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Published in:
Intercultural Education

DOI:
[10.1080/14675986.2023.2213657](https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2023.2213657)

Published: 16/06/2023

Document Version
Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

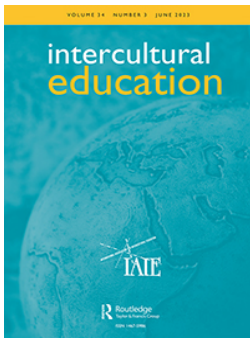
Please cite the original version:
Heikkilä, M., & Lillvist, A. (2023). Multilingual educational teaching strategy in a multi-ethnic preschool. *Intercultural Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2023.2213657>

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To cite this article: Mia Heikkilä & Anne Lillvist (2023): Multilingual educational teaching strategy in a multi-ethnic preschool, Intercultural Education, DOI: 10.1080/14675986.2023.2213657

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2023.2213657>



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Published online: 16 Jun 2023.



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Multilingual educational teaching strategy in a multi-ethnic preschool

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ABSTRACT

The revised Swedish national curriculum stresses that preschools should, on the one hand, place emphasis on stimulating children's language development in Swedish, while on the other hand help children with a mother tongue other than Swedish develop their mother tongue. The aim of this study is to analyse preschool teachers' strategies to develop multilingualism in daily life in preschools. The analysis was conducted by analysing their reflections on multilingualism and how their beliefs are transformed into educational strategies and parental cooperation. The results reveal two main strategies: joint language expression and reflection with children and parental cooperation in developing children's multilingualism. The analysis revealed patterns of strategies for activities that we argue form multilingual educational strategies. These various strategies tend to occur in the daily work of the preschool staff.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 February 2022

Accepted 3 April 2023

Keywords

Multilingual; early childhood education; multi-ethnic; preschool; parent

Introduction

Due to the national curriculum for preschools (National Agency for Education 2021), Swedish preschools (which receive 85% of all children in Sweden aged 1–6), have a strong mandate regarding the promotion of children's language development and children's multilingualism. Multilingualism in preschools is a highly contemporary and urgent subject, and many preschools in Sweden struggle with how to help multilingual children meet curriculum requirements (Pérez Prieto et al. 2002). The revised curriculum stresses that preschools, on the one hand, should place emphasis on stimulating children's language development in Swedish, while on the other hand help children with a mother tongue other than Swedish develop their mother tongue (The National Agency

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for Education 2016). This implies that there are expectations placed on preschools to work on children's (multi-) language development. The national curriculum for preschools links this to the overall quality of a preschool (National Agency for Education 2016).

Swedish preschools have increasingly accepted children who have Swedish as a second or third language, which in itself places demands on both preschool work on language development and on collaboration with parents. This is also related to the fact that during 2015–2016 a large number of refugees and asylum seekers arrived in Sweden. Both refugee and asylum-seeking children have the right to attend preschool in Sweden. Hence, there is a need to develop strategies on how to deal with a situation in which many children and parents lack sufficient knowledge of Swedish, and where additional challenges occur in different geographical locations due to social segregation.

Parental cooperation is an important factor in how children experience preschool, but many preschool teachers view parental cooperation as something difficult, especially when preschool teachers and parents do not share a common language (Vuorinen 2020; Pramling Samuelsson and Park 2017). Parental cooperation is clearly expressed as an aim in Swedish preschool policy documents. Good cooperation between preschool and home, through effective communication, makes all parties involved feel that they are listened to. Also, all parties receive the information they need in order to create good learning conditions for children. In this article we will focus on teachers' perspectives on this issue.

Arzubiaga, Noguerón, and Sullivan (2009) have noted how migration is a continuous process for a family or a child, not something static but rather a complex interaction between time, context and people, a process that continues in preschool. To ensure continuity around language development, good cooperation between preschool and the home can be crucial, not in the least for learning in general (Arnold et al. 2008; Haney and Hill 2004). Teacher beliefs and thoughts on multilingualism are an important factor both for families and children in their learning processes within preschools (see e.g. Sawyer, Manz, and Martin 2016; Alstad and Tkachenko 2018; Portolés and Martí 2020).

The present study adds to the existing knowledge body pertaining to multilingual processes for young children. The aim of the study is to analyse preschool teachers' strategies to create multilingualism in daily life in preschools. The study analysed how school staff view multilingualism and how their views are transformed into educational strategies and parental cooperation. The following questions guided the research: How do preschool teachers describe the multilingual strategies used in their preschool? How do they describe the collaboration and communication that takes place around multilingualism among parents with Swedish as a second or third language?

