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## **Reforming the National Core Curriculum for Bilingual Education in Finland**

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This article explores the discourses surrounding the act of writing Section 10 Bilingual education in the new Finnish national core curriculum, which will be implemented in 2016. This section will set the parameters for programs that integrate language and content learning, where a minimum of two languages are used for instruction in content subjects. The main research questions discussed in this article are how and why certain discourses are expressed, or left unexpressed, in the final draft version of the curriculum. The data for qualitative analysis consists of participatory observations and minutes of meetings in the working group assembled for writing the draft.

Finnish abstract at end.

Keywords: Bilingual education; content and language integrated learning; core curriculum; discourse; language immersion; language policy

## 1. Introduction

The Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) is in the process of reforming the Finnish national core curriculum, a reform that will be implemented in schools in August 2016. The purpose of this article is to explore what discourses are expressed, as well as *how* and *why* they are expressed, or left unexpressed, in the April 2014 draft version of the section of this new curriculum titled *Bilingual education*.

Reforming core curriculum for bilingual/multilingual education is informed by educational policies as well as national language policies. Learning in school happens through the medium of language; thus, educational decisions are always simultaneously decisions about language. Language education policy development is also an integral part of the curriculum reform as different language policy texts are interpreted and their implementational space for multilingualism is explored in the process (García & Menken, 2010; Johnson & Freeman, 2010). Reforming core curriculum in accordance with national macro-level language policies involves not only transferring these policies for the use of bilingual education but also renegotiating intentional meanings and reconceptualizing the ideologies behind them. In this sense implementing language policy through curriculum reform undoubtedly leads to developing language education policy.

Studies on bilingual education have investigated national core curricula as artefacts, for example identifying the ideologies behind the national bilingual education in France (Hélot, 2003) or have focused on the implementation of these artefacts, such as implementing new linguistic goals in everyday educational practice in Australia (Alford & Windeyer, 2014). This article is unique in analyzing the writing and thinking processes leading to such artefacts.

High quality bilingual education curriculum reform as a process can be studied on the local or national level. Richards (2013) points out that bilingual education curriculum designs derive from the interplay between theories of language and theories of learning. He further concludes that bilingual education curriculum design typically follows a forward design, starting from identifying relevant content and language, going to content and language integrating teaching methods, and finally identifying the objectives of learning. Such curriculum designs have been explored, for example, by Lyster (2007) as *counterbalanced instruction*, where teachers are encouraged to plan instruction to shift pupils' attentional focus between suitable content objectives and specific, predetermined language objectives, and Snow, Met, and Genesee (1989) with concepts such as *content-obligatory and content-compatible language*, among others. While forward design is generally true for local level curriculum design in classrooms and schools, backward design is typically more appropriate for national curriculum development, and the present study offers an example of such backward design.<sup>1</sup> According to Richards (2013), backward design traditionally starts with stipulating the learning objectives. He argues that in national curriculum development teachers are often left with having to implement the curriculum but are rarely involved in its development. However, it is clear that national and local policies interact in a complex way (Johnson & Ricento, 2013; Siiner, 2014). In a decentralized educational system such as Finland's, local education providers and teachers are active agents in developing, interpreting, and implementing both national and local policies and curricula.

In this article the theories of language and theories of learning as identified by Richards (2013) are combined with a broader theory of education, where education is seen as

[...] the process by which children, young people and adults are initiated into forms of understanding, modes of action, and ways of relating to one another and the world, that foster (respectively) individual and collective self-expression, individual and

collective self-development and individual and collective self-determination, and that are, in these senses, oriented towards the good for each person and the good for humankind. (Kemmis, Wilkinson, Edwards-Groves, Hardy, Grootenboer, & Bristol, 2014, p. 26)

With this theoretical framework, this article shifts the focus slightly from language learning and language skills to a wider educational question of “what role does bilingual education play in preparing students to live well in a world worth living in?” This wider focus makes the present study relevant for all involved in providing bilingual education opportunities around the globe. This focus also means that the Finnish core curriculum in this article is conceptualized and treated primarily as an educational policy text rather than as a language education policy text.

### **1.1 National Core Curriculum in Finland**

Basic education in Finland is free of charge and practically all children go to publicly funded schools. These schools are all governed by the national core curriculum, which results in all children having a similar education wherever they reside in Finland (Holm & Londen, 2010). The Finnish way of carrying out educational reform, as described by Sahlberg (2011), is to encourage local and individual solutions to national goals instead of standardizing teaching and learning throughout the country or opting for test-based accountability and control. The education system is based on a culture of shared responsibility and trust. Great emphasis is placed on creative learning and on enhancing all aspects of growth, including knowledge and skills, but also identity, moral character, and creativity. Teachers in the Finnish educational system are highly valued in Finnish society. They are encouraged to find novel approaches to teaching and learning and to develop instructional leadership. There are no national

standardized tests or school inspections in Finland, and their absence gives teachers more freedom and encourages them to try out new working methods in the classroom. This approach appears to be working remarkably well, as Finland's education system is perceived internationally as one of the strongest in the world (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015).

