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# Nordic perspectives on linguistic diversity and multilingualism in early childhood education and care: Guest editorial

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## **Introduction**

This special issue sprang from the guest editors' (henceforth 'our/we/us') personal interest in advancing the interdisciplinary field of examining Nordic linguistic diversity in early childhood education and care (ECEC) at the crossroads of the scientific fields of education and linguistics. Starting off by critically unravelling our own teacher educator trajectories, we questioned who we are as researchers and as educators, all of us standing with one foot in the linguistic frame of reference, the other foot in the pedagogical frame of reference and, finally, our hearts and souls in the didactical frame of reference. Sharing similar stories and experiences with each other about the joys and challenges in maintaining all frames in balance, we realised that the topic could be discussed further. We noted, for example, that research on early childhood education and care contexts involving very young (potential) multilinguals is not, in general, considered in international research within the research field of second language acquisition (SLA) (see, for example, The Douglas Fir Group, 2016, p. 19). However, it is always difficult to be just 'insiders', as all three of us are in the Nordic context. The opportunity to collaborate with Professor Andrea S. Young, who is connected to both the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences and the University of Strasbourg, helped us to address this Nordic bias. Professor Young has also contributed to the afterword in this special issue. We think that her experience and expertise within the field can shed light on what can be referred to as

specifically Nordic - and add more nuances into the discussion about the complex phenomenon of Nordic perspectives on linguistic diversity and multilingualism in ECEC.

In the call for this special issue, we requested the authors to start by asking themselves 'Who would you be today if you had access to one language only? How would your social life and working life be affected by monolingualism?' We thus wanted the authors to see multilingualism as part of all our lives, not just as part of the life of the 'other'. As a starting point, we argued that supporting multilingualism as a resource and as a norm is a question of linguistic identities and rights. However, we also pointed out that it is a question of handling linguistic diversity for harnessing multilingual skills for the good of society and fighting for inclusion and social justice. We then stated the goal of the special issue to be making visible the crossroads between research through the linguistic, pedagogical and didactical viewpoints, and studying the linguistic diversity within the Nordic ECEC through the prism that these viewpoints create together.

The aim of this special issue is to generate theoretical and empirical knowledge on linguistic diversity and multilingualism in the Nordic ECEC context, including a multiplicity of contexts prior to transitioning to formal primary education. We called for articles that could address the topic from the viewpoint of one or more national contexts, and also relate and contribute to a wider pan-Nordic understanding of the linguistic diversity in ECEC.

### **The Nordic ECEC model and linguistic diversity**

The Nordic region has a tradition of language co-operation regarding the mutual understanding of Scandinavian languages (specifically, Swedish, Danish and Norwegian). Supporting mutual understanding of the Nordic languages is seen as promoting mobility as well as creating a sense of belonging to the shared Nordic region (Nordic Council, 2024). However, the linguistic landscape of Nordic countries beyond the Scandinavian languages entails second language learning and teaching for language minority children, local languages and varieties of small languages or endangered languages and even so-called elite or global languages, such as English. Some topics are shared by multiple Nordic countries, such as Sámi languages, Romani and Sign language(s), whereas some topics relate more specifically to certain countries, such as Kven in Norway or Meänkieli in Sweden.

Despite the many similarities across the Nordic countries and educational systems, the conditions for linguistic diversity are not identical – Norway and Sweden have a longer history of migration in comparison to Finland and Iceland and dialects have higher prestige in Norway than in most of the other Scandinavian countries. Whereas Denmark, Iceland and Norway have traditions as monolingual countries emphasising linguistic purism and a national language hegemony, Finland is officially a bilingual country with

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two national languages, Finnish and Swedish. Education, including ECEC, is provided in Finnish or in Swedish (or in Sámi), creating separate educational tracks, which both operate in a multilingual reality. Additive bilingual education (e.g. immersion, CLIL and tandem language learning) is well established in Finland, while it barely exists in Denmark, Norway and Iceland. Therefore, this special issue set as its goal to address – or challenge – the ‘Nordic model’ by examining a spectrum of perspectives on linguistic diversity in ECEC contexts.