Research perspectives

This section is organised around the themes of this article – teacher views relating to multilingualism in preschool, the aspects that are deemed central to children’s multilingualism and teacher beliefs pertaining to different educational aspects of multilingualism.

Educational views on multilingualism in preschool

A traditional view is that before learning more languages, one should master one language ‘well’. Hobbs (2012) dismisses this by showing how simultaneous language acquisition does not present any linguistic or learning disadvantages, and this has been confirmed for instance by Fillmore (1991). Colombo (2005) highlights that there is a misconception that children can only learn one language at a time, and that children should only be exposed to the language one wishes the child to learn as their primary language (see Stewart 2004). Language confusion is uncommon, and it rarely lasts for a long period, according to the research summarised in Tobin, Arzubiaga, and Adair (2013, 69). A study by MacSwan and Pray (2005) shows that children of different ages learned English as a second language at about the same speed. This could be an argument against age playing a crucial role in the language learning process.

Tobin, Arzubiaga, and Adair (2013) further discuss how the educational context of multilingualism development plays an important role. Their analysis reveals that for families living close to the US border with Mexico, there was no real dilemma relating to whether children would learn Spanish, either from teachers or parents, compared with a parent in New York. The results of their study show that it not useful to speak of *one way* of multilingual development, but that the living context for the child and the family can have an influence on this process. In their study, Kirsch and Aleksić (2021) note how teachers and young children use multiple languages in everyday activities.

Aspects central to children’s multilingualism

Much of the research done that has touched on the theme of the present article has focused on compulsory schools rather than preschools (cf. Björk-Willén and Cromdal 2009; Kultti 2012). Today, we know that a more holistic approach to language development is more insightful (Gruber, Björk-Willén, and Puskas 2013; National Agency for Education 2013).

Even if children do not have a well-developed language, they tend to be included in their peer group, provided that there is already an inclusive group climate (Kultti 2012). Skaremyr (2014) points out that children who do not yet master the Swedish language still communicate and play and also develop common play when a majority of the children in the group are Swedish

speaking. Research indicates that children handle situations by developing communication strategies to include all children, regardless of their ability to be understood in a particular language (Cekaite 2006). It has also been suggested that verbal language is not always the common denominator of child communication, but instead it may be gazes, gestures or the exploration of common toys (Henning and Kirova 2012).

Cekaite (2006) points out that children use various communicative strategies, including repetition and language play. Some studies have also shown that it can sometimes be hard for non-native speakers to gain access to play, since children need some level of language communication skills to be conversant with their native peers (see Blum-Kulka and Gorbatt 2014; Rydland, Grøver, and Lawrence 2014). These studies also highlight the importance of teacher assistance in helping newcomers gain access to other children's play, since children's language choices can also exclude others (see for example Puskás and Björk-Willén 2017; Cekaite and Evaldsson 2017).

The role of play, as an arena for language and communication, has also been studied. Aesthetic expression in play can be a border area in which everyone's knowledge and experience plays a role and multilingualism can be accommodated (Dunn, Bundy, and Woodrow 2012; Hulusi and Oland 2010; Marsh 2012). Such studies indicate how children's play can be a place where multilingualism can exist actively, and where existing knowledge and experiences are utilised.

Teachers' beliefs regarding multilingualism

Haukås (2016) writes about multilingual pupils and how they are taught. He relates this to how teachers' pedagogical beliefs are of great significance in the didactic choices they make in their teaching and in their relationship to their students' language skills. Mohamed (2006) has summarised previous research on pedagogical beliefs, stating that it is a 'complex, inter-related system consisting of unspoken theories, values and starting points that the teacher considers to be true, and that it acts as a cognitive filter that helps to interpret new experiences and guide the teacher's thoughts and behaviours' (Mohamed 2006, 21). Lundberg (2018) has shown that teachers' beliefs tend to be welcoming towards multilingualism and multilingual students, while recent concepts such as translanguaging are well accepted. Nevertheless, sceptical views, often based on monolingual ideologies continue to exist and are likely to pose challenges for the implementation of pluralistic policies.

