEC centres are encouraged to actively engage children with different languages and create positive attitudes toward languages through playfulness, curiosity and fun.

The other three themes can be connected to acknowledging both individual and societal multilingualism. The theme *Finnish-Swedish bilingualism* acknowledges children from mixed Swedish-speaking and Finnish-speaking families, especially in documents related to the Swedish-speaking population of Finland. The theme includes the need to eventually provide additional support for child's Swedish language development and ways to simultaneously support the child's development of Finnish language. The documents also mention *Swedish S2-language X bilingualism*. In this theme measures for instructional support for Swedish as a second language (as a language not spoken at home), awareness of diverse mother tongues and instructional support for pupil's own mother tongue are highlighted. The final theme *Linguistically and culturally diverse society* highlights the cultural and economic opportunities elicited by national, foreign and immigrant languages in society. This theme is not only about the individual that already is a bilingual, but also about the need to make children aware of linguistic and cultural diversity in society, even in cases in which no children with diverse backgrounds are enrolled at ECEC centres. This topic also includes cultural sensitivity, such as awareness of religious traditions.

Acting the change: In-service training and participants

The first module was designed so that it consisted of two half-day sessions and a task to be conducted together with the colleagues at the practitioners' own ECEC centre. The module was participated by 90 practitioners possessing varied educational and linguistic backgrounds. They came from ECEC centres located either in strongly Swedish-speaking areas, bilingual areas or small regional language ECEC (i.e. Swedish-speech islands). Some practitioners worked in Swedish-language immersion provided within Finnish-medium ECEC. All of the participants had at least receptive language skills in Swedish. During the first session a paragraph called *Cultural diversity and language awareness* from the core curriculum (EDUFI, 2017, section 3.1) was opened up by the researcher-educators and discussed together with the practitioners. The sessions included also hands-on practical advice and discussions on potential opportunities and pitfalls of different practices, and lectures about bilingual language learning and child language development.

During a lecture (å 45 minutes) the six LA themes were presented and their connection to both policy documents and ECEC practices was discussed. After the

lecture the participants were asked to fill out SWOT analysis template together with their colleagues with an emphasis on the operational culture within their own ECEC centres. By including secondary participants' voices, we aimed to strengthen the findings' credibility, as well as create a demand for co-reflections that are critical in PLCs (cf. Sharmand et al., 2017, Sharmand, Peeters & Bushati, 2018). SWOT is an acronym for the words *strengths*, *weaknesses*, *opportunities* and *threats*, and it is a simple tool suitable for analysing learning in workplace and supporting change in strategies (Väyrynen, 2010, p. 23–24). The template included all the six themes, all in all 24 boxes size of a post-it notes, for reflections.

During the second session--three weeks later--these SWOT analyses were discussed in small mixed groups. The groups were instructed to discuss each of the themes, and all participants were to share their PLCs' views on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that applied to them. The time allocated for group discussions was one hour. Participation in data collection was voluntary. In total, nine out of eleven group discussions--with four to five practitioners in each group--were audio-recorded. The data included 41 primary participants and 165 secondary participants on sites (i.e., each primary participant's respective PLC). The researchers did not participate in these discussions but held a whole group discussion after the task.

Reflecting the change: Analytical method

In order to better understand the linguistically and culturally diverse ECEC reality we focused on reflecting the dynamics of minority-majority positions in the data. Our preliminary intended objective was to analyse PLCs' *strengths* from the perspective of the operational culture and identify possible good practices for future in-service training. However, this proved to be difficult as the same aspect often was treated both as a strength and as a possible weakness (see p. 95). Another aspect affecting the analytical process was the difficulties that practitioners expressed in focusing on their actual practices and operational culture: "*We had great difficulties in sticking to our workplace, the operational culture; it became more of a general idea what we thought about these themes*" (Group 7). This led us to an important insight that in our planning and acting phase we had failed to plan for and provide support on how to ground the practitioner reflections, i.e. not only on the 'sayings', on the operational culture, but also on the "doings" and relatings" (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014, p. 57). For these reasons, we settled for inductive descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2009) of the whole discussion data. We initially coded the transcripts independently and proceeded to refine interpretations through joint in-depth considerations. The individual codes were grouped up to themes. As the data are rich in values, beliefs and attitudes about diversity, it is not possible to include a detailed holistic analysis of all the themes that emerged.

