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Got access? How to improve language education for all in Nordic compulsory education

What are barriers to high-quality language education? How do we increase the variety in languages students learn? How do we promote, support, and foster multilingual, multicultural and other kinds of diversities? These and other hard questions kept the participants of the RECLAS-symposium on Access to language education busy on November 28, 2019.

Julkaistu: 4. joulukuuta 2019 | Kirjoittanut: Johanna Ennser-Kananen, Sanna Riuttanen ja Taina Saarinen

The symposium was organised to celebrate the publication of the report Access to language education in European comprehensive education: Getting in, getting it, getting out (Kyckling, Vaarala, Ennser-Kananen, Saarinen & Suur-Askola 2019). The report was commissioned by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, and is available in the Finnish original

(<https://www.jyu.fi/hytk/fi/laitokset/solki/tutkimus/julkaisut/pdf-julkaisut/kielikoulutuksen-saavutettavuus-eurooppalaisessa-perusopetuksessa.pdf>) and as an English summary

(https://www.jyu.fi/hytk/fi/laitokset/solki/tutkimus/julkaisut/pdf-julkaisut/report-on-access-to-language-education-in-european-comperensive-education_english_summary-1.pdf).

What is special about this report is that it does not merely understand access as “getting into” or “having the opportunity to attend” a course or program but rather looks at access in a three-dimensional way: getting in (being able to attend), getting it (receiving quality education and learning), and getting out (completing the program with a result that is valued and recognized). The below table illustrates the concepts further.

Dimension	Related questions
Getting in Access to education	Who is expected or allowed to participate in education? Who decides that? What are the criteria for inclusion or exclusion What obstacles exist?

Getting it Enabling education and learning	Who teaches? What is their qualification and employment situation? What is/are their supervision and support systems, training opportunities? Does learning actually take place?
Getting out Value of education	What is the completion rate? What is assessed, by whom, based on what, how? What opportunities does course completion offer for future trajectories? What are potential pitfalls?

Our recommendations focussed on

- 1) the steering of language education and supporting educational providers,
- 2) teacher education and development of teachers' work,
- 3) lowering hierarchies between languages,
- 4) development of language awareness and multilingual pedagogy, and
- 5) development of assessment and certificates of language education.

We also recommended longitudinal and systematic follow-up of all language education reforms in the last few years.

“Sufficient proficiency” of pupils “in need”: Who calls the shots when it comes to access?

We took the publication of the report as an opportunity to learn about access to language education in other Nordic countries and Finnish contexts and invited an excellent group of experts to help us think about the different dimensions and aspects of access to language education. The six experts we invited each had something to say about access in their own context and country.

In her presentation, Aina Bigestans (National Centre for Swedish as a Second Language and Petrozavodsk State University) talked about the discrepancy between well-intended steering documents and the problematic reality particularly from the point of view of Swedish as second language (SSL) and heritage languages (HL). She pointed out the problems with evaluation of language skills, access to qualified teachers, and, in general, the low status and unsatisfactory learning results of SSL. When access to language education is offered for those “in need” of it, who decides what the need is, and what criteria is this decision based on?

Mette Skovgaard Andersen from The Danish National Centre for Foreign Languages continued on the situation of foreign language learning in Denmark in light of the newly established Centre she is heading together with her co-director Hanne Wachter Kjærgaard. Her experiences from Denmark are familiar from the Finnish context too: Firstly, the lack of incentives and/or sanctions to municipalities leads to a decreasing selection of foreign languages. Secondly, teacher further education is in dire need of financial and other resources. Transitions at all levels were also mentioned as an obstacle for foreign language learning in Denmark.

Our third Nordic guest was Gunhild Tveit Randen from the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences. She focussed on the new Norwegian curriculum of 2020 and particularly the role of minority languages, both of Norwegian and migrant origin. Her presentation echoed the ambiguities presented in Aina Bigestans' presentation: since a student who is "sufficiently proficient" in Norwegian does not have a right to bilingual or heritage language instruction, the question is raised whether there is adequate evaluation to make the call on whose Norwegian proficiency is "sufficient".