A recent Danish study found that teachers embrace a positive attitude towards multilingualism, the value of maintaining and supporting children's first language (L1), and the importance of proficiency in L1 for developing language and literacy in children's second language (L2) (Søndergaard Knudsen et al. 2021). The authors further show that teachers' attitudes were influenced by their own competence in a foreign language. A recent

Norwegian study also shows how teachers have positive beliefs about multilingualism and multilingual-oriented education, but that they continue to engage in monolingual teaching practices, do not acknowledge linguistic and cultural diversity in the classroom, and fail to employ multilingual teaching strategies systematically (Lorenz, Krulatz, and Torgersen 2021). A study by Kirsch and Aleksić (2021) shows that multilingual practice reflects teachers' beliefs that speaking and reading in several languages promotes language learning. Haukås (2016) has noted that teachers' awareness of the foregoing plays a large role in how the child's multilingual identity is expressed and developed. Lee (2003) has pointed out that knowledge of children's culture implies that teachers can more effectively meet the needs of children. Finally, a study by De Angelis (2011) among 176 secondary schoolteachers working in Italy, Austria, and Great Britain showed that teachers tended to have limited knowledge of multilingualism and how it affects multilingual children's learning, and also how teachers tend to believe that multilingualism can be something negative and can hinder children in their multilingual identity development.

Theoretical perspectives

In the present study, the concepts of 'relational agency' (Edwards 2005) and 'boundary space' (Edwards 2011) served as ways to explore how multilingualism can be established as an educational teaching strategy, and also how it can be developed further. 'relational agency' can be understood as a concept that focuses on how individuals as actors constantly stand in relation to other people's agency and expertise. Edwards (2011) calls the space between one individual and another individual's agency, a 'boundary space' or a boundary for actors and actions. Edwards (2005, 169–170) argues that relational agency means 'a capacity to align one's thoughts and actions with those of others in order to interpret problems of practice and to respond to those interpretations', which means it is about having the capacity to put together one's own thoughts and actions with those of others who are involved in a shared dilemma or a task.

Staff, parents and children have different kinds of relational agency with respect to where their experience and expertise (on equal terms) need to be utilised in the creation of, in this case, early childhood education. These groups have different expertise in areas such as language and identity because of their different perspectives and experiences relating to the topic, and this needs to be reflected in the creation of the conditions for the healthy development of a child's multilingual identity. The boundary spaces which are formed can contribute constructively to this, according to Edwards, who writes that all groups' combined experience and knowledge can be seen as resources for micro negotiations that need to take place in collaboration. Such negotiations can, for example, be about how the child's willingness to communicate when

having a cold, or how a substitute teacher's presence affects daily work with the children.

The foregoing concepts can help deepen the understanding of what was happening in the preschool institution we studied, focusing on multilingualism and how that is realised in educational practice. Using these concepts – relational agency and boundary space – in the analysis, we can better understand how multilingualism is shaped in practice and how different actors can influence and reinforce such practice.

Method

This study was implemented as an interactive case study. Jensen and Sandström (2016) argue that case studies develop and generalise theories, so-called analytical generalisation. One purpose of this study was to demonstrate how its results might provide tools to understand the case and the contextual phenomenon that was studied. To understand or explain events, activities or processes in different contexts". Jensen and Sandström (2016) suggest that the complex phenomenon that will be investigated ought to be contemporary and best understood by concrete events (here the preschool context). Therefore, a case study approach is appropriate in relation to the objectives and research issues that have been addressed in this article.

Interactive research was the approach for this case study. In interactive research (Callerstig 2014; Author 2016), it is a key principle that research findings are presented as a joint process, together with those participating in the study. The task for the researchers is to see patterns and to point the way forward – not to evaluate or analyse the individual activities carried out at the preschool (Boman, Sjöberg, and Svensson 2013).

Study overview

The preschool is in a multi-ethnic area in a medium-sized Swedish city where many different cultures and languages meet. The area consists mostly of apartment buildings. The preschool had 16 children aged 1–5 years old, and the children had connections to several different countries, including Albania, Burundi, Chile, Finland, Iraq, Kurdistan, Montenegro, Russia, Somalia and Tanzania.

The study can be divided into three main phases, with an emphasis on the first two phases. The first phase was a start-up phase in which the aims and objectives of the project were established between researchers and practitioners at the preschool. The aims and objectives regarding multilingualism and parental cooperation were communicated to the preschool teachers. All preschool staff and the preschool manager were also individually interviewed the second phase, focusing on their experiences and thoughts regarding

parental interaction, with an initial focus on language development. The interviews themselves turned into more general interviews about multilingualism in preschools, which is mirrored in the aims of this article. The interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. They were semi-structured, with a focus on themes such as different types of parental cooperation and the content of cooperation with a special focus on children's language development. In this article, the results from the interview analysis are presented, while the full data and the analysis of that data are presented in different publications.