The Finnish core curriculum has three main functions. Firstly, it is an administrative document and, as such, it represents part of the national system of managing and directing education. Secondly, it is an intellectual document, defining and recreating culturally significant knowledge, and in this respect it reveals current conceptions of knowledge. Thirdly, it is a pedagogical document, providing advice and support for teachers and setting guidelines for teaching and learning (Vitikka, Krokfors & Hurmerinta, 2012). Local providers of education have wide freedom to write their municipal and school curricula locally, on condition that this is done in accordance with the national core curriculum. Local curricula must take into account local needs and resources and local conditions (Niemi, 2012). Questions of teaching methods and educational practices are not regulated in the core curriculum.

The Finnish core curriculum includes the objectives and core content of the different subjects (Sections 13–15), but equally important is what is said in the core curriculum about the principles of a good learning environment, pedagogical working approaches, and the concept of learning. The principles of pupil assessment, special needs education, pupil welfare, and educational guidance are also addressed in the curriculum. Section 9 governs the needs of different types of linguistic and language minority groups – the Sami, the Roma, and other bilinguals – and Section 10 is concerned with additive bilingual education such as immersion and content and language integrated learning (CLIL) programs. This article focuses mainly on the reform of Section 10, *Bilingual education*, but the reader should keep

in mind that this section deals only with issues not covered elsewhere in the curriculum and thus it cannot be read on its own, without the rest of the curriculum. The core contents presented in Sections 13–15 apply to all Finnish schools, including those that offer bilingual education.

In June 2012 the Finnish government issued a new *Decree on national objectives and distribution of teaching hours in basic education*<sup>2</sup> which was the starting point for the new national core curriculum. The FNBE appointed 33 different multidisciplinary working groups supported by online consultative groups to reform the core curriculum. In the opening meeting for all the working groups in January 2013, the central shift in curriculum thinking was presented. Instead of solely focusing on *what* should be taught and *why* it should be taught, the guiding question this time around would be *how* it is to be taught. The focus of the new core curriculum would therefore be on developing the operational culture and pedagogics (Halinen, 2013).

## **1.2 Bilingual Education in the National Core Curriculum 2016**

Since the launch of Swedish immersion in 1987, bilingual education has been a popular option in the Finnish educational system. Bilingual education today is offered in many languages, but mostly in Swedish or English. Despite the popularity of bilingual education, it took almost 20 years for it to be acknowledged in the national core curriculum (FNBE, 2004) and given an official position in the educational field (Björklund & Mård-Miettinen, 2011). Due to fairly strong societal support for immersion in Finland's national languages (e.g. Finnish and Swedish) and in the indigenous Sámi language, there was a clear demand for immersion to be included in the new curriculum as it had been included in the previous one

(Prime Minister's Office, 2012). A working group for bilingual education was formed to co-construct Section 10 on bilingual education for 2016.

I was invited by the FNBE to represent Swedish language immersion in the group assigned to Section 10 of the national curriculum. The working group on bilingual education consisted of nine members with two representatives from the FNBE having varying experience with bilingual education. Members were working as classroom teachers, special education teachers, researchers and in-service trainers, language teachers, and school principals. The languages represented in the group were (in alphabetical order) English, Finnish, French, German, Russian, Spanish, and Swedish. The official working languages of the group were Finnish and Swedish, but all the participating languages were used in a flexible way in spoken communication. Everyone appointed to the working group was multilingual and their work experience in bilingual education varied from a few years to decades. The working group had mainly positive attitudes toward bilingual education, and although the group was familiar with the different challenges involved in providing high quality bilingual education, no one questioned the need for Finland to provide bilingual education programming.

The bilingual education working group was faced with a rather challenging task since we were given no guidance beforehand regarding what the contents of Section 10 should entail. It was also unclear precisely what the group's mandate included. Nevertheless, the group worked together successfully to construct the document. Writing was mostly accomplished through the medium of the whole group writing together in Finnish, paying close attention to word choices and possible alternative interpretations. The main phases in the process are presented in Table 1. An online consultative group was asked to comment on the November 2013 version of the draft and then the steering group, consisting of 16 members representing a wide range of interests, commented on the draft twice before



accepting it in April 2014. After its initial acceptance in 2014 the participants in the process of curriculum reform became even more diversified: education providers were asked to give their feedback and the draft was made available on the FNBE website for open review by anyone who might be interested in the process. This article is based on the April 2014 draft, but no significant changes have been made to that draft version in the final version.

