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# Chapter 22

## Language Education for Everyone? Busting Access Myths



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**Abstract** Finland has, rather successfully, promoted an image of itself as a model of educational excellence and linguistic equity. This chapter problematises this image by analysing Finnish language education policies at the comprehensive school level. For our analysis we use a three-fold understanding of access as; (a) having the opportunity to participate in language education (getting in); (b) participating in education that is meaningful and effective for the pupil (getting it); and (c) receiving credentials that are societally legitimate and valuable assets (getting out). We elaborate on each aspect of access by debunking three myths for the Finnish context that: (a) Multilingualism is politically valued; (b) the curriculum promotes multilingual education; and (c) the education system offers equal opportunities to all, regardless of language. We conclude with a mixed picture. While initiatives have been put in place to expand participation in language learning and develop multilingual pedagogies, the societal status of national languages and constitutional bilingualism have also, somewhat paradoxically, strengthened monolingual ideologies. Such ideologies have contributed to the erasure of Indigenous and autochthonous languages from education and minimise the position of allochthonous (migrant) languages in curriculum and education. We propose several reforms in teacher education and a more systematic, long term, national supervision of (language) education policy in the service of equitable multilingual education.

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This chapter analyses Finnish language education policies at comprehensive schools through an access framework. Constitutionally bilingual, Finland is commonly perceived as a model of educational excellence, language equity, and language education policy.<sup>1</sup> While this image has been promoted and commodified,<sup>2</sup> it has also been criticised.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, we focus on debunking myths of access to education from a language perspective.

All pupils must learn both Finnish and Swedish in Finnish comprehensive schools. This, combined with one so-called “foreign”<sup>4</sup> language makes Finland formally fulfil the recommendation of “mother tongue plus two” of the Barcelona European Council in 2002,<sup>5</sup> i.e., that students should know two languages in addition to their first one. However, both the recommendation itself and Finland’s fulfilment of it are problematic. “Mother tongue plus two” normalises the notion of having one first language as well as an understanding of multilingualism as simply accumulating languages as distinct and separate units. Fulfilling the recommendation also perpetuates a view of the national languages as the only important languages, which, in turn, lowers political motivation to invest in multilingual education. Since the two additional (“plus two”) languages are commonly identified as Finnish/Swedish and English, many pupils’ heritage and other minoritised languages remain marginalised.<sup>6</sup> Relatedly, language education is unequally available across Finland (with fewer opportunities in rural areas) and participation in language education is stratified according to socio-economic background and gender.<sup>7</sup>

In this chapter, we analyse access to language education against larger education and language policy trends. We operationalise “access” as the opportunity to participate in language education (*getting in*), participating in education that is meaningful and effective (*getting it*), and receiving credentials that are societally legitimate and valuable assets (*getting out*).<sup>8</sup> This approach enables us to identify and understand inequities throughout the process of language education, rather than limiting our focus to the “getting in” phase.

We debunk three myths of Finnish (language) education, one related to each dimension of access:

1. Myth 1 (getting in): Multilingualism is valued in Finnish language education policy.
2. Myth 2 (getting it): The Finnish curriculum and schools promote multilingual education.
3. Myth 3 (getting out): The education system offers equal possibilities to all learners, regardless of their first languages.

We discuss the first myth in the context of foreign language and heritage language education. While the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education<sup>9</sup> has educational and social equity and equality as one of its core values and multilingualism is politically valued, access to less commonly taught languages and heritage languages varies greatly across municipalities and between demographic groups. We approach the second myth by problematising the fact that while the national core curriculum is quite forward-looking in promoting language awareness and multiple

language use in schools, it remains surprisingly vague about multilingual pedagogies.<sup>10</sup> Regarding the third myth, we argue that the Finnish education system does not offer the same opportunities to first and second language users of national languages. All these myths are discussed against the goal of educational equity.