The third phase involved reflective feedback from the researchers to the staff, and one joint reflection among the preschools and ourselves. This joint reflection session did not have a major impact on the analysis.

The present study was carried out at one preschool where two schoolteachers and two child carers worked. The teachers both had a preschool teaching degree, consisting of 3.5 years of study; one of the preschool teachers was trained in Chile and the other in Iraq, and both had undergone additional training in Sweden. The child carer who worked in the institution had a high school diploma and the other had a teaching degree and university studies from Turkey. All participating staff were female and had Swedish as a second or third language. The staff's native languages were Spanish, Arabic, French, Turkish and Kurdish. Several had experience of working as a teacher in their home country. The preschool manager also participated in interviews and in follow-up meetings, and she spoke Swedish as her second language, being a native speaker of Spanish. Their life stories, including moving to Sweden as adults as experienced teachers, were an experience that all staff at the preschool shared. The stories were visible and central in different ways, and also corresponded to some extent to the children's experiences.

Method for analysis

The analyses of the material were carried out in several stages. Initial analyses were carried out when the data was collected, and the analytical procedure was applied to the different parts of the material (cf. Creswell 2012). Initially, all the material (interview transcriptions primarily, but also other material collected) was carefully read through with the study aims in main and with a focus on the research questions as well as the theoretical concepts. From this reading, coding first took place in the material of patterns. The second round of reading meant that the next level of coding reflected the concepts of relational agency and boundary spaces. The coding procedure was in line with how Braun and Clarke (2006) discuss coding, as an inductive and empirically driven work. Things in the material that were distinctive, or in some ways stood out, or where there was a description of a process or an operation, a point of view or perspective, related to the research questions, were highlighted in that coding process. Highlights can be characterised as things that were stated that in various ways gave

information about the processes pertaining to multilingual identities in preschool. Subsequently, the coding was read and the researchers created categories, here called dimensions. These served to present the analysis in a relevant way.

We continuously informed all participants in the study about research ethics and their rights as participants (Vetenskapsrådet 2011). In the presentation of the results, all names were changed and the quotes presented were chosen carefully in order not to make participants recognisable.

Results

In the following we present the analysis of preschool teachers' strategies to create multilingualism in everyday life in preschools. The analysis of the material consists of two main themes. One of these themes is how language expression and reflection is done together with children, and the other relates to parental cooperation in developing children's multilingualism. We start with a general presentation of teachers' beliefs and then present two different dimensions of strategies for work at the preschool. These are used in teachers' daily work to strengthen the children's multilingual development. This work can be said to form the boundary spaces where 2 different kinds of expertise meet: language expression and reflections with the children, and parental cooperation. These tend not to be separated or treated as separated entities in the daily work of teachers, but rather as a holistic way of working. Our analysis brings together these different dimensions. The dimensions include agencies from all actors involved in the preschool – staff, children and parents, all with their specific expertise and agency. The relational agency formed in the encounter between the expertise of these three expertise groups is important to make it possible for the strategies for multilingual work to take place and exist in practice.

Teacher beliefs regarding multilingualism

The analysis shows that the basis for the multilingual identity work done in the preschool was based primarily on the preschool teachers' personal experiences as mothers of multilingual children themselves. They mentioned the many ways they had taught their own children their first language at home, and how they had become fully multilingual and fluent in Swedish. They were using their experiences to support their teaching practice. They added that the experiences they had gained working in preschool seemed to be consistent with their personal experiences.

Based on their experiences, and to some extent on the training they had received, the teachers expressed how they shaped their beliefs relating to how children's multilingualism is best developed and supported. They argued that parents needed to talk to their children in their mother tongue, and that the

preschool needed to support both children's mother tongue and the majority language. Agül shared her thoughts:

We have agreed on this. . . we have agreed on this in our team, and we had it last year too . my colleagues are all into this; you should master, and we should also know, the children's home language and we will also give them knowledge but how . and some of my colleagues think it might be a little difficult to give enough time for it . But all are in, in my team.