[Table 1 near here]

In writing this article I have a dual role as participant and researcher, but in the working group my participation took precedence over my research activities. My aim was to change the curriculum so that it would better support language immersion education in Finland, for example by better defining immersion in the text of the curriculum. I had an active role in initiating many of the discourses discussed later on in this paper, and I also wrote the first draft for Swedish language immersion. This very first draft was later used by the other languages/programs as a starting point, which they adapted to better suit their own language situations. Despite my role as an active participant, the researcher in me was intrigued by the complexity of the curriculum reform and I felt it necessary to document both *what* and *why* in order to gain a deeper understanding of the process and in order to be able to share these discourses with other immersion educators and researchers.

## **2 Data Sources and Analysis**

The primary research data consists of participatory observations made during 11 working group meetings and minutes of meetings. These meetings were not audio-recorded due to their confidential nature, but I took notes during the meetings. Additional materials used for analysis were other core curriculum meetings at the FNBE (e.g. on assessment, the Swedish-speaking curriculum, and an opening meeting for everyone involved in the reform process),

lectures, the author's personal notes on informal and formal meetings, and other documents, such as different international, national, and local policy papers made available at the working group's web-based platform (Workspaces by Adobe). The FNBE has granted permission for these materials to be analyzed and referenced for this paper.

Employing an inductive approach, I analyzed the data qualitatively. In the first phase of the analysis I identified the different topics discussed in the meetings and listed the arguments or discussion points made and references used in the meeting concerning, for example, assessment. In the second phase of the analysis, I worked with these lists of topics, grouping them into bigger themes. Some of the themes recurred quite frequently in the materials while others were discussed more rarely. More often than not these themes interacted and were closely interwoven; it was not always possible to refer to one theme without also making reference to another. In the final stage I organized the different themes according to their level of abstraction. My interpretations and conclusions were read and commented by one of the FNBE representatives and one of the group members. The findings are presented as various discourses. These include (1) languages in society and policy guidelines, (2) bilingual programs, (3) stakeholders, and finally, (4) the curriculum. The order of presentation is based on the level of abstraction, starting from more abstract societal issues and definitions and moving toward the narrower and more concrete tasks relevant to the everyday educational choices that education providers must make.

### **3. Discourses**

#### **3.1 Languages in Society and Policy Guidelines**

A large part of the working group's dialogue involved discussion around large societal issues related to language and language policy. Curriculum work does not happen in isolation, and

to understand bilingual education in Finland it is important to situate the work in Finnish language policies, which in turn is a part of European language policies. Finland is an officially bilingual country in Northern Europe, with Sweden, Norway, Russia and Estonia as its neighboring countries. Finland's biggest export partners are Sweden, Germany, and Russia, and close co-operation with other Nordic countries is important in many fields of society. Finland is heavily dependent on the workforce having strong language skills (Confederation of Finnish Industries, 2014). The national languages, Finnish (the majority language of the country) and Swedish (a minority language of the country), are obligatory for all pupils, as is the learning of at least one additional language, nowadays most commonly English. Language rights are set out in the Constitution of Finland (Ministry of Justice, 1999) as follows:

The national languages of Finland are Finnish and Swedish. The right of everyone to use his or her own language, either Finnish or Swedish, before courts of law and other authorities, and to receive official documents in that language, shall be guaranteed by an Act. The public authorities shall provide for the cultural and societal needs of the Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking populations of the country on an equal basis. The Sami, as an indigenous people, as well as the Roma and other groups, have the right to maintain and develop their own language and culture. Provisions on the right of the Sami to use the Sami language before the authorities are laid down by an Act.

Finnish societal bilingualism is practiced as dual monolingualism. At birth individuals can by right be registered as either a Finnish-speaking Finn or a Swedish-speaking Finn; there are no options for registering other languages or being registered as bilingual. There is a Finnish-speaking school system and a Swedish-speaking school system all the way from early

childhood education and care through to university education. There are no officially bilingual schools; the administrative language is always either Finnish (in the Finnish-speaking educational system) or Swedish (in the Swedish-speaking educational system). It is, however, possible to teach in a language other than the “language of instruction,” as stated in the Basic Education Act (Ministry of Education, 1998):

The language of instruction and the language used in extracurricular teaching shall be either Finnish or Swedish. The language of instruction may also be Sami, Roma or sign language. In addition, part of teaching may be given in a language other than the pupils’ native language referred to above, provided that this does not risk the pupils’ ability to follow teaching. [...] If the education provider provides education in more than one of the languages of instruction [...] the parent/carer shall choose the language of instruction. Additionally, in a separate teaching group or in a separate school, teaching may be given primarily or totally in a language other than those referred to in subsection 1.

