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**Author(s):** Repo, Elisa; Aerila, Juli-Anna; Tyrer, Maria; Harju-Luukkainen, Heidi

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# Multilingual learning environments in early childhood education in Finland

*Elisa Repo<sup>a</sup>, Juli-Anna Aerila<sup>b</sup>, Maria Tyrer<sup>c</sup> & Heidi Harju-Luukkainen<sup>d</sup>*

<sup>a</sup> *University of Jyväskylä, corresponding author, e-mail: [elisa.a.repo@jyu.fi](mailto:elisa.a.repo@jyu.fi),  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6175-5955>*

<sup>b</sup> *University of Turku, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1109-8803>*

<sup>c</sup> *University of Turku, <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9036-0023>*

<sup>d</sup> *University of Jyväskylä, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4532-7133>*

**ABSTRACT:** Increasing linguistic diversity creates a need to construct early learning environments as spaces where children's whole multilingual repertoires are represented. The purpose of these spaces is to support the crossing of linguistic boundaries during collaborative, play-based activities. In Finland, the language policies of the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care have been changed to promote multilingualism. This study focuses on data provided by early childhood education and care (ECEC) staff, documenting changing language policies in learning environments through the management of space and practice. The study analyzes what ECEC staff ( $N = 81$  participant groups) report on constructing multilingual learning environments and what type of barriers and enablers are described as present in such environments. Theoretically, the analysis draws on pedagogical translanguaging. The data were collected using the LangPeda tool, and the participant groups' textual documents were scrutinized via qualitative content analysis. The findings suggested that although most of the groups' textual documents reflected either pre-planned or spontaneous pedagogical translanguaging, not all the groups were eager to change their monolingual practices. Linguistic hierarchies were found, and the development of children's linguistic repertoires appeared to be hindered by misconceived understanding of language learning. Enabling pedagogical translanguaging to become part of ECEC institutions' (spatial) practices requires sufficient resources, materials, and systematic education for ECEC staff.

**Keywords:** *learning environments, pedagogical translanguaging, multilingual children, language policies*

## Introduction

Due to global migration, linguistic diversity has increased in Nordic societies in recent years. To support societal transformations, the common approach in the Nordic context has been to advocate for more holistic views of the language environment in education (see, e.g., Alstad & Söpanen, 2021; Söpanen, 2018). Finland, the focus country of this study, has embraced various perspectives on language in its language policies outlined in the Finnish national core curriculum for early childhood education and care (ECEC) (see Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2018, 2022). The reformed curriculum emphasizes the importance of language awareness, including understanding how languages function and how people learn and use them (Association for Language Awareness [ALA], 2022; Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; EDUFI, 2018, 2022; Honko & Mustonen, 2020a). As a polysemic concept, language awareness directs attention not only to the widespread presence of language in education but also to practices that integrate children's linguistic knowledge into all learning situations (Cenoz et al., 2017; Repo, 2023; Young, 2018). It guides ECEC personnel to create learning environments that recognize children's multilingual abilities (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; EDUFI, 2022; Young, 2018) and consider their knowledge about language(s) and (meta)linguistic awareness (Jessner, 2006; Roehr & Gánem-Gutiérrez, 2009; Wright, 2002). Based on the assumption that language-aware educational institutions should be involved in the development of multilingual children's linguistic repertoires, the Finnish curriculum acknowledges the interconnection of language awareness and multilingualism (see Cenoz & Gorter, 2017; Dufva, 2018; Lehtonen, 2021). Thus, in language-aware ECEC, all languages used by children are supported (Lourenco et al., 2018).

While each Nordic nation has its own language(s) and unique characteristics, they share similar views about childhood, valuing child-centered and play-based learning environments (Einarsdóttir & Wagner, 2006; Pramling & Pramling Samuelsson, 2011). In Nordic welfare states, most children participate in ECEC from a young age, guided by fundamental ideals of freedom, democracy, and collaboration (Einarsdóttir & Wagner, 2006). Early learning in Finland is developed on the basis of Nordic egalitarian principles, with an emphasis on a child's holistic development, equitable treatment, and inclusion in the broadest sense. This study focuses on ECEC learning environments in which (we assume) the reformed language-aware policies are carried out and negotiated (e.g., Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; Heller, 2006; Hornberger & Johnson, 2007), with decisions pertaining to language use being made. Such decisions can lead to the lowering or establishment of linguistic hierarchies and the categorization of languages into good or bad, favorable or unfavorable, and represented or hidden (Ricento, 2006). Thus, learning environments are intersections of orientations, agendas, and power and can become significant contexts of equitable language policy implementation physically, mentally, and

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socially (see Arvola et al., 2020; From, 2020; Heller, 2006). The significance of learning environments as physical, mental, and social spaces is also highlighted in the ECEC core curriculum (see EDUFI, 2022, pp. 30–31).