Here Agül described here how this can be done in practice. She also told us how it had become a common approach in the preschool, and how it was strengthened through a university course they attended. She also emphasised how the work could be difficult, and that not everyone was equally keen on this approach.

A further aspect that can be connected to teacher beliefs is what Mireya described:

Just show interest; maybe you do not need to read since you can download books and read, read a lot, but sit with your children and show them other countries and show their culture and their traditional costumes, what they eat and how they live, that is possible.

In this 'showing interest' there were aspects of wanting to normalise 'the other', as well as enhancing 'the other' by making a culture both specific and explicit by highlighting other ways of life. In this manner, she was also pointing out differences between cultures. In addition to normalisation there were also things that could be connected to what Agül pointed out several times, that the children should not be ashamed of their culture and their language. By gaining knowledge of that which surrounds their own language, one can embrace a positive identity, and that can help to shape what is 'I'.

In the next section the two themes connected to the study dimensions will be presented.

Language expression and reflection with children

In relation to parents, children and staff, the daily work associated with multilingualism met different reactions and reflections. In the daily interactions with the children, there were several aspects related to how multilingualism was expressed and reflected on through multiple languages. One example is how teachers engaged with children's multilingualism and partly how the children themselves used their language skills when interacting with other children. The children would find and shape their own strategies for multilingualism and negotiate how they related to other children. They related mainly to different languages according to places and people. This implies that the use of language took place according to the location and to the person in question, in a complex combination of factors.

Agül explained how children used their language in the unit.

(A) *we have two Somali children, they always speak Swedish...*

(M) mmm

(A) *eh what more do we have, Kurdish children, we have three, they also speak Swedish. No talking to each other in their language...*

(M) *For that, I thought it might, but they may not know each other outside the preschool?*

(A) *It might also be that they may not know each other, but or maybe we are too, well... uh... yeah we do not show an interest in them... talking together in their own language*

Here, Agül reflected on about the different languages that the children spoke, and also mentioned that 'no one is talking to each other in their language' inside the preschool, except for the staff. The children's strategy seemed to be to switch languages according to the people involved and physical places. In the interview with Mireya, she noted that the children seemed to speak their language more outdoors than indoors.

Another aspect regarding the children's language expression and reflection, as well as language use, is what strategies teachers used with the children. In this case, it was about speaking their languages with the children and engaging in different language related activities with the children.

With respect to speaking their language with children, Agül recounted what she did regarding language use:

(M) But do you speak Arabic and Kurdish with the children as well?

(K) Uh yes, yes, we are talking quite often, when we eat, we discuss food and they ask what to call something in another language, what can you say to them, they ask for milk or water in different languages, and we have songs, assemblies and so we sit right there, many songs in many different languages. So, they are so interested; they come back and they are watching and listening.

Agül mentioned that she spoke Kurdish and Arabic with children who had these languages as their mother tongue. It was also evident in the quote that the children who did not understand what she said during Arabic or Kurdish 'sessions' showed a general interest in languages and became curious. This is a pattern that was described several times in different ways in the interviews; that there is a kind of general curiosity about languages in the preschool. Mireya described how she especially used Spanish with one child who had recently moved to Sweden, and particularly in situations that required extra care and closeness.

When she gets sad and one should comfort her or when she does not understand something, then one can explain in Spanish. It's been great.

Language development activities could vary considerably, but there were frequent references to reading (and singing) in various languages; they had laminated song sheets in the children's languages; they sang songs in the children's languages, and they also had an accepting attitude to children's code switching. Technological devices, such as iPads were crucial in this preschool's multilingual work.

Parental cooperation regarding child multilingualism

The work on multilingualism did meet with some concerns and queries about (not) learning Swedish among parents. Parents were, according to the teachers, often eager for their children to learn Swedish. They saw the preschool as a good place for this, as the preschool can be seen as an official part of Sweden. Teachers reported that some parents limited their own influence on children's language learning, giving full responsibility to the preschool. Preschool staff often tried to encourage parents to use their mother tongue when speaking with their children, thereby strengthening their children's multilingual and multi-ethnic identities. Agül mentioned the following:

(A) -Yes, I try or we all try here at the school to encourage parents, so that they can help their children speak their mother tongue at home.

(M) -The home language?

(A) (A) - Yes, at home. And when they come here, they can speak their mother tongue also with their children, so we hear it. We might not understand anything, but it's great for us to see them, the security of the children and mothers and fathers when they use their language. We always try to ask them, "How much do you use your native language at home? In what way, just talking or...?" Usually it's just speaking. But some also read books in their native, home languages ... for the kids to have something that connects them to their homeland.