The working group criticized some of the word choices in the current legislation, especially in the Basic Education Act. The concept *language of instruction*, for example, is confusing in bilingual education, as it simply refers to the administrative language, i.e., whether the school belongs to the Finnish- or Swedish-speaking system, rather than referring to the actual language used for instruction. Similarly, to automatically consider the *pupils’ native language* to be the same as the *language of instruction* is inappropriate for the diverse population of modern Finland. The group could not, of course, change the wording of acts and decrees, but it raised the need to explain the legislation more clearly in the core curriculum itself. The systematic use of the terms *school language* and *target*

*language/immersion language* was set as a goal for the April 2014 draft. The term *school language* refers to the administrative language of the school (Finnish/Swedish) and *target language/immersion language* refers to the other languages used as a medium of instruction. In bilingual education in Finland both of these languages are used as a medium of instruction in content teaching.

Another point in this discourse was a shared experience in the group that not all stakeholders in bilingual education are aware of the legislation guiding bilingual education. Therefore, in the April 2014 draft, reference is made to the legislation governing bilingual education, and it is briefly explained in the first paragraph. Furthermore, the group asked for clarification from the Ministry of Education and Culture of what was meant by saying that everything could be taught in a language other than Finnish/Swedish in some groups. The statement provoked lively discussion in the group because some stakeholders in bilingual education had interpreted it as meaning that everything could be taught in English, without there being any requirement that students should learn the national languages of the country. The ministry did not wish to encourage this interpretation.

The societal status of different languages in bilingual education was implicitly or explicitly referred to in most of the meetings. Finnish and Swedish have a special role in Finland since they are both actively used in all fields of society from language policies to literature and popular culture. There are newspapers, TV channels, theaters, publishers, and schoolbooks in both languages in Finland. The ethnic and cultural background of Finnish-speaking Finns and Swedish-speaking Finns is similar (see, e.g., McRae, 2007). Because of this, many of the sometimes heated arguments around bilingual education in other languages in Finland were not relevant when it came to Swedish/Finnish immersion. For example, education providers do not need to translate the names for Finnish institutes and authorities since they are bilingual, and all the subjects concerned with the national heritage (history,

social studies, literature, and fauna) can be taught in either language without needing to venture outside the national borders. However, bilingual education in the national languages has its own contested issues that needed to be kept in mind. For example, it is sometimes feared that bilingual education in Swedish-medium schools will lead to a language shift in the Swedish-speaking population, especially if the target language is the majority language, Finnish (see, e.g., Boyd & Palviainen, 2015).

This fear of a language shift was not discussed when it came to foreign languages in Finland, but the choice of the word “foreign” was not approved by the group. Although it was used in the earlier core curriculum (FNBE, 2004) to refer to languages other than Finnish and Swedish, members of the group shared their experiences of parents of bilingual children (e.g., Spanish-Finnish or Russian-Finnish), objecting to the use of the word “foreign” when talking about their native language. What is “foreign” on the national level may be very close to the heart at an individual level. This discourse led us to consider options that were less likely to promote feelings of otherness and of not being fully accepted in Finnish society. Eventually this discussion led to calling Section 10 *Bilingual education* instead of the earlier proposed title “*Instruction in a foreign language and language-immersion instruction in the national languages.*” The status of different languages affected the decisions made in the curriculum and brought out the need to write to some extent different texts for different languages.

Bilingual education is closely interwoven with the general language education program in Finland, and this relationship was discussed in the working group. Despite diverse language needs of the country, English is quickly becoming the only foreign language studied (FNBE, 2011b). Integrating language and content is generally seen as a good way of promoting communicative language skills, and an early start in language learning is seen as a positive factor that reduces anxiety in language learning. The working group discussed how bilingual education could help promote the learning of a wider variety of languages in

Finland. However, the relationship between the language curriculum and the bilingual education curriculum was difficult for the working group to tackle because the core contents for different languages were being reformed concurrently with the curriculum for bilingual education. The group also discussed whether the target language always needed to be taught as a separate subject or whether it was enough to simply try to raise students' interest in the language by offering them some samples of the language, for example songs or some other small-scale content input. It was concluded, though not unanimously, that in bilingual education the target language needs to be offered as a language subject and also be used as a medium to teach other school subjects.

### **3.2 Discourses of Bilingual Programs**

Without a doubt the issue discussed most extensively and intensively among working group members was the question of a *definition* for bilingual education. The working group presented a united front when it came to demanding clear descriptions so that educators, policy-makers, parents, and other possible stakeholders could have realistic aims and expectations for any bilingual program. A sentence in the 2004 core curriculum that stipulated that the education provider could decide on the designation given to any course or program has made it possible for educators in Finland to label any program language immersion, CLIL, content-based instruction (CBI) or any other name they choose, without there being any demand that a program should follow certain scientifically established principles. This has led to considerable confusion in the field (Björklund & Mård-Miettinen, 2011; Kangasvieri, Miettinen, Palviainen, Saarinen & Ala-Vähälä, 2011). Instead of providing definitions, the group offered descriptions of different kinds of bilingual education alternatives in the document. Local education providers will have the right to decide what

kind of bilingual education they choose to offer. However, the Finnish government decided in 2012 that immersion in the national languages will be described in the national curriculum as playing an important part in promoting positive attitudes toward both the learning of the national languages and supporting societal bilingualism in both national languages. The immersion experts in the working group used this *Strategy for the National Languages of Finland* (Prime Minister's Office, 2012) to justify the inclusion of a section dedicated solely to immersion education in the national languages and to pinpoint the need to write down the most important ground rules in the curriculum.