Drawing on the interconnectedness of physical, mental, and social spaces (From, 2020; Gulson & Symes, 2007), this study argues that multilingual ECEC environments can become mental and social spaces if staff interpret and implement the current language education policies. In such interpretative work, ECEC personnel have the potential to act as policy agents by mainstreaming language policies in their daily practices and orientations (cf. Hornberger & Johnson, 2007; Ricento & Hornberger, 1996; Tarnanen & Palviainen, 2018). Here, the meaning of “agency” is twofold. Regarding personnel, agency refers to their ability, knowledge, and eagerness to act in language-aware ways and position multilingual children as active in the learning environment (see Aalto et al., 2022; Kayi-Aydar, 2014). Regarding children, agency grows through interactions with peers in the learning environment, as learning is a result of learners’ active attempts within these social groups (see Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Miller, 2014; van Lier, 2008).

Following the multilingual turn in educational linguistics (Conteh & Meier, 2014; May 2014), it is believed that creating multilingual spaces can increase language awareness (ALA, 2022; Cenoz et al., 2017). In turn, this can foster the agency of personnel regarding the adoption of language policy and its transformation into pedagogical practices. However, there is still little information on language policy implementation, supporting multilingual children through pedagogy in ECEC, and professional development for ECEC personnel (Alstad & Mourão, 2021; Kirsch & Mortini, 2021). Thus, we wanted to focus on ECEC staff’s views on changing language policies (EDUFI, 2018, 2022) via managing spaces and practices. To map the transformation of language education policies into practices, ECEC personnel’s reports on the construction of multilingual learning environments were categorized and critically analyzed. The study sought to understand the gradual shift toward multilingual environments, including barriers and enablers, as reported by ECEC personnel. Hence, the following research questions were asked:

1. What are the characteristics of learning environments that recognize multilingualism as a resource?
2. What barriers and enablers are present in such environments?

Methodologically, the textual data of this study consisted of 81 reports from ECEC groups across Finland (see “Data and methods”). These documents were collected using the LangPeda (Kielipeda) tool (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2020), which was designed to guide ECEC staff in documenting, assessing, and supporting language awareness, multilingualism, and Finnish language practices (see “Context of the study”). In particular,

this study utilized textual documentation related to representations of children’s linguistic repertoires in books, pictures, games, plays, and texts in ECEC. To analyze these reports, the concept of pedagogical translanguaging (also called multilingual pedagogy or crosslinguistic pedagogy) was used as a lens (see the next section; e.g., Creese & Blackledge, 2015; Cummins, 2021a; Duarte, 2019; Kirsch & Mortini, 2021). This model has roots in a sociocultural understanding of language learning—and learning in general—as a social and cognitive process (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Vygotsky, 1962/1986). Pedagogical translanguaging and the extensions of its definition (pre-planned and spontaneous pedagogical translanguaging; e.g., Cenoz & Gorter, 2021, 2022; Symons, 2021) were applied in the qualitative data analysis.

The study’s research questions were framed as “general,” and personnel’s self-reports rather than direct observations in ECEC institutions were relied upon. However, since reports may not always match how personnel actually behave in learning environments (Borg, 2006), some aspects might be missing from the data. Nonetheless, this study examined personnel’s reports to gain insights into their views on implementing pedagogical translanguaging in (spatial) practices and offer guidance on enhancing ECEC personnel training for diverse linguistic learning environments.

## **Pedagogical translanguaging in early learning environments**

### **Pedagogical translanguaging in multilingual ECEC environments**

In language-aware ECEC (EDUFI, 2018, 2022), all of children’s linguistic assets and competencies are recognized (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017; Creese & Blackledge, 2015; Duarte, 2019; Kirsch & Mortini, 2021). The concept of pedagogical translanguaging is useful for understanding, identifying, and valuing how language users can utilize their entire communicative potential as a resource for learning (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021, 2022; Cummins, 2021a). When discussing multilingual children, this study refers to emergent multilingual Finnish-language learners, typically with immigration backgrounds (see, e.g., Repo, 2023) who commonly use languages other than the majority language as their first language(s). However, we acknowledge that all children in ECEC institutions, regardless of background, are language users with the potential to communicate in various situations using their linguistic resources (see, e.g., Jørgensen et al., 2011).