The Finnish commentary section was opened by Liisa Tainio from the University of Helsinki. She presented results from the recent report "The many languages and religions of schools" in which she acted as editor. She pointed out that the share of young speakers is bigger in some language groups (such as Arabic and Somali) than others (for instance Russian and Estonian) in Finland. Both the need for and availability of heritage language teachers varies between languages. According to the report there were also great differences in the qualifications of heritage language teachers, from almost 90% qualified in the English language to 0% in the Kurdish language.

Sanna Voipio-Huovinen from the City of Espoo presented their simultaneous teaching practises in heritage language teaching that include enhancing translanguaging and multiliteracy practises. Simultaneous teaching is available in several languages: Albanian, Arabic, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Farsi/Dari, Indonesian, Lithuanian, English, Spanish, Kurdish, French, Somali, Thai, Estonian, Russian and Hungarian. The teachers are in general well qualified.

Last but not least, Heli Vigren from the University of Turku talked about the ongoing research in her group on teachers' attitudes towards heritage language use at school. She presented some disturbing results: while approximately 70% of teachers in her study thought it important that students get to talk about their own language, only a little over half considered it unethical to prevent students from using their own language, and less than a third thought that students should be allowed to write in their heritage language.

Bring in the students to stir things up!

After such rich and valuable input, we continued the discussion in three small groups, each of them focusing on one of the following talking points:

- What can teachers/schools do in the current situation to increase access (getting in-getting it-getting out) in language education? What are currently the big issues in teaching/schools that limit access in language education and call for change? What kind of resources, structures, support, ... do teachers need to do this?
- What can teacher educators/teacher education institutions do in the current situation to increase access (getting in-getting it-getting out) in language education? What are currently the big issues in teacher education that call for change? What kind of resources, structures, support, ... do teacher educators/teacher education institutions need to do this?
- What can parents/guardians, families, and communities do to change the hierarchy of languages (in education)? What are currently the big ideologies, attitudes, and beliefs that call for change? What kind of resources, structures, support, ... do parents/guardians, families, communities need to do this?

We were lucky to have a group of students from the course Current Issues in Teaching English at the Department of Language and Communication Studies, University of Jyväskylä, attend our group work session. They made some very important points and did not spare the teacher educators, researchers, and education experts in the room. Some of our topics must have resonated with them, prompting them to follow up with important questions such as "Where do in-service teachers get support for promoting

multilingual and multicultural education?” Kristiina Skinnari’s (Department of Language and Communication Studies, University of Jyväskylä) response “When stuck, think of the values and social justice goals that drive your teaching” echoed with many in the room.

Key questions in the wrap-up of the group work revolved around the teachers’ role in making diversity visible in situations where individuals and communities think of themselves as non-diverse or homogeneous. Also the role of parents and principals came up on several occasions in different groups. An important point was that some of our activities are based on strongly internalized notions of what is regarded as valuable and good research. We need courage to fail and talk about our failures.

We ended the productive day with a common reflection on the most central issues that were raised as well as plans to continue the work. There is no question that the thinking, learning, and talking about access in language education will continue in some form in the future. Onwards!

Johanna Ennser-Kananen is a senior lecturer of English at the University of Jyväskylä. Her current research and teaching center around linguistic legitimacy (whose languages count?) and epistemic justice (whose knowledges count?) particularly, but not exclusively, in school contexts.

Sanna Riuttanen works as a project researcher in the Centre for Applied Language Studies at the University of Jyväskylä. Currently she is working for the Finnish Network for Language Education Policies.

Taina Saarinen is research professor of higher education at the University of Jyväskylä, with a keen interest in language as proxy for all things political. While her mother tongue is the Salo dialect, she has also demonstrated sufficient proficiency in Finnish.

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