Similarly, it is not easy to state in concrete, measurable variables what the abstract idea of a shared Nordic region or model entails in terms of education. The pedagogical traditions in ECEC in the Nordic countries are said to share values and beliefs where pedagogy is described as child-centred, play-oriented, experience-based and outdoor-based (e.g. Thingstrup et al., 2023). The Nordic view on ECEC focuses on the well-being of both the child and the child’s surroundings and supports children’s democratic socialisation in a welfare state supporting childcare arrangements. Education and care are both central and supported with positive and loving relations (Aspelin, 2016; Puroila et al., 2012; Thingstrup et al., 2023). The Nordic model of education has been connected to the strong ideological foundations of equity, equality and diversity, although this rhetoric has lately been challenged by global neoliberal education policies (Frønes et al., 2021; Tavares & Skrefsrud, 2023; Thingstrup et al., 2023).

Tavares and Skrefsrud (2023, p. xvi) call for caution in using the term ‘Nordic model’ in educational contexts as it may, in their words, ‘overshadow nuances and create barriers for necessary critical examinations of educational and societal practices’. However, they also argue that the examination of the Nordic contexts can contribute to the international discourse on education and increase educational dialogue within the Nordic countries. As educators and researchers, we have noted that we usually do not need to explain the ideologies behind, for example, outdoor pedagogies related to *Skogsmulle/Mörrimetsä* or *Ur och skur* to our Nordic colleagues. At the same time, clarifications are often needed related to languages, linguistic circumstances and contexts. These clarifications may include, to name a few topics, policy guidance regarding languages (Alstad & Sopenan, 2021; Bergroth & Hansell, 2020), use of key concepts such as who is a minority speaking child and how we refer to a child’s own mother tongues or home languages in different contexts (Bergroth & Alisaari, 2023), what kind of language education pathways ECEC should prepare children for, as well as who can and should teach which language and who has the right to make decisions about the use of languages in ECEC (Sopenan et al., in press). We thus argue, in line with Tavares and Skrefsrud (2023), that increased dialogue within the Nordic region is valuable. We approach the Nordic region as a mesolevel of the educational spaces between the national, microlevel educational space and the global, macrolevel educational space.

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The Nordic model is by no means a static model, unaffected by change, but we argue that the significance of Nordic ECEC is due to its socio-educational character, which is deeply rooted in an educational philosophy with an informal, play-based and child-centred approach to teaching and learning (Wagner & Einarsdottir, 2006). Further, the Nordic model is characterised by highly trained staff and the provision of ECEC as a universal service. By combining education and care for all children aged 0–5 years old, the Nordic model has a different character from elsewhere in Europe, where the main model is that 0–2-year-olds are enrolled in childcare institutions, and older children (3–5-year-olds) are usually based in institutions associated with more formal teaching (European Education and Culture Executive Agency [Eurydice], 2009, 2019). This means that it is vital to partake in international discourses as well, not only to receive a better understanding of good practices promoting multilingualism, but also to share ideas of good multilingual pedagogies, as seen in the Nordic countries. Furthermore, as the Nordic countries and the majority and regional minority languages within them are relatively small in number, we argue that there is strength in numbers in the combined Nordic region. This requires Nordic researchers to collaborate closely and share their findings, not only with the wider global research audience, but also within the shared mesolevel region with the Nordic audience. Furthermore, researchers and educators writing in Scandinavian languages could keep in mind the mesolevel readership, which can hopefully even in the future be promoted by a mutual understanding of Scandinavian languages.