5.2 Identified dynamics of minority-majority language positions in group discussions

In the following sections, we weave in the codes (Saldaña, 2009) throughout the narrative presentation of the following three themes: 1) language contacts; 2) bilingual children and multi-layered identity; and 3) developing multilingual pedagogies.

Language contacts

The position of Swedish as the lesser-spoken national language in Finland revealed different kinds of relations to both other majority and minority languages. On one hand, majority languages such as Finnish and English were treated as a vital asset for children, but they were also viewed as threats that diminish the use of Swedish. Group 8 pointed out *"Well, it is rather often that one uses a great deal of English words, and it's seldomly treated as anything negative. But Finnish feels like a threat, that is stupid"*. The practitioner ponders why the use of Finnish is treated like a threat in public discourse, but translanguaging from another majority language--English--is deemed less problematic (cf. Cenoz & Gorter, 2017). These considerations seemed to echo a public debate about the urgency to create a national language-policy programme to protect both national languages from the influence of English. The practitioners go on to note that *"one should be aware, as a practitioner, that it is all right if I say so in my spare time, but it is not pure Swedish"*, referring to the use of English words mixed with Swedish.

Group 5 also discussed the role of English in the context of the minority group's survival. However, it concluded that *"Finnish-Swedish is weakened by English, but also by Swedish-Swedish"*, naming yet another majority language--Swedish spoken in Sweden--as a potential threat. They discussed how children who follow Swedish-Swedish media use Swedish-Swedish pronunciation as their play language in ECEC. The practitioners said that they actively promote Finnish-Swedish children's TV programmes as an important alternative to productions made in Sweden. They conclude that the awareness of Swedish-Swedish should also include language use by practitioners because *"We Finnish-Swedes are such a small minority that we need to protect our language so that it is maintained, so that it will not be 'vi går på fika', but actually words that we use"*. The differences between Swedish spoken in Finland and Swedish spoken in Sweden lie in vocabulary, pronunciation and intonation. For example, it is typical for a Swedish-Swedish person to refer to "coffee break" with the aforementioned expression "gå på fika", whereas in Finland, a person would say "gå på kaffe". In the following group, the need to use 'pure' Swedish refers to avoiding dialect and using plain and simple Swedish. The reason is to include parents as new speakers of Swedish, rather than seeing dialects in a negative light:

P1: When I write digital messages to the parents, they have to use Google Translate in order to understand what I mean, so I can't use spoken language or dialect, but I have to use as correct and good language as I can...

P2: Yes, I feel I have to have them face to face and say in the shortest way possible 'You, come tomorrow, nine, you' and then they ask, 'Only father?' and I say 'No, mother, father, come, nine'. No additional words or any courtesy phrases, but just 'Come, tomorrow, nine' (Group 3).

State-level bilingualism sometimes leads to tricky situations. It is not only that parents might still be learning Swedish, but also that families may be in a situation in which the parents themselves have learned Finnish as their integration language, but their children are attending Swedish-medium ECEC centres. As one of the practitioners in Group 2 pointed out: *"One aspect with our multicultural day care is that we can have parents who have their children in Swedish day care, but they have themselves learned Finnish. That's very difficult"*. Navigating between which languages to use and how to use them is complicated further by the need to navigate between different kinds of expectations from languages in use. In Group

4, one of the practitioners shares a recent experience in which a group of boys was conversing in Bosnian. A Bosnian-speaking girl was very upset about this because her parents did not allow her to speak Bosnian at the ECEC centre. Another practitioner agrees, noting that *"the aims always become apparent, and as we have the new curriculum, the Vietnamese parents, it always becomes apparent what they want and what their aim is, it is that 'the child shall learn Swedish'"*. The practitioners viewed this parental expectation of Swedish-only as somewhat problematic, as the new curriculum expects them to encourage the use of multiple languages and provide opportunities for mother-tongue use. Furthermore, the core curriculum promotes active child agency and involving the voice of the child in decisions related to the child (Alasuutari, 2014), as well as active partnerships with parents and language-aware operational culture. If these intertwined actors' expectations clash, it may prove challenging for the practitioner to see to it that everyone is satisfied with language practices.