Early total language immersion in either of the national languages was often referred to as the “hard core” version of bilingual education because of the number of principles that need to be applied before a program can be called an immersion program. This discourse of *norms vs. freedom* was a tricky one for the group. Early total immersion in Finland is an educational program from early childhood education and care to the end of basic education (from the age of 3 to the age of 16). Starting a new immersion program is demanding; it needs a great deal of planning, considerable bilingual teacher resources, co-operation between school levels, and parental involvement, to mention just a few requirements. In other bilingual approaches, in contrast, there is freedom to start programs at any age, with just one bilingual or target language teacher, with decisions made in just one school, again just to mention a few of the requirements. On the other hand, with immersion, all the stakeholders have rather clear guidelines based on published literature on how programs should be designed and implemented and a substantial amount of both national and international research upon which to build the program. In other bilingual programs, teachers might vary more in their approach and the local authority or school administrative personnel might be less committed. In short, immersion requires a lot of cooperation and planning but it also forms a well-structured and stable educational program provided established principles are



followed, whereas other types of programs such as CLIL might be a lot easier to start but are more vulnerable to change. The consensus in the working group was that following at least some immersion principles in all bilingual education would be the ideal, but too high demands might scare some education providers away. Since the shared aim of the group was to promote bilingual education, it was decided that early total immersion in the national languages would be defined and described in a more normative way and other bilingual programs would be given more freedom to choose program characteristics and implementation plans. For these reasons, the shared principles for all bilingual education are presented first in the April 2014 draft and the parts where immersion and other bilingual education programs differ are presented under different sub-headings.

The group members were aware of the fact that separating immersion in the national languages from other bilingual education programs is an artificial solution. There are programs that strictly follow immersion principles in languages other than the national languages. These programs can naturally be called immersion. As far as the national languages of Finland are concerned, the only immersion model we currently have is the early total immersion program. However, it was not the group's intention to exclude any possible alternative models of immersion in the national languages or to say that all bilingual education in the national languages has to be immersion. The solution for which we settled does not lessen the complexity of the problem; even with immersion considered separately, the rest of the field is complicated. Bilingual approaches may vary from a few hours in one subject to teaching all but the mother tongue and literature in the target language.

The final solution was to draw a rough line between large-scale and small-scale bilingual programs. Large-scale programs include early total immersion and other bilingual programs in which at least 25% of all hours during basic education are taught through the target language. In small-scale programs the target language medium instruction is under

25% but involves more than ordinary language lessons. Since all of the bilingual programs in Finland are in fact multilingual in their orientation, it might prove to be challenging to actually reach a 50-50 share of languages in immersion. The term *on average* is used to allow the necessary small deviations from this norm. It is stated in the draft that other programs can follow the principles laid down in the immersion part of the curriculum, keeping the door open for early total immersion in languages other than the national languages. In addition, it is made clear that other bilingual programs in national languages can be part of either large-scale or small-scale-programs.

To further help educators and other stakeholders to navigate the complex field of bilingual education, the working group compiled a short list of terms including different possible models and names in bilingual education. The list will be included in the supplementary materials.

### **3.3 Discourses on Stakeholders**

Other significant discussions among working group members involved the stakeholders, i.e., the individuals served by Finland's bilingual programs. One of the differences between immersion education in the national languages and other bilingual programs is the participating families and the pupils. Diversity in the immersion student population was discussed briefly, but at the moment the immersion population in Finland is not yet so diverse that immersion-specific adjustments are needed in the curriculum. Other bilingual programs, especially those in English, serve a more diverse student population. A large proportion of the pupils are Finnish speakers for whom English is a foreign language, but there are also bilingual pupils, and pupils for whom neither the school nor the target language is the same as the language spoken at home. Especially the need for language skills in the school language was often raised in our discussions, because eligibility for further studies after basic

education requires skills in Finnish or Swedish. The normal practice is that pupils – usually from immigrant families – who lack sufficient language skills in the school language participate in instruction preparing immigrants for basic education, which is a one-year syllabus (FNBE, 2009). It is not necessary to follow this in case of short stays in Finland; for short stays a pupil might be able to start with bilingual education with all the contents given in English. However, sometimes a planned short stay becomes a stay of many years, and in this way bilingual education might provide an English-only path by which it is possible to bypass the obligatory study of the national languages. This is not, however, the intention, and a clause was therefore added to the curriculum to the effect that if a pupil is participating in bilingual education during the later years of basic education but has difficulties studying in the school language, s/he should complete the preparatory instruction for basic education before going any further.