### **Teaching and learning about language(s) in early years**

Due to the emphasis on play and an informal, child-centred approach as a Nordic ECEC trait (Palviainen & Curdt-Christiansen, 2022), the term *teaching* has traditionally not been widely used within the Nordic ECEC. The term has been understood as related to school and teacher-led transmission of knowledge. Instead, the Nordic ECEC has been, and continues to be, described as *educare*, combining education with caregiving and play. The socio-cultural perspective on learning, which can be identified in current Nordic steering documents, entails teaching being seen as supporting the development of skills for information management, and as an intersubjective and communicative process rather than as the transmission of knowledge (e.g. Säljö, 2017). Therefore, the terms *education*, *instruction* and *teaching* have started to be more widely used within the ECEC context, stressing a transition from simply care and play to pedagogy (e.g. Eidevald & Engdahl, 2018). As Björk-Willen et al. (2018) point out, teaching in ECEC should not be seen as an alternative to play, but as play-responsive. This view of teaching places additional emphasis on good communication and quality of child–adult interactions and, thus, accentuates the understanding of the communicative aspect of language(s).

A common feature of Nordic ECEC is research-based early childhood teacher education (ECTE) (Toom & Husu, 2021). Even though some differences can be identified between the Nordic countries, the high level of education of ECEC teachers strengthens the position of ECEC as part of the educational path. Research-based ECTE also gives good starting points for the ECEC teachers' further professional development in service, including in-service training. The mandatory multidisciplinary courses for teacher qualification in the Nordic countries typically include topics such as children's development, play and learning, language development and multilingualism, special needs and didactics in music, art, science and sustainability and mathematics as well as teacher practicums and other practical activities. For changes in the professionalisation of ECEC teachers in the Nordic countries see **Alstad**<sup>1</sup> (this issue).

Despite the many similarities across the Nordic countries in the approach to learning, teaching and ECEC, there are differences in the terminology regarding ECEC. In Sweden, the educational stage for 0–5-year-old children is called 'preschool' (*förskola* in Swedish and the last year before school is *förskoleklass*) and in Iceland 'playschool' (*Leikskóla* in Icelandic). While the Finnish term 'early childhood education and care' (*varhaiskasvatus* in Finnish, *småbarnspedagogik* in Swedish) also stresses pedagogy, it makes no explicit mention of school. In Norway and Denmark, ECEC is arranged in 'kindergartens' (*barnehage* in Norwegian, *børnehave* in Danish) or, for the youngest children, 'nurseries' (*vuggestue* in Danish). Even though there are differences in how much stress the terminology puts on pedagogy, ECEC is defined in all Nordic countries as the first level of education, although not a compulsory part.

The socio-cultural perspective on learning, combined with a holistic view on language, has switched the main emphasis in early language education from the linguistic form to content and communication. Similarly, the focus has shifted from linguistic awareness to language awareness and the aim of language instruction is to create a foundation for the lifelong learning of language(s). In line with wider European policies (e.g. Council of the European Union, 2019), language awareness is included in Nordic educational policies, including ECEC (Alstad & Sopanen, 2021; Bergroth & Hansell, 2020). Language awareness, as understood in this policy context, is a part of the operational culture and professional learning communities of the ECEC, which is in line with the informal, child-centred approach of the ECEC. It is not used as a concept of, or method for, explicit language acquisition or instruction but it includes both the language of instruction in the ECEC and the diversity of linguistic backgrounds, assets and interests, as well as the multilingualism in the surrounding society, both locally and nationally. Creating a

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<sup>1</sup> Despite acting as an editor of this special issue, Gunhild Alstad did not participate in any way in the anonymous peer-review process of this article.



language-aware operational culture and practices is a process with several stages, as stated by **Bergroth**<sup>2</sup>, **Harju-Autti** and **Alisaari** (this issue). The process needs to be supported by both the initial teacher education and in-service training, which also actualises the need for increased awareness among the teacher educators, as **Lundkvist** and **Sopanen** (this issue) state regarding Sámi languages and ECTE in Finland.

Recently, the widespread trend has been to start language instruction early, to utilise the sensitive period for language learning (e.g. Enever, 2011; Otto & Cortina-Perez, 2023). The early start entails playfully introducing languages, which are later studied as school subjects, as early as in ECEC (see also Sopanen et al., in press). This demands that teaching methods are adapted for young children and that the ECEC teachers understand language learning and have a greater command of both languages and language pedagogy. Languages can be included in ECEC through different models of bilingual education, as presented in **Anatoli** (this issue, see also Hansell & Björklund, 2022; Mård-Miettinen et al., 2023), but also through more explicit language instruction, as in **Koivula, Palojärvi, Moate and Mård-Miettinen** (this issue). However, as **Lund** (this issue) states, language-learning tools used in ECEC can promote the view of language as an academic instrument and focus on explicit knowledge of specific language components. For children with languages other than the language of the ECEC, the whole ECEC context is often seen as an arena for second language learning. The multilingual children's right to support for all their languages is also part of the language teaching and language-aware ECEC (e.g. Bergroth & Alisaari, 2023) and could be made more widely visible for the majority language children too.