## Recycling Ideologies and discourses—A Historical Overview

Finland is commonly idealised as a bilingual country.<sup>11</sup> This bilingualism is, however, institutional rather than individual in nature, as it is based on the idea of separate parallel Finnish and Swedish language institutions rather than bilingual institutions or individuals.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the two national languages, Sámi languages, sign languages, and Romani are mentioned in the constitution, albeit in the context of Indigenous (Sámi), disability (sign languages) and cultural (Romani) rights and values, rather than linguistic ones. While the constitution does not recognise minority languages, they, together with Karelian, have received recognition as minority languages based on The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML).<sup>13</sup>

The comprehensive school reform that was debated in the 1960s and gradually implemented from 1972 on, brought all students together under one educational system in order to increase equal educational opportunities. In the reform, compulsory teaching of both national languages was extended to all students in the cohort. According to the Basic Education Act, teaching is organised in two separate strands based on the two national languages (Basic Education Act 628/1998), following the constitutional principle of parallel language institutions. The role of the second national language (Swedish for most pupils) has been controversial ever since, with Swedish occupying a complex role as hegemonic national language, compulsory school subject, and *de facto* minoritised language.<sup>14</sup>

The language education policies of the 2000s tend to focus on the availability of “foreign” languages (e.g., English, German, French, and Russian) on the one hand and the teaching of second language and heritage languages to migrant background students on the other. The position of autochthonous minority languages, particularly Sámi, Romani and Karelian, remains vulnerable, with little support and low status within mainstream education, apart from Sámi languages in the Sámi homeland, an administrative area in the very north of Finland with some autonomy in Sámi matters.<sup>15</sup> This is illustrative of the historical erasure of minoritised languages in education.<sup>16</sup>

According to the Basic Education Act from 1998, the language of instruction at school and the language of the “mother tongue and literature” subject is either Finnish, Swedish or a Sámi language, but, based on guardians’ choice, also “Romani, sign language, or pupil’s other mother tongue” may be taught “as mother tongue” (§12). Unfortunately, municipalities are not required to offer heritage language teaching, nor is studying heritage languages compulsory. Municipalities can, however, apply

for funding from the National Agency for Education to organise heritage language programs.<sup>17</sup>

Language education is thoroughly linked to the historically recycled language ideologies of the relative value of different languages. Societally, emergent new nationalist and populist politics manifest as concern for (a) national language(s), putting pressure particularly on the areas of language education that are associated with learners who are perceived as “foreign”. These developments reproduce a hegemony of national languages and the marginalisation of minoritised (allochthonous and autochthonous) languages.<sup>18</sup>

## Language Education in Finnish Comprehensive School

Finnish comprehensive school is divided into primary education (Grades 1–6) and secondary education (Grades 7–9). Finnish and Swedish speaking pupils take a subject called “mother tongue and literature” throughout their school careers. The second national language, Swedish for most pupils, starts in 6th Grade as a compulsory subject. However, Swedish-speaking students usually start learning the second national language, Finnish, earlier than this.<sup>19</sup> While there are no statistics of Finnish-Swedish bilingualism, there is some evidence that Swedish speakers as a minority (5.9% of population) tend to be more Swedish-Finnish bilingual than Finnish speakers and to choose Finnish as their first compulsory language. According to Statistics Finland,<sup>20</sup> in 2019, 5.7% of pupils in Grades 1–6 took Finnish as their first compulsory language whereas most pupils chose English.

The narrow spectrum of languages learned at school (mostly English and Swedish) has been cause for concern since the 1990s. According to the official statistics, in 2019, 83% of pupils in Grades 1–6 and 99.5% of pupils in Grade 7–9 studied English.<sup>21</sup> One effort to alleviate this problem was a 2020 policy change, which required pupils to begin to learn their first “foreign” language in Grade 1 (rather than Grade 3, as before). As the 309 municipalities are under no obligation to offer more than one language, and because resources are (perceived to be) scarce and demand for variety from parents and guardians is limited, municipalities offer mostly English as the first “foreign” language.<sup>22</sup> As a result, for an overwhelming majority, English remains the first “foreign” language, even though English itself is not a compulsory subject.<sup>23</sup>