Bilingual children and multi-layered identity

Due to state-level bilingualism and the fact that Swedish-medium ECEC represents the numerical minority, the practitioners all have experienced bilingualism in some form. A generally positive attitude toward bilingualism exists among them, as well as a belief that bilingualism benefits children's future lives. Nevertheless, when the practitioners talk about their everyday practices and experiences in ECEC, the picture becomes more complex:

Like we said earlier about the Finnish-Swedish bilingualism, as long as the child follows a normal language development, it is not a problem [to be bilingual], but if there are difficulties, maybe with the whole development of the child or linguistic development, then multiple languages can actually impede (Group 7).

A practitioner in Group 7 points out that as long as the child does not have other difficulties, bilingualism with any language combinations is not a problem. This view was expressed in most groups. Notably, a rather general consensus existed among the practitioners that difficulties related to language development were on the rise *"due to the fact that parents no longer speak to their children"* (Group 5). Furthermore, it often was mentioned that bilingual children often have learning difficulties. However, it was not always clear in this context whether these experiences were based on facts about bilingualism or on a more monolingual language-acquisition perspective (cf. Baker, 2017). For example, in Group 1, a practitioner remarked that 1-year-old bilinguals *"do not even practise their languages the same way"* as monolinguals and that they *"are somehow closed-in before they learn the language"*. She concluded that she wishes that all these bilinguals would be *"granted the luxury of speaking Swedish only"*. This expression is easily the most extreme pro-monolingual view that we encountered in our data and, thus, should not be treated as representative of the practitioners' general sentiment. Indeed, practitioners in Group 8 stated it as a threat if staff *"does not have training in bilingualism and how languages are learned"*. They argue further that *'then everyone has their own opinions of how it should be'* and that *"it can be quite confusing for the child"*. Practitioners in Group 9 are on the same track and refer to scientific research as a baseline for understanding bilingual language development. They point out that *"it has been researched a lot, this bilingualism, and languages in general; it's good for your brain"*. Another practitioner in the same group agrees: *"In school,*

they have easier to organise content than the monolinguals". A third practitioner agrees, noting, "I have written that thinking skills improve and that improves social and cultural skills, openness".

Language was coupled not only with language development and thinking skills in the group discussions, but also with identity and belonging. A practitioner in Group 8 noted the need to understand the complexity of multi-layered identity and belonging. Rather than being a member of one language group or another, a child has a single identity in which different kinds of belonging are inter-related (cf. Council of Europe, 2018):

For example, if you are a Finn, and you are a Finnish-Swede, but then your parents maybe have moved from another country, then you are also, the home language can be Russian, and it's a different culture, and you don't really know who you are. That one would be able to support all that. It's all right too, and it's your thing to be a part of many different cultures (Group 8).

In a few of the utterances, individual, multi-layered and multilingual child identities were replaced by a monolingual group identity, e.g., nationality. In Group 4, a practitioner comments on a group of children with a shared ethnic background, noting that when the group is big enough, *"it is difficult to get the children to speak Swedish in free play, and the risk is evident that they do not know Swedish well before pre-primary school and when school begins"* (cf. Strobbe et al., 2017, on similar findings about dominant minority groups in Flemish society). Although the practitioners tended not to challenge each other's opinions directly during the discussions, this specific view was challenged mildly, as another practitioner drew a contrast, noting that *"the children's behaviour is understandable"* and that, in fact, if she were in the same situation and found a group of other Finnish-Swedes in a foreign country, she would be quite happy to use Swedish with them.