### **The (potentially) multilingual child in focus**

In the call for manuscripts for this special issue, we asked the authors to place multilingual children in focus. Recently, particularly within second language acquisition (SLA) research and multilingualism research, there have been several fundamental discussions about what the 'object of inquiry' is. With the social turn (Block, 2003) and the multilingual turn (García & Wei, 2014; May, 2014) towards language and language learning, there was a shift from traditional structural and cognitive linguistics that looked at individual language learning as a set of structures to be internalised (the development and growing awareness of the linguistic features in specific languages, i.e. *linguistic awareness*). The social and multicultural turns towards language and language learning implied that language cannot be considered in isolation from its social world. Consequently, language use and linguistic practices are woven into social practices and should therefore be considered in light of larger social and thus ideological contexts,

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<sup>2</sup> Despite acting as an editor of this special issue, Mari Bergroth did not participate in any way in the anonymous peer-review process of this article.

making it highly relevant to conduct research on language-related practices in ECEC (the growing awareness of languages surrounding us, i.e. *language awareness*).

Language as a social phenomenon is the underlying perspective that characterises the contributions in this special issue. Thematically, the articles cover fields that reflect the distinctive educational context of ECEC. The language environment and semiotic landscape that surrounds the children is described through the children's perspective by **Fjeld** and **Giæver** (this issue) and through the ECEC staff's perspective in **Pakarinen**, **Hansell**<sup>3</sup> and **Kvist** (this issue). The language pedagogical practices and the teacher/child interaction and communication are in focus in **Repo**, **Aerila**, **Tyrer** and **Harju-Luukkainen** (this issue), as well as in **Aluf** and **Tkachenko** (this issue). Interestingly, only a few articles have a direct focus on children, with a few exceptions – **Pesch** and **Sundelin** (this issue) discuss ethical issues when multilingual learners are involved in research and Fjeld and Giæver (this issue) present walking interviews with children to study the semiotic landscape from their perspective.

According to Genishi et al. (2001, p. 1179), the research focus in early childhood education worldwide has been aimed mainly towards the environments as a whole or towards the children, in contrast to classroom research, which has had a clearer focus on the teacher's role. Genishi and colleagues claim that this is related to social and cultural constructions of children and childhood and, as a result, the teachers' work has received less research focus than that on children. However, in most research on linguistic diversity and multilingualism in the Nordic ECEC setting, a focus on children and their multilingual development is not prevalent (Alstad, 2015, 2020).

Considering the aspiration expressed in the call to place emphasis on (potentially) multilingual children and child agency (e.g., Bergroth & Palviainen, 2017) and the child-centeredness of Nordic early childhood education, it may be somewhat surprising that only a few of the studies included have children as the main focus. However, all the articles focus on conditions for children's multilingualism, either through microlevel realities (language pedagogical practice) or as a target of macro/mesolevel educational policies and practices. The articles' approaches within Nordic ECEC aim to encourage and sustain the multilingual potential of each child. These multilingual approaches are treated as part of a competent system in which individuals, teams and institutions collaborate and have proficient governance at the policy level (cf. Bergroth & Hansell, 2020).