In 2019, around 48,000 pupils spoke some language other than Finnish, Swedish or Sámi as their first language.<sup>24</sup> These pupils are taught Finnish or Swedish as a second language. Additionally, they can be offered heritage language teaching. In 2019, approximately 44% of the pupils entitled to heritage language teaching participated in it.<sup>25</sup> According to The Finnish National Agency for Education,<sup>26</sup> in autumn 2019 there were 89 education providers who organised heritage language teaching in 57 languages, and 21,215 pupils participating in it in comprehensive education and at senior high school level. The language groups with most learners were Russian (5745 pupils), Arabic (3095 pupils) and Somali (2261 pupils).<sup>27</sup> Because most speakers of

these “other” languages live in the urban centres, linguistic diversity in smaller rural municipalities receives less attention, meaning less language learning support and opportunities for pupils.<sup>28</sup>

## Access is More Than “Getting in”

Traditionally, access to educational opportunities, more specifically language education, has been understood as the possibility to participate in educational programs. However, opportunities to develop useful and socially valued language skills not only hinge on the existence or availability of a language program, but on a complex multitude of factors, including socially just language education as a linguistic and educational (human) right,<sup>29</sup> education as participation,<sup>30</sup> and dis/investment in education,<sup>31</sup> all of which has influenced our three-fold approach to access.<sup>32</sup> In addition to continuous access to education—what we call *getting in*—our concept of access includes also the enabling of education and learning (*getting it*), and the value of education—what we call *getting out*. The following sample questions are associated with these three dimensions of access: (Table 22.1)

This frame challenges and expands a narrow view of access as “getting in” and enables us to examine potential obstacles and opportunities for language education in more thorough and nuanced ways.

**Table 22.1** The three dimensions of access to educational opportunities

<b>Getting in</b> Access to education	Who is expected/allowed to participate? What prerequisites exist, infrastructural obstacles and opportunities exist?
<b>Getting it</b> Enabling of education and learning	How is quality of teaching ensured? What education, networks, support, opportunity for professional development do teachers have? What pedagogical principles or curricular incentives and guidelines guide them? What materials are available and used? How is the course/program organised?
<b>Getting out</b> Value of education	What credentials do learners receive at course completion? How likely are they to complete the program? What is assessed, how, and by whom? What doors do they open/close?

## Debunking Myths of Language Education

### *Debunking Myth 1: Multilingualism is Valued in Language Education Policy*

At the level of national politics, multilingualism and teaching of multiple languages is celebrated and promoted in Finland.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless the steady decrease in language learning, both in terms of numbers of learners and the languages learned, has led to concerns about Finnish language education. As a counter-reaction, the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Agency for Education have funded national projects in the 1990s and early 2000s which focused particularly on world languages or “foreign languages”,<sup>34</sup> and on early language learning, second language and heritage language learning in the 2010s.<sup>35</sup> Despite this national attention to multilingualism, important goals of linguistic equity have not been achieved. In analysing *getting in*, we give examples from access to optional languages on the one hand, and heritage languages on the other. We also recognise that this is only part of the picture: pupils from different areas and socioeconomic backgrounds still lack access to language education in several intersecting ways.

Laws, statutes and policies, such as the national core curriculum, steer language education policy and its implementation both nationally and locally. Decentralisation of education policy since the 1980s and 1990s means that municipalities have a lot of power in organising education, including the language programs they offer. However, while statistics exist on what languages pupils choose, there is no reliable data on what languages the municipalities offer.<sup>36</sup> It is also important to note that municipal decisions are heavily influenced by demographic changes (for example migration from rural to urban areas and consequent closings of schools, and different migration flows into municipalities) and their economic situations (e.g., changes in funding structures and austerity measures since economic recessions in the 1990s and 2000s). Additionally, differences between bigger and smaller municipalities are increasing. Whereas bigger cities and municipalities may be able to offer varied language programs, offerings in smaller municipalities may be restricted to Swedish and English.<sup>37</sup>