The perceived need for prior target language skills resulted in multiple simultaneous discourses among working group members, for example, the need/relevance/justification of language testing as an entrance gate and the right for all students to receive support for learning through bilingual education. Finnish schools strongly support inclusion (FNBE, 2011a), and the obligation to meet every pupil's right to receive support applies to all education providers, including all those offering any form of bilingual education. Although there should be no doubt about whether pupils in bilingual education have the same rights as all learners, experience in the field and even research (Wise, 2011) show that the requirements are not always fully observed and that the legislation is open to a wide range of interpretations. For this reason, even though support measures are discussed in depth elsewhere in the curriculum, the working group added a short paragraph stating that the right to receive support for growth and learning extends to those in bilingual education and that

bilingual language acquisition needs to be taken into account when determining the need for support and the implementation of supportive measures.

With immersion programming, the working group recommended that there should be no other testing for readiness for the program besides the normal testing for readiness given to all children before the start of school. The guiding principle is that immersion is suitable for all children (e.g., Genesee & Fortune, 2014). In other bilingual programs there are varying practices around testing and choosing pupils according to test results. The possibility of using tests to select suitable pupils for bilingual education divided opinions in the group. It is stated in the April 2014 draft that the principles for choosing who would be eligible for bilingual education must be set out in the local curricula. The group agreed that they could not regulate this through the core curriculum. However, in the case of immersion there is no further mention of testing in the document, whereas in other bilingual programs the possibility of testing is mentioned. Leaving the issue of testing with regard to immersion unexpressed was our strongest way of communicating that in early total immersion, testing for language skills, language aptitude, intelligence, social skills, or other characteristics in an attempt to close doors to possibly struggling students is not recommended.

Immersion and other bilingual programs differ from each other not only as far as students but also as far as teachers are concerned. Immersion teachers are bilingual teachers, most of whom have earned their teacher's certificate through the Finnish education system; they are well acquainted with the system and the core curriculum. In other bilingual programs, however, teachers can be weak users of the target language, monolinguals in the target language, or anything in between. Their educational background may vary greatly and they might not all share the views of learning promoted in Finnish society. They might have been in the country for a short period and might still be following the core curriculum of their country of origin in their teaching practices and beliefs. Although this is something that was

discussed at great length and with deep passion and some frustration, it was agreed that issues with teacher education, recruitment and qualifications are not something that can be regulated through the core curriculum. However, a brief reference to the level of language skills required of teachers in bilingual education (FNBE, 2005) and the need for a well-founded pedagogical approach to language teaching is mentioned in the April 2014 draft. It was also stated that parents have the right to receive information in the school language; they do not have to use the target language with the teacher in order to get information about how their child is doing in school.

### **3.4 Discourses of the Curriculum**

One of the earliest and most frequently recurring discourses among working group members, and one that is surprisingly hard to express in words, was the work done to identify the crucial added value of bilingual education. What does bilingual education offer that is so special that it needs its own section in the national curriculum? The Finnish core curriculum promotes multilingualism and multicultural understanding in the common parts of the new curriculum (Halinen, 2013). The general language program in Finnish schools aims for communicative skills in multiple languages; it aims to educate democratic global citizens aware of their own multilayered cultural heritage and open to and understanding of other cultures. In the opening meeting for everyone involved in the reform process the FBNE stressed the importance of content teaching that is language aware, and the view that all teachers are language teachers. This is taken very seriously, and all the working groups for different school subjects were asked to identify the core language needs in their own subject, in terms of both the language specific to their academic subject and of everyday language needs in that subject. Using multiple languages in all teaching is promoted in the common

parts of the new curriculum. Thus, the added value of bilingual education must be more than the expected outcome from any non-bilingual school. In this discourse both language-learning objectives and deeper cultural knowledge and understanding were mentioned. Although better language skills were acknowledged as a typical reason for parents to choose bilingual education, the group pointed out that successful bilingual education is not only about gaining native-like language skills, but rather about giving a strong foundation for a multilingual and multicultural orientation to life and giving the keys to life-long language learning. It is about giving both monolingual and multilingual children the opportunity to live a multilingual life.