Teachers at the preschool asked the parents to write down common words in their mother tongue, and the words they receive they then they wrote on the computer in the preschool. These were put up on the wall in order for the children to learn them. Teachers also encountered concerns among parents that their children might not learn Swedish properly if they spoke their mother tongue(s) too often. The teachers observed some fears among parents about being excluded from the Swedish community, or that the children would not complete their schooling properly due to insufficient knowledge of Swedish. This led to teachers conveying their own experiences and knowledge, as well as explaining to parents how important it is for children to know the family's language and culture for a variety of reasons while, for instance when visiting the country of origin or other family visits. Parents could easily relate to such explanations, also at the emotional level.

Summary and discussion

This empirical analysis pointed to two dimensions associated with teacher strategies and ideas: *language expression and reflections with children*, and *parental cooperation on multilingualism*. The teachers in this case study had similar ideas, especially regarding the relationship between the language(s) spoken at home and Swedish. Both thought that Swedish could be learned at preschool and school, and both emphasised the importance of continuing to speak one's native language at home (see e.g. Mohamed 2006; De Angelis 2011). However, there was no clearly shared idea of exactly *how* to communicate and work with this.

Cekaite (2006) highlights in her study that children develop strategies to include everyone regardless of whether they share a common language or not. In our study, staff confirmed this took place in the preschool and that there was great openness and extensive understanding of all kinds of linguistic expressions. This affirms observations by for instance Kultti (2012), who refers to the importance of creating an inclusive climate if multilingualism is to be developed in preschool. The results point to importance of teachers sharing a common view on how to include all children in the group. They also point to how teachers can encourage parents to support their multilingual children in learning their native language.

Tobin, Arzubagi, and Adair (2013) have pointed out that the context for multilingualism influences how it is expressed and understood. This suburban area of Sweden was a congested area with high unemployment and low levels of education. There were many languages spoken and it was the norm for Swedish to be a second or third language. Multilingualism was a given, something which Tobin, Arzubagi, and Adair (2013) suggest is a beneficial context for multilinguistic development.

Both Haukås (2016) and Mohamed (2006) have highlighted the importance of positive teacher beliefs relating to multilingualism and our results confirm this. Staff beliefs regarding multilingualism were coherent and were realised in educational practice.

The aspect of the children's native country, mentioned in one of the teacher's quotations, needs to be further studied. We did not pay attention to this in our study, since the material where teachers discuss this was too limited. This issue raises questions such as one's relationship to one's native country, past and present, and one's beliefs about the political system there. Another issue worth mentioning is that the teachers did not reflect on or mention the amount of time children needed to practice Swedish at school. There are preschools in Sweden where little Swedish is spoken where children do not learn Swedish, despite time spent in preschool.

We argue that the key dimensions we highlight form educational strategies for work relating to children's multilingualism development. These dimensions

not only focus on language but also on other aspects of having a multilingual identity and receiving the space to develop one. There are other aspects of group belonging as a multilingual child such as being fully accepted as multilingual, as well as having one's cultural background accepted. It is worth reiterating that the present study was based on teacher interviews, while parental views were indirectly analysed.

Conclusions

The aim of the present article was to analyse preschool teachers' strategies to create multilingualism in preschool daily life. There were two preschool teachers and two child carers in the preschool studied, none of whom had Swedish as their first language. The analysis of the material helped identify several patterns related to strategies connected to the preschool's multilingual work. These can be considered *multilingual educational strategies*, which took place in the daily work of the pre-school staff. The identified multilingual educational teaching strategies showed that multilingualism contains identity-bearing and identity enrichment dimensions, based on ideas about culture. The basis for the multilingual work done in the preschool was primarily based on preschool teachers' personal experiences as mothers of multilingual children. The work by the school staff created and reinforced a type of multilingualism that included both children and parents in the process.

The contributions by school staff, parents and children allowed multilingualism to exist in practice. The preschool staff did not see such work as particularly problematic despite some initial parental doubts. However, there was limited reflection among the study participants before the study on their actual knowledge, beliefs and actions. Their educational strategies were based less on training and scientific insights into multilingualism than on their own experiences. This is something to highlight when considering how best to prepare future teachers and for the professional development of present teachers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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