In all, pupils’ choices and opportunities are not merely dependent on their individual wishes, but rather the result of a complex interplay of language ideologies, educational policies, municipal politics, and national regulations. Municipalities have not been required to offer optional foreign languages in secondary schools since 1994. Participation in optional language learning decreased drastically after this time, leading to counter-initiatives in the aftermath of Finland joining the European Union. Even if municipalities do offer optional language programs, they may set the required group size relatively high, which leads to the groups not being filled and formed<sup>38</sup> and, ultimately, programs being cancelled because of “low demand”. While language education initiatives have brought up numbers temporarily, these efforts have not been sustained and participation tends to dip as projects end and funding is exhausted.<sup>39</sup>

Another factor impacting access to language education is families' social, cultural and economic background,<sup>40</sup> as language choice (either that of the compulsory first language or a later optional language) may operate as one distinguishing factor in school choice.<sup>41</sup> According to Kangasvieri and others,<sup>42</sup> the younger the language learner, the more their guardians' attitudes and wishes affect language choices. This has spill-over effects later, as parents' educational strategies affect school selection on a long-term basis at the secondary level as well. Consequently, whether intentional or not, language choices are mechanisms of social distinction, as particularly families from middle or upper classes exercise these options.<sup>43</sup>

Heritage language education is commonly linked to Finland's official immigration policies, which state, in line with the constitution, that migrants have a right to maintain their languages and cultures, which have "great value in their integration to the Finnish society as well as in enriching the Finnish culture".<sup>44</sup> However, heritage language teaching is defined as complementary education, when the goal and contents of heritage language teaching are described in the appendix of the national core curriculum. Interestingly, although in the Finnish constitution and other national and international regulation, autochthonous languages such as Sámi, Romani, Karelian, Tatar or Yiddisch have different status from migrants' heritage languages, in the national core curriculum their status is similar to "other" languages (with the exception of Sámi in the Sámi homeland), illustrating the relatively poor position of Indigenous and autochthonous languages in language education policy and reinscribing the difference between "national" languages (Finnish and Swedish) and "other" languages.

In the heritage language context, systematic support for teacher education is largely non-existent. The circumstances under which heritage language education operates, adds to its marginal status: formal criteria for heritage language teacher education does not exist, and lack of certification means that teachers do not receive permanent positions in the school system and receive lower pay. Instruction typically takes place for two hours per week after regular school hours and, for many pupils, outside their school campus. Groups are usually heterogeneous in terms of age and language level, which adds to the complexity of the teaching situation.

While multilingualism is presented as a valued goal in language education policy, existing practices paint a different picture. Historically, promoting access to language education has been operationalised as increasing participation in "foreign language" teaching, and, in recent years, support for second language learning. While heritage language learning has been celebrated as if it were valued,<sup>45</sup> this has not been followed-up with sustained political action. The overall impression that supports for multilingualism is, in effect, short-term promotion of world (i.e., white European) languages. When education policies are systematically decentralised, deregulated, and conducted based on individual choice and local decision making, they tend to benefit those who already have a head-start in the education system.



## ***Debunking Myth 2: Finnish Curriculum and Schools Promote Multilingual Education***

In the national core curriculum, the presence and use of multiple languages at school is explicitly encouraged in the name of appreciation of linguistic and cultural diversity.<sup>46</sup> In the document, this is even defined as one of the main objectives of basic education:

The objective is to guide the pupils to appreciate different languages and cultures and to promote bilingualism and plurilingualism, thus reinforcing the pupils' linguistic awareness and metalinguistic skills. (National core curriculum/NCC, Sect. 9.4)

The national core curriculum ties the importance of recognising linguistic and cultural diversity to language rights and identities:

The pupil's cultural background and linguistic capabilities are taken into account in basic education. Each pupil's linguistic and cultural identity is supported in a versatile manner. The pupils are guided to know about, understand and respect each citizen's right to their own language and culture protected under the Constitution. (Sect. 9)

What is noteworthy is that this approach is not limited to pupils' use of multiple languages but extended to teachers:

School work may include multilingual teaching situations where the teachers and pupils use all languages they know. (Sect. 9.4)

Although there is a general sense of promoting and valuing linguistic and cultural diversity, concrete multilingual approaches, such as translanguaging pedagogies, are not mentioned in the national core curriculum. In fact, when the use of multiple languages is discussed, the wording of the curriculum seems to reflect an understanding of languages as individual units that should be kept separate:

The basic principle of language instruction at school is using the language in different situations. It strengthens the pupils' language awareness and parallel use of different languages as well as the development of multiliteracy. (Sect. 13.4.1)

The Finnish word used to describe multiple language use at school is *rinnakkain*, usually translated as *parallel*. This echoes the institutional bilingualism where national languages, constitutionally defined as Swedish and Finnish, but also other minoritised languages like Finnish Sign language (FSL), Finland-Swedish Sign Language (FSSL), Sámi languages, and Romani, have the right to co-exist, but are limited to a "parallel" life, where they do not interact (or interfere) with each other.<sup>47</sup> Seen against this backdrop, it is quite possible that the national linguistic parallelism permeates the level of school language policies to a degree that restricts recommendations of (and thus opportunities for) truly multilingual pedagogies, in the sense of dynamic multilingualism or translanguaging. In other words, while the national core curriculum is well-intentioned in its goal to promote cultural and linguistic diversity, exchange, and understanding, it fails to shed an ideology of parallel monolingualisms—or, as Cummins<sup>48</sup> has called it, a "two-solitude assumption". Ironically,

such an approach to multiple language use not only reinscribes a monolingual stance, it is also inept at creating and supporting multilingual and multicultural identities, or speakers who are competent and confident in using and understanding multiple linguistic and cultural resources in dynamic, meaningful, and respectful ways. It is particularly worrying if such a stance is (even inadvertently) promoted by the national curriculum.

Empirical studies offer some insights into the presence and status of multiple languages at Finnish schools, although it is important to remember that the greater part of school life is not captured by research. Prior work has shown that teachers' assumptions and ideologies, for instance their holding on to a target-language-only approach, can be detrimental to multilingual development.<sup>49</sup> Based on their recent survey of 2864 teachers in Finland, Suuriniemi and others<sup>50</sup> found teacher attitudes towards multilingualism to fall into three groups. While 44% of their participants were described as cautious and 37% as deliberating, only 19% were identified as having positive attitudes towards multilingualism. Given that multilingual student identities and interactions are not only a curricular goal but also a daily reality in a growing number of schools in Finland, this number is an alarming call to action for all of us who are teacher educators and applied linguists. In addition, teachers in Swedish-medium and CLIL contexts have reported feeling challenged on multiple levels (e.g., organisational, methodological) by linguistic and cultural diversity in their classrooms, which has triggered a very mixed bag of reactions. These have ranged from teacher resignation through to being motivated to learn.<sup>51</sup> Yet some teachers have been identified as experts in serving multilingual pupils,<sup>52</sup> and adequate professional development as well as experience supports the development of such pedagogical skills.<sup>53</sup>

Prior research has also shown that, unsurprisingly, translanguaging is present in Finnish schools,<sup>54</sup> including in immersion and Indigenous education<sup>55</sup> and not merely tolerated but also used as an intentional pedagogical approach.<sup>56</sup> Efforts such as teacher education programs that focus on language awareness (*Language Aware Multilingual Pedagogy* or LAMP at the University of Jyväskylä,<sup>57</sup> and the action research project *Itä-Helsingin uudet suomen kielet* (The new Finnish languages of Eastern Helsinki)<sup>58</sup> are a promising contribution. They are beginning to turn Finnish schools into spaces where multilingual resources are used consistently and developed continuously. However, since these projects are not part of mainstream (teacher) education, at present, the notion that "Finnish curriculum and schools promote multilingual education" can be described as a partial truth at best.