One way to challenge others' opinions in the group was to treat the same aspect both as a weakness/threat and as a possible strength/opportunity. The following quotation is an example of a situation in which a practitioner decides to turn the negative perspective in the previous comment into opportunities, rather than threats:

I was thinking, when you wrote that cultural clashes might be a threat, so I would like to see it as an opportunity, too, because if there is a cultural clash, then one can discuss together, 'So, your way is like this, and my way is like this, what should we do now so it is a good solution?' so it can also be an opportunity. [---] And this with multiculturalism, I think it's so fun. I want to take in all the parents, and I have already noticed, since we were here [in-service training] the last time, I talked to all the parents, and they were like 'Wow, yes, we would like to do that; I will gladly participate', and the children have started to reflect, 'Oh, one can talk like you do too'. I believe that in the future, and before the end of the year, these children have, or should I say, that there shall not be racism any longer when these children grow up because they have become accustomed to it from the start, because we have made it visible and made them aware that 'we look alike and we can play in a same way even if you come from another country and nevertheless, we have fun together' (Group 3).

The practitioner refers to active transformative teacher agency and how her colleagues in her PLC, during the three weeks that elapsed between the first training session and the second, had started to better involve parents with diverse linguistic backgrounds as resources to improve children's LA. The practitioner is enthusiastic and shares a strong belief that this kind of normalisation of different

kinds of linguistic backgrounds through active partnerships with all parents eventually will lead to a more tolerant and democratic citizenry in these children's future as the children will understand that we are all alike as human beings, despite our different backgrounds.

Developing multilingual pedagogy

Practitioners' prior experiences affected how they were oriented toward and talked about diversity within their PLCs. The level of involvement in different kinds of diversity varied between practitioners and their respective PLCs. In some of the groups, practitioners said they "outsourced" reflections about new minorities to their colleagues working within Finnish-medium ECEC centres. In Group 7, the practitioner explains this through the fact that *"we have a rather big refugee-accommodation centre [in the municipality], and they all choose Finnish, those families"*. Another practitioner joins in and says that this is a common practice and *"that's why it was so interesting to hear about new minorities since we do not have them on the Swedish side"*. The practitioners working in more Finnish-speaking regions of Finland seemed genuinely unaware that multilingual and multicultural day-care centres existed within Swedish-medium ECEC. In contrast, the practitioners in more Swedish-speaking parts of Finland conceptualised their ECEC often as multicultural, such as in Group 2: *"Our centre is a multicultural day-care centre. We have five, six different languages in our group only"*. The practitioners with no children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds often viewed this lack of multiculturalism as a problem because *"in our day-care centre, most of the children have Swedish as a mother tongue, so we do not have any huge opportunities to take part in new minorities"* (Group 5).

In our reading of the data, we tried to pinpoint actual practices, or possible and imagined practices, for promoting and mainstreaming multilingual pedagogies. We noticed that if a group had no children with linguistic diversity other than the national languages, a clear tendency existed to bring in pedagogies that promoted the use of majority languages, mainly Finnish and English, whereas if the ECEC centre had a more diverse child population, the languages and experiences brought in by children were used as a source of inspiration. In real life this tendency is not always as simple. To illuminate this, a practitioner in Group 1 explains that they have started a project in line with a governmental programme for introducing early-language-learning: *"We use Finnish and Swedish every day"*, noting that using Finnish alongside Swedish has yielded some unexpected results regarding children with other language backgrounds, as *"it has opened it up for them. Now they dare to say more—for example, fruits—in their own language"*. This kind of 'normalisation' of multiple language use also is reflected in other groups. In Group 2, the practitioner draws parallels to normalising language use among all other kinds of differences between people:

When I was in a practice training period and saw other ECECs, if there were some other difficulties that a child had, different kinds of difficulties, it was a distinguishing factor: 'Oh, he has difficulties, he is special, he has ADHD'. I think that in our ECEC, when there are so many different difficulties—you have different problems or are from different cultures—that it's not that differentiating at all, like someone would be special in some way (Group 2).