In the ECEC context, pedagogical translanguaging relates to instruction designed to enable multilingual children to deploy their linguistic repertoires flexibly when participating in play-based and child-centered learning activities (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021, 2022; Kirsch & Seele, 2020). The concept stems from sociolinguistic understandings that human’s actual language use does not always correspond to “canonically known” or distinct (national)

languages (e.g., Blommaert & Backus, 2011; Jaspers, 2018). Instead, the ways language users employ their linguistic repertoires are dynamic, multimodal, and situational, and language learning can be seen as the development of a “personal repertoire,” the aim of which is not “perfect” or “complete” language skills (see Blommaert & Backus, 2011; Dufva, 2020; Lehtonen, 2021). Hence, learning environments should be constructed to encourage multilingual children to overcome linguistic boundaries, and children’s linguistic repertoires should be represented holistically in ECEC physical spaces, both indoors and outdoors, including in books, pictures, games, toys, and texts. Multilingual spaces should engage all language users in recognizing their (sometimes hidden) linguistic resources, negotiating meanings, and taking opportunities to become linguistic experts (Kirsch & Mortini, 2021). At best, promoting the recognition and use of children’s entire linguistic repertoires could help reject the rigid instructional separation of languages and advance social justice in education (Creese & Blackledge, 2015; Lehtonen, 2021).

Regarding the critical considerations pertaining to pedagogical translanguaging, a recent question has been how to find balance between valuing children’s linguistic diversity and expanding their resources in the language of the majority population (e.g., Cummins, 2021b; García & Wei, 2014; for more on the multiple viewpoints on language in curriculum documents, see Alstad & Sapanen, 2021). Indeed, this is one of ECEC’s central tasks (Council of Europe, 2007; EDUFI, 2022). Furthermore, supporting the development of multilingual repertoires and practicing the language of instruction are crucial for language-aware learning environments (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; Dufva, 2018). Normalizing pedagogical translanguaging as a tool with which to transform language-aware and multilingual education policies into practices could help ECEC institutions disestablish linguistic hierarchies and oppressive language orientations (Creese & Blackledge, 2015; Gort & Sembiente, 2015). If physical multilingual spaces enhanced social interactions in identity-affirming and cognitively powerful ways, children could see themselves as emergent multilinguals rather than as language learners, which describes children by what they lack. Moreover, they could realize that the surrounding adults see them as multilinguals as well (García & Kleifgen 2018; Lehtonen, 2021).

### **Pre-planned and spontaneous pedagogical translanguaging**

Viewed through a sociocultural lens, the recognition of multilingualism as a learning resource can scaffold children in enacting everyday tasks and activities at ECEC centers and kindergartens (cf. Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Cummins, 2000; Duarte, 2019; Kirsch & Mortini, 2021). When a learning environment enables the deployment of multilingual repertoires for social purposes, children have more opportunities to develop metacognitively, interact fluently and confidently, mediate understandings, and co-construct meanings (Creese & Blackledge 2015; Cummins 2000; García & Kleifgen, 2018).

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For instance, the flexible use of children's linguistic repertoires allows them to question, recap, reformulate, and elaborate on knowledge. Collaborative activities involving such joint thinking ideally occur within a child's zone of proximal development (cf. Vygotsky, 1962/1986). Thus, pedagogical translanguaging might play a central role in facilitating children's learning by enhancing broader intermental activity (cf. Duarte, 2019) and providing higher levels of participation (Pontier et al., 2020). The use of linguistic repertoires in educational institutions can occur in either a pre-planned manner or spontaneously (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021, 2022) depending on how prepared and eager staff are to embrace change when transforming language policies into practices (e.g., Repo, 2020, 2023). However, these two types of language use are more of a continuum than a dichotomy (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; 2022), as pre-planned pedagogical translanguaging designed by ECEC personnel can occur alongside the spontaneous use of multilingual resources. At times, spontaneous translanguaging can evolve into spontaneous pedagogical translanguaging (see below); thus, the phrase "spontaneous (pedagogical) translanguaging" was used to acknowledge this possibility.

Children's participation in everyday tasks and activities can be supported through both pre-planned pedagogical translanguaging (the intentional actions of an ECEC staff member in constructing learning environments) and spontaneous (pedagogical) translanguaging (actions that occur by chance during activities; e.g., Cenoz & Gorter, 2021, 2022; Symons, 2021). In practice, pre-planned pedagogical translanguaging is reflected in the learning environment when, for instance, the environment intentionally supports children in co-constructing knowledge through social interaction with peers who have the same languages in their repertoires (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021, 2022). Furthermore, in pre-planned multilingual spaces, children are invited to share and recycle their linguistic resources while collaboratively participating through and with language. Constructing such environments requires agency from ECEC personnel, who must plan in advance how to deploy multilingualism as a resource (on personnel agency, see Hornberger & Johnson, 2007; Ricento & Hornberger, 1996; Young, 2018). For example, a staff member could reflect on and plan how the physical spaces and artifacts could support mental and social practices and what kinds of multilingual instructional conversations might occur during such practices (e.g., Gort & Sembante, 2015). This could be done by acquiring multilingual books, music, and artifacts and designing play-based activities around them, or by decorating physical spaces with versatile texts and illustrations representing different languages.