### ***Debunking Myth 3: The Education System Offers Equal Possibilities to All Students, Regardless of Their First Language***

With human rights, social equity and equality, and individual well-being among its main driving principles (NCC, Sect. 2.2), the Finnish school system is commonly believed, and should be expected to, offer the same opportunities to all pupils, including to those with migration backgrounds who are often (but not always) second language learners of the language of schooling. Some valuable support structures are in place. For instance, the Finnish National Agency for Education designed a syllabus of Finnish or Swedish for second language learners in lieu of the first language syllabus, resulting in a two-stranded system that offers different strands of Finnish/Swedish classes for first language and second language learners. In agreement with pupils' guardians and teachers, pupils can (but don't have to) move between those strands, and it is possible to graduate from both strands with the respective one (first or second language) listed in the school report. In addition, preparatory programs are available for pupils who need support in developing Finnish or Swedish language proficiency and/or other school-relevant skills before participating in preschool or basic education.<sup>59</sup>

Inequity in "getting out" practices and policies is evidenced by the fact that multilingual skills are not recognised appropriately for heritage language learners. The fact that the grade for their heritage language courses is not part of the official school report and thus remains largely invisible sends a clear message about the value the Finnish school system assigns to pupils' multilingual resources and the potential it sees in multilingual resources as being an asset in pupils' life post-graduation.<sup>60</sup>

Even rather early (2012) PISA studies suggested significant shortcomings in how the Finnish education system serves 15-year-old pupils with migration background, resulting, for instance, in a commonly cited "2-year-gap" in mathematics between pupils with migration background and those without. A particularly alarming finding was that a great proportion of the first-generation immigrant pupils did not reach the minimum level of mathematical proficiency. The results were also similar in science, reading literacy and problem solving.<sup>61</sup> In reality, of course, this is less a gap in pupils' abilities but one in offering appropriate and effective structural and individual support and opportunities, which points to systemic problems within education, teacher education, and policy making.

As shown by a large evaluation of pupil learning outcomes (N = 1530),<sup>62</sup> 87% of pupils in the Finnish as second language syllabus attained levels of B1.1–0.2, i.e., good proficiency or higher at the end of the comprehensive school. Although these levels seem reasonable, it is important to note that about 40% of the participants were born in Finland and completed the second language strand of the Finnish school system. In addition, prior research<sup>63</sup> has found that pupils need a level of B2 to follow content area instruction, read teaching materials and understand non-fiction (e.g., information) texts. The fact that most participants in the above study, all full-time pupils in the much-acclaimed Finnish education system, remained below this level,

raises important questions about what causes and perpetuates this systematic failure to serve an already vulnerable population.

Related to the myth of all students “getting out” with equal credentials is the myth of equal opportunities for transitioning to next stages of education. While the Finnish school system prides itself in claiming to have “no dead ends”, referring to the possibility to move forward without complications, this seems to be far from true. A 2019 example from higher education illustrates this well. Finnish universities jointly decided that for 2020 student selections, second language speakers of Finnish or Swedish must pass the high school leaving exams (matriculation examination) with the fourth highest (on a seven-step scale) grade in second language, while the required grade for first language users remained the lowest accepted grade.

Although this decision ended up being overturned for the 2021 student selections, the case illustrates at least two important points. First, high-stakes decisions tend to reinforce familiar hierarchies along nationalistic, xenophobic, and racist lines. For Finnish universities, the exclusion of those who are perceived to be “less Finnish” seems to be the instinctive response to expected literacy skills of new students. Second, the case illustrates language as an allegedly “neutral” and common-sensical anchor point for such discriminatory policies throughout the educational trajectory of the students. This is a call to educators and applied linguists to remain vigilant about such policies and take a stance against the systemic discrimination that is happening in our very own institutions, sometimes with arguments from our very own areas of expertise. It is also important to keep in mind that while the myth of equity in “getting out” processes only becomes visible to us as members of a privileged majority at specific moments, this myth does not need much debunking to those who experience linguistic, cultural, racial, ethnic, or other kind of discrimination in their daily interaction with the Finnish education system: its members, gatekeepers, and authorities.