As far as bilingual education is concerned, the group felt strongly that one of the focal points of the new curriculum, the school operational culture, has a special role in successful bilingual education. The goal was seen to be the building of a working bilingual operational culture at school in which both the target language and the school language are seen as equally important in both in-school activities and in the students' life as a whole. This means that cooperation and open dialogue between the teachers teaching in the school language and those teaching in the target language should be promoted more than has been the case before. Bilingual education is not only about teaching in the target language, but also about teaching in the school language. Teachers in both languages need to be aware of issues related to bilingualism and the bilingual acquisition of skills and core contents. In an early draft the group also presented the results of our desire to explain and regulate good teaching methods for language immersion or other bilingual programs; however, those parts had to be removed because of the wide pedagogical freedom that is fundamental in Finland, where each teacher has the right and obligation to select their own working methods and plan their working approaches in interaction with their pupils (FNBE, 2011a). Certain methods could not be specified or recommended for bilingual education. It is up to teacher education programs to

promote such methods as alternatives for teachers. This discourse showed that it was difficult to balance the writing of a normative text with the desire to help teachers by setting out some practical ideas. In the April 2014 draft the working group was only able to make a rather general reference to student-centered methods, dialogue, and the importance of students having opportunities to use the language of instruction.

There are varying approaches to learning to read and write in bilingual education in Finland. In early total immersion programs initial literacy is taught first in the immersion language, but in other bilingual programs it varies from teaching in the school language to teaching bilingually, so that there are twice as many lessons, one set for the school language and the other for the target language. Special arrangements in which lessons in the mother tongue and literature are taught in the immersion language are utilized in immersion but not in other bilingual programs. This combining of subjects caused confusion even amongst members of the working group who were not familiar with the possibility of combining the hours allocated for the mother tongue and for the immersion language. Only half of the combined hours during basic education must be given through the medium of the mother tongue (= the school language), making it possible to teach core contents, such as initial literacy, in the immersion language instead of the school language (Finnish Government, 2012). Although this means fewer hours in the school language in the subject called “mother tongue and literature”, the combination offers more flexibility, since the core contents in the immersion language are integrated into all the teaching and they are often learned already in early childhood education and care. It is stated in the draft that a detailed description of how this combination works needs to be given in the local curriculum. Learning the immersion language and learning the school language impact each other especially in the early stages, and therefore very close cooperation between teachers in the different languages is called for

in the immersion part of the curriculum draft. As far as other bilingual programs are concerned, these specific arrangements are not mentioned.

It is clear that the core contents in language subjects are not sufficient on their own to cover the language needs that pupils in bilingual education have for academic language skills. Identifying pupils' actual language needs requires that all teachers have language awareness. The working group did not have the mandate to specify learning goals for the immersion/target language, although practitioners in the field requested this (see e.g., Mård-Miettinen, 2006). The task of identifying additional objects for language learning in bilingual education will remain with local education providers. However, it is mentioned in the April 2014 draft that as instruction moves increasingly into the realm of concepts, students will need skills to produce more demanding academic texts and the ability to participate in academically demanding discourse while grammatical accuracy is supported. Hopefully this will aid writing the local curricula with reference to both language functions and language structures. For all bilingual education the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) (2001) is recommended as a good starting point for identifying the right level.

It was established in the April 2014 draft that the learning objectives in all subjects need to be reached in bilingual education even if the language of instruction is not the school language. Neither the language of instruction nor pupils' language skills should affect assessment, but it is not always possible to be certain if pupils can express all their acquired knowledge through the medium of the second language. The role of language skills in assessment was debated among working group members from many points of view, but it was impossible to come up with any clear, easy solution to the problem. The question of who is responsible for teaching and assessing language in bilingual education was discussed in depth. Teachers are not usually held responsible for teaching language, especially in higher



grades where the teacher teaches only one subject. This view might slowly be changing with the new core curriculum, particularly with the expectation that all teachers are language teachers, but to ensure that the task of language teaching in all subjects is taken seriously in bilingual education it is written in the April 2014 draft that pupils' language acquisition is assessed in all core subjects, by all teachers, and in both the school language and the target/immersion language. In different core subjects, subject-specific language goals will guide the assessment of language acquisition. These language goals need to be stated in the local curricula; doing so will be a demanding task that will require a lot of time and effort from schools providing bilingual education.

In the final assessment at the end of Grade 9 the target language/immersion language will be assessed according to the requirements of the language curriculum. This practice was considered to be contradictory and somewhat confusing, but it is stipulated in the April 2014 draft to ensure that pupils in bilingual education have an equal chance to continue to the next level of education. If the criteria for assessment were more demanding for pupils in bilingual education than for those in other schools, their average grade might be lower, and the average grade is important for acquiring the right to study in a particular school at the next level. The group expressed the hope that taking part in bilingual education would be rewarding for pupils, and it is suggested in the April 2014 draft that pupils might be given an extra certificate that would show the extent of their bilingual education. It is common to give this kind of extra certificate in Finland in the same manner as some states in the U.S. have developed state-level programs to acknowledge and formally recognize students' bilingual abilities.<sup>3</sup> However, it was not possible to stipulate in the core curriculum that certificates must be given since the Finnish educational rationale is to provide equal education for all students. Demanding immersion or other bilingual education certificates could be seen as an

undesired distinction marker (Smala, Bergas Paz & Lingard, 2013). Thus, local education providers will decide if extra certificates are given or not.