The practitioner talks about understanding different linguistic and cultural backgrounds as part of normal variations among children—not as a reason to treat children differently. A practitioner in Group 7 draws on the shared experience of

the necessity of language learning among all minority-language speakers and *"there is the empathy to understand how difficult it can be to learn a new language among the staff because one knows how it was to struggle"*. The feelings of insecurity in one's own language skills also were discussed in multiple groups as being related to practitioners' ability to model a multilingual speaker actively for the children. Practitioners in Group 6 discussed how they had held lengthy conversations about the practitioner's role in supporting multilingualism and *"what kinds of expectations one has on oneself"*. One of the practitioners explained: *"Maybe I was not able, when playing with children in another language...If you are unsure, it might become an insecurity in the group"*. Another practitioner agrees: *"We thought about it too. Are the language skills of the staff enough, and what shall I do with that thing? Shall I settle for it?"* In the end, they concluded that it depends on the team and on the *"staff's attitudes and playfulness--all this, all the time"*. The practitioner continues to explain how languages can be brought forth naturally and playfully in all kinds of situations: *"We often serve porridge in--someone can speak a little bit of Spanish--and you emphasise these things"*. It was also deemed important to draw on existing awareness of the linguistic diversity that the children might have: *"We count a lot in different languages in the assembly, and sometimes we sing also and now the children have started to say, 'Could we count in German? I know some numbers in German'"* (Group 5). Digital devices were mentioned frequently as a good source for bringing in multiple languages and encouraging children to explore new things. A practitioner in Group 8 explains: *"You just pick up your iPad or tablet and check what they have for flags and what languages they speak when they have been travelling somewhere"*. In Group 2, a practitioner envisions combining in-service training with a mentoring programme that entails *"exchange within the ECEC [---], if there is plurilingual staff so that you take advantage of each other's skills"* (Group 2). In this vision, a visiting practitioner can introduce language competencies and practices, or they can be learned by visiting other ECEC centres.

Practitioners in multiple groups pointed out the importance of a shared vision and agency as a means for optimising LA in their ECEC centres. Practitioners in Group 6 stressed this need by asking a rhetorical question about forgetting to continuously work for language development in everyday situations: *"Will the whole development stop at a certain level then, and do we want it to stop at a certain level?"* Group 8 stressed the need for each practitioner to use *"precise language and concrete words with the children, such as, 'Take the book from the shelf and place it on the yellow shelf', instead of, 'Take that from there and put it there'"*. However, this need involved not only individual practitioners, but also the whole staff:

P1: So that it becomes a unitary practice in the house, if one uses picture symbols, so all the groups should have the similar kinds of symbols. [---]

P2: Yes, that's one of the most difficult things, to get all in the staff to [---] use the picture symbols, so when the children move on to the next age group, it will not end there (Group 9).

In this last quotation, the practitioners stress the importance of a continuum of unitary practices, not only between practitioners in the same group, but also when the children enter older age groups and begin pre-primary school. In this way, the practitioners see themselves as part of a wider educational system. The idea of shared agency included LA in the whole competent system, even including administrative personnel within the municipality and top-down decisions, such as which food is served and how cultural differences are regarded in that aspect. The practitioners frequently stressed that all ECEC staff need to internalise a language-aware mindset.

6 Concluding remarks

This study's objective was to develop in-service training and to examine how practitioners in Swedish-medium ECEC centres in Finland reflect on language-aware educational language policy in their professional learning communities. The rationale behind the study was built both on the more general need for a deeper understanding of ECEC's role in lifelong learning processes in European discourses (Milotay, 2016) as well as on the increasing pressure to include ECEC more effectively as an integrated part of language-policy development processes (e.g. European Commission, 2011)

The findings based on the practitioner reflections presented in the study support earlier findings on the importance of the participation of whole PLC for building LA early childhood education (Buschmann and Sachse, 2018; Sharmahd et al., 2017). The findings also highlighted the importance of understanding the local circumstances that may affect different sensitivities one needs to be aware of (Meier, 2018 p. 113). Such local circumstances in the Swedish-medium ECEC required, among other things, an understanding of learning processes in several languages, as well as of the simultaneous need to protect the lesser spoken national language from multiple majority languages, Finnish, English and even Swedish spoken in Sweden. It became apparent that tackling both multiple majority and minority languages within the minority-medium ECEC was far from the imaginary monolingual reality often showcased in language-policy documents and debates in Finland (Pöyhönen & Saarinen, 2015).