This view of sustaining the multilingual potential of each child aligns with the ideologies behind the so-called multilingual turn, and thus questions pedagogies and practices based

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<sup>3</sup> Despite acting as an editor of this special issue, Katri Hansell did not participate in any way in the anonymous peer-review process of this article.



mainly on only one societal majority language. Within the multilingual turn, traditional views of power, ideology and underlying values and norms related to languages in research, pedagogy and practices have become questioned. The articles in this issue largely use the same theoretical perspectives on multilingualism presented by researchers such as Cummins (2021), García and Li Wei (2014) and Genoz and Gorter (2017). Some of the articles illuminate language ideologies and power relations quite explicitly, such as the studies of language policies presented by **Papakosma** (this issue), Alstad (this issue), and Lundkvist and Sopenan (this issue), how the hegemony and monolingual norm of the national, official majority language(s) still prevail, and how certain forms of multilingualism are preferred (for example, involving prestigious languages with higher social status). Language can also be used to mediate inclusion and exclusion in groups of children, as presented in **Mansikka, Londén, Holm, Saloranta and Nordström** (this issue). In the study of picture books by **Skaremyr, Hermansson, Abraham and Lindström** (this issue), postcolonial theoretical perspectives are applied to illustrate how language and power are (still) embedded in a Eurocentric organisation of the world. These examples show that Nordic ECEC research moves within the same theoretical landscape as research on multilingualism in general, questioning the monolingual bias, but still partly embedded in it.

The articles reflect various multilingual contexts relevant to the ECEC in the Nordic region, including languages such as the official languages, Sámi languages and English. In addition, most of the articles deal with language learning and multilingualism from a minority perspective, where children with an immigrant linguistic minority background are engaged in a majority language(s) and semiotic resources in ECEC. However, a heightened focus on child agency in multiple languages, including all their languages, could be desirable in future Nordic ECEC studies. Also, early opportunities for majority language children to become acquainted with both societal majority and minority languages should not be forgotten, also in terms of supporting an early start for the mutual understanding of the Scandinavian languages. Similarly, as ECEC has a holistic approach to children's development, more research disciplines involving language issues in ECEC – such as STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), art-based subjects and co-operation with guardians and the surrounding local society – would be a valuable addition to a better understanding of the multilingual childhoods in the Nordic region. The contributions in the special issue nevertheless fit well into 'language-in-education' research, or 'educational linguistics', both concepts used to describe how research draws on theoretical and methodological perspectives from both educational sciences and linguistics (Alstad & Mourão, 2021; Bergroth et al., 2022).

## Conclusions

This special issue offers a window into the rich and lively research conducted on multilingual childhoods in the Nordic countries. The quality of manuscripts originally suggested for the special issue was high and the number of manuscripts could, easily, be divided into three or four special issues. In the selection process, we paid particular attention to the fact that the manuscripts should have an explicitly Nordic perspective and focus on ECEC. We also aimed to include and balance submissions from various national contexts as well as thematic and methodological approaches. As means to promote the future vitality of the research field, we encouraged both junior and senior researchers to publish their valuable research in this special issue.

The opportunity to compile this special issue has been inspirational and has shown us that there is something unique in the Nordic model, which deserves to be acknowledged even in future research. However, as the Nordic model and the sense of belonging in the Nordic region cannot be seen as a static phenomenon, it requires continued scientific and educational dialogue, both within the Nordic region and outside of it. This dialogue should include topics such as the shared understanding of the terminology involved in Nordic multilingualism and a critical discussion of the theoretical frameworks most suitable for the topic. Currently, a predominantly western, even Anglo-American, frame of reference is visible in the articles, and this view is rather uncritically adopted in the Nordic context. Another joint feature of the articles is that views of ECEC and language learning within ECEC as a means to prepare children for school, rather than valuing childhood as its own phase for holistic and harmonic growth, are acknowledged as problematic. For future research in our field, it is important to maintain the encouragement of a diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches, to an even greater extent than we present in this special issue. Our approach to and focus on the Nordic perspectives does not imply a desire for unification or a common norm, but rather for a critical discussion about our own ideologies, norms and values.

Awareness of multiple languages and their roles in our lives is essential for ECEC. With research-based ECEC and ECTE, we wish to support the multilingual potential of each child, whether they belong to a linguistic majority or minority, so that the questions presented in the call for this special issue (i.e. 'Who would you be today if you had access to one language only? How would your social life and working life be affected by monolingualism?') remain hypothetical, in the sphere of wild imagination.

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