Even though assessment in bilingual education was recognized as an important but challenging issue, more time was spent among working group members discussing the inter-relationship between assessment and teaching practices. On-going assessment and feedback are needed to give the teacher information, as one member light-heartedly commented: “Sometimes you just have to look in the mirror if the kids don’t learn a thing; maybe it’s not all their fault.” It was said that in bilingual education many different ways of assessing and giving feedback are needed for a holistic and realistic evaluation. Self-evaluation and peer-assessment were mentioned as important supplements to teacher evaluation. Continuous assessment is not (only) about counting grammatical errors, but includes aspects such as motivation and identity growth as well, which can only be estimated by means of self-evaluation. The April 2014 draft recommends that teachers work together to evaluate pupils’ general language acquisition.

#### **4. Discussion**

In this paper I have described the process of reforming Finland’s national core curriculum with a special focus on bilingual education. The result of the process is a five-page draft for Section 10 of the national core curriculum.<sup>4</sup> The new core curriculum will, if it works as planned, change the Finnish educational landscape, redefining teacher education and teaching and learning in Finland and leading, in the words of Irmeli Halinen, the head of curriculum development, to “more participatory, physically active, creative and linguistically enriched schools and integrated teaching and learning” (2013, p.22). At this point we can only

speculate whether the new curriculum will result in any significant changes in bilingual education, and what kind of changes these might be.

One might ask if the working group is fully satisfied with the April 2014 draft. The work was full of compromises; the group was not allowed, or perhaps even able, to describe specific language goals for bilingual education, nor was it able to describe the most general stages of school language and target language acquisition in bilingual education, a request often expressed in the field. Nevertheless, the group gave much thought to the most profound of the questions: what is bilingual education about and why do we need bilingual education of this kind in Finland? There is some reason to hope that we managed to give education providers some deeper understanding of what different alternatives there are for bilingual education and to set up some basic parameters for these alternatives. There is also hope that all the instructional languages will be recognized as important in building a school's operational culture and that language learning will be followed up and supported in all school subjects.

The next step in the implementation of the new core curriculum is on the local level, when municipalities and schools start working on changing their local curricula to align with the new national core curriculum. It would be worth documenting the discourses surrounding this work in the same way as is done in this article, in an attempt to better understand the whole process of reform. Equally important will be to follow up what happens in staffrooms and classrooms in 2016 and beyond, when the new curriculum is introduced.

#### **Notes**

1. It should be noted that backward design as discussed by Richards (2013) is similar to yet broader than Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) backward design approach, which can be used by teachers to develop classroom-based curriculum.

2. The Acts and Decrees cited in this article are available at Finlex Data Bank ([www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset](http://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset)) owned by the Finland's Ministry of Justice. English translations have been used when available. *Decree on national objectives and distribution of teaching hours in basic education* (Finnish Government, 2012) has not yet been translated into English.
3. The state of California has instituted a "Seal of Biliteracy" (<http://sealofbiliteracy.org/>), and some other states have adopted the same or a similar mechanism to recognize students' bilingual skills.
4. The English translation will be accessible at FNBE's web page: [http://www.oph.fi/english/curricula\\_and\\_qualifications/basic\\_education](http://www.oph.fi/english/curricula_and_qualifications/basic_education).

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Table 1

*Main Phases in the Process of Writing Section 10*

<b>Phases of the Process</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
Working group appointed by FBNE	December 2012
First meeting	January 2013
Draft of pre-primary curriculum completed	April 2013
First draft of Section 10 sent to the consultative group	November 2013
Revised draft sent to the steering group	February 2014
Revised draft available for public review	April 2014
Revised draft sent for official consultation to education providers	August 2014
Final revisions completed	November–December 2014
Mandate of the working group ends	December 2014

## Tiivistelmä

Artikkelissa kartoitan ja analysoin vuonna 2016 voimaan astuvan Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteiden kaksikielistä opetusta käsittelevän luvun laatimisen yhteydessä esiin nousseita diskursseja. Kyseisessä luvussa määritellään kieltä ja sisältöä yhdistävien opetusohjelmien reunaehdot sellaisissa ohjelmissa, joissa eri oppiaineiden opetuskielenä käytetään vähintään kahta kieltä. Artikkelissa pohditaan miten ja miksi tiettyjä diskursseja ilmaistaan tai jätetään ilmaisematta kyseisessä luvussa. Diskursseja tarkastellaan kvalitatiivisesta näkökulmasta. Tutkimusaineisto koostuu luvun kirjoittamista varten kootun työryhmän kokouksissa tehdyistä osallistuvista havainnoista ja erilaisista kokousasiakirjoista.

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