As means of identifying the situation regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the current language-aware operational cultures at the ECEC centres, we utilised SWOT analysis as a simple reflection tool. The analysis revealed that it was a challenge for many participating practitioners to address language-policy themes related to LA from the perspective of the ECEC operational culture. Rather than discuss the strengths of their ECEC centres as far as responding to the needs of children/families from diverse backgrounds, many participants reflected on what kinds of positive effects can be attributed to diversity *in general*, e.g., what are the strengths of diversity as a phenomenon in its own right. Furthermore, when talking about strengths, the participants typically gave conventional "right answers", such as "*knowing multiple languages is a good thing*". While it is likely that the participants truly did hold this belief, it was notable that it often was stated as a platitude without furthering the discussion, nor connecting it to the practitioners' daily work. Simultaneously, possible weaknesses and threats, such as learning difficulties, were concretised and exemplified more frequently as personal experiences or hearsay. Taken together, these aspects paint a picture in which the role of practitioners' actions and agency ("doings") was detached from a more general picture of beliefs, hopes and fears related to diversity ("relatings").

Both of these findings, i.e. understanding the local circumstances and sensitivities as well as the insight in the difficulties to connect reflections on LA to the operational culture, provided fruitful ground for developing in-service teacher training according to the action research approach. The spiral of planning, acting and reflecting needs to be followed up by re-planning, acting and reflecting (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014). We deemed that the actions taken to raise awareness on the role of languages in the national language (education) policies and how the LA concept itself comprised several interwoven, multi-sited concepts enacted by different policy actors over different time frames were successfully

implemented. The need to raise awareness on the role of language(s) in multiple fields of contemporary society as a means of safeguarding and promoting inclusion within a democratic society and the need for site-specific reflections and adjustments was also visibly accentuated as no “one size fits all” solution exists for implementing LA, especially regarding minority-medium contexts.

However, as it became apparent that practitioners were not always able to reflect on their individual teacher agency or shared agency (Biesta, Priestley & Robinson, 2017; Vähäsantanen, Paloniemi, Hökkä & Eteläpelto, 2017) within the PLC in relation to abstract concepts such as language awareness and operational culture, we were also able to identify a vital starting point for the re-planning stage of our educational action research. The findings implied that the ability to reflect and understand different aspects of language-aware policies was a crucial first step on the road to language-aware operational culture, but the study’s findings also implied that to move from *awareness* toward transformative *agency*–shared or individual–and further to language-aware *action* would require a more holistic action plan, i.e., a strategy for the language-aware operational culture. This plan would need to be shared and co-constructed by ECEC centres’ staffs, but ultimately also together with local municipal administrations, parents and children in collaborative efforts. The practitioners in the study called for unitary practices within the ECEC centre in order to make a real change, which begs the question whether the future in-service training should, in fact, in this local minority-medium context, promote and explicitly focus on the development of *operational culture* within ECEC. As LA is an interwoven dimension of the operational culture according to the national curriculum (EDUFI, 2017), this approach might reach practitioners with prior misconceptions about the nature of LA (cf. Lourenço, Andrade & Sá, 2018) and thus better promote the change in practices.

Based on this study’s findings and our concluding reflections, we argue that action-research-based pre-service and in-service teacher education may be the key to openness for both minority and majority languages in ECEC operational culture. The findings imply that both cognitive (“sayings”) and affective aspects (“relatings”) should be included in future in-service training for added value, but most importantly, these should be connected to the operational culture and reflection on the actual “doings” taking place. This allows for the inclusion of not only theoretical knowledge about bilingualism and multilingual language acquisition, but also small-scale language courses that support playfulness and creativity and push practitioners to challenge their own comfort zones. In addition, the kinds of language skills needed for different purposes could be discussed when it comes to this kind of multilingual socialisation in education (Meier, 2018). If the purpose is to raise awareness of languages in a diverse society for all children through playful activities, it does not necessarily require that practitioners attain advanced mastery of the language in question. The findings clearly showed that practitioners who model plurilingual language use and act on it are important in supporting all children’s awareness of linguistic diversity. It is also a way to incorporate awareness of new minorities, even when they are not present in the group—an aspect that is easily neglected, even if its importance is highlighted in policy documents.

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