## **Conclusion: Towards Political Action in Language Education**

The ostensibly positive political attitude towards multilingualism in Finnish society is reflected in the recent goals of widening participation in language learning and developing multilingual pedagogies and practices. However, Finnish constitutional bilingualism as institutional monolingualism has also worked towards strengthening monolingual ideologies in language learning, consolidating policies that are historically monolingual and national language centred, and that have in previous decades led to the erasure of Indigenous and autochthonous languages from education, now operating against allochthonous (migrant) languages.

Our focus on three aspects and three myths of language education leads us to ask how the situation can be changed. We conclude this chapter with some ideas for moving forward, believing the Finnish education system can and should be a place actively creating and promoting spaces for linguistic and social equity. These

measures imply shifting the focus from national language centrist thinking towards an ideology that fully acknowledges all languages and their speakers in the society.

On the policy level, we hope that the national core curriculum will articulate a clear stance towards multilingual pedagogies and abandon the ideology of separate languages that is likely seeping into schools. Given its orientation towards equity and human rights,<sup>64</sup> it would not be a big stretch to make a clear statement about the importance and necessity of critical multilingual and multicultural pedagogies. Such a policy change would have to be followed up by professional development, support, and resources for teachers and teacher educators.

Relatedly, a crucial step in overcoming existing monolingual ideologies and practices is the development of multilingual teacher identities and pedagogies. Rather than “teaching a language”, teachers need to be supported in teaching multilinguality, which includes not only the development of students’ proficiency in multiple languages and multilingual practices, but also their identities and legitimacy<sup>65</sup> as multilingual language users. Promising work exists to guide such an endeavour,<sup>66</sup> but it takes a concerted effort for us as teacher educators and educational researchers to unlearn our thinking of languages as individual units and dedicate our work to developing the budding efforts such as *Language Aware Multilingual Pedagogy* (see above) into strong and nation-wide foundations for truly multilingual education. Such an effort must go hand-in-hand with an understanding that, ultimately, the goal is not merely a multilingual but a more just society, as the national curriculum hints at.

In terms of making “getting out” processes more equitable, we have pointed to the fact that students who are second language learners encounter many barriers in the school system, although it is said to have “no dead-ends”. Some of these are related to language choice in comprehensive education and certificate-based admission to higher education. We suggest that this area should be a priority for further research and action. Transitional spaces like this are prone to inequalities and often function (unintended, connived, or accidental) as tools for segregation, hierarchisation, and gatekeeping, which can only be avoided through proactive, research-based measures.

Considering language education in the schools, we propose that the two strands of Finnish/Swedish as second language and Finnish/Swedish as a first language should be brought closer to each other by increasing co-teaching and other types of teacher co-operation to avoid student segregation and disengagement. Considering the well-documented harm of grouping students by (perceived) ability,<sup>67</sup> the aim should be that second language students, with ample and appropriate support, move into the first language group relatively quickly, to study together with their peers, and that integrated second language teaching continues after this transfer. Again, this requires professional development opportunities and incentives for teachers as well as the development and dissemination of new teaching content, methods, and materials. One concrete step forward would be to mandate and integrate the collaboration of first language and second language teachers in their workload and, most importantly, in teacher education programs.

As for the recognition of multilingual language skills, we believe it would be important to make existing skills legitimate and visible. We urge local and national

policy makers to consider the possibilities for students to receive credentials and/or certificates by demonstrating proficiency in languages that are not well integrated in the traditional canon. Importantly, the recognition of language skills through a test and certificate cannot replace the right to receive instruction in these languages, and the main efforts should be on developing multilingual and multicultural identities. This implies a call to us language educators and researchers to refocus our attention from supporting language proficiency towards promoting linguistic and social equity in a linguistically and culturally diverse society.

To avoid a Matthew effect, where resources and opportunities are offered increasingly to those who already have those amply, we find it critical that educational reforms are put under national supervision with a long-term focus. Educational reforms cannot depend on the good will of individual teachers, schools, or municipalities, but need to be a non-partisan, systematic and common effort of all political parties and representatives of all groups that are affected by them.

## Notes

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