The learning environment can also demonstrate spontaneous (pedagogical) translanguaging, which is when children's linguistic repertoires become visible extempore in play and learning activities (e.g., Cenoz & Gorter, 2021, 2022; Symons, 2021). In such cases, an ECEC personnel member may recognize children's linguistic resources in real-time instruction—for example, while reading a book or playing—and

ask them to translate a word or explain something to their peers in a language they comprehend. Although such representations of linguistic repertoires are not planned, they can be linked to the learning process, thus providing scaffolding and creating spontaneous pedagogical value (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022). However, although ECEC personnel might be eager to embrace change that aligns with multilingual language policies, they may lack the abilities, knowledge, and practices to agentively strive toward achieving collaborative linguistic (inter)actions (Honko & Mustonen, 2020b; Kirsch & Mortini, 2021).

## Context of the study

Finland is experiencing growing linguistic diversity due to immigration. Almost 8% of the population speaks languages other than Finnish, Swedish, or Sami (Statistics Finland, 2023), and the number of multilingual children aged 0–6 rose from under 9,000 to over 35,000 between 2000 and 2018 (Statistics Finland, 2019). This diversity varies among educational institutions and residential areas, particularly in urban settings with high immigrant populations (Bernelius & Huilla, 2021).

Education plays a pivotal role in the linguistic integration and social inclusion of multilingual children (Cummins, 2021a; Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019). The Finnish national core curriculum for ECEC (EDUFI, 2018, 2022) requires staff to follow the values and objectives set therein and provides a common direction for revising practices in all education centers, day-care units, and kindergartens. Regarding linguistic diversity, the curriculum is multivoiced (on language in curriculum documents, see Alstad & Sopanen, 2021), drawing a complex picture of how multilingualism should be promoted alongside the development of the majority language(s) (Finnish, Swedish, or Sámi). The curriculum encourages diverse language use, advocates for making diversity visible, and offers opportunities for children to use and learn their first language(s) (EDUFI, 2022). It recognizes language as both an object of and a vehicle for learning, promoting multiliteracy for all children (EDUFI, 2022).

Despite progressive curriculum statements, policy implementation has been gradual (Honko & Mustonen, 2020b; Repo, 2020; Tarnanen & Palviainen, 2018). For instance, recently, the need for ECEC personnel's professional development to prepare staff to interpret and adopt current language education policies has been identified (see Honko & Mustonen, 2020b). Simultaneously, some scholars have recognized that personnel's agency in transforming policies into practices could be more sustainably supported if staff knew how to assess their existing pedagogical practices and orientations regarding children's linguistic repertoire development and overall growth (e.g., Aerila et al., 2023;



Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2020). To support this assessment, Harju-Luukkainen et al. (2020) designed a tool: LangPeda. The tool functions as a “self-assessment platform” for developmental needs; by discussing the tool’s questions and reporting their answers, staff can identify such needs. The tool comprises three assessment forms related to 1) language-aware and multilingual environments, 2) multilingual child language support, and 3) Finnish language development in multilingual children. These forms contain sets of questions that guide ECEC personnel in documenting the status of language-aware and multilingual practices and the orientations of staff to provide ECEC centers with practical information on how to develop their practices. After its 2020 launch, the tool’s questions were piloted across Finnish municipalities, and the content was adjusted (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2022), forming the basis of this study.

## Data and methods

An assisted design research approach was used to collect the data for this study (for design research, see Collins et al., 2004; Kiviniemi, 2015; McKenney & Reeves, 2019). The data were collected between October and November 2021 from 81 personnel groups (in Finnish ECEC, a personnel group consists of one or two teachers and two early childhood care nurses [“caregivers”]; ECEC teachers have at least a bachelor’s degree in the field, while early childhood care nurses hold at least a vocational degree), totaling 239 staff members from 13 municipalities and 47 ECEC centers. All participant groups used Finnish as their official language. Regarding the participants’ linguistic repertoires, 98% mentioned using Finnish in their work; 9.3% also used Swedish, and 8.5% also used other languages. The groups were permanent and responsible for a certain number of children. Since these groups consisted of adults who were continuously present in children’s everyday lives, the reports were analyzed at the group level ( $N = 81$  groups). Each group generally had three or four participants (this was the case in 86% of the groups), though a few groups had two members or more than four members. The participant groups worked with children aged 1–6 years.

The data included textual documents illustrating the characteristics of the learning environments. As background information, the participant groups were asked to report the children’s ages and to estimate the percentage of multilingual pupils in the group. In addition to the official languages of Finland, the children had linguistic resources in Albanian, Arabic, English, Estonian, Farsi, French, German, Kurdish, Mandinka, Russian, sign language, and Spanish. The background information of the children in the sampled groups is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Ages and percentages of multilingual children in the groups

PERCENTAGE OF MULTILINGUAL CHILDREN IN THE GROUP	AGE GROUP				TOTAL
	TODDLERS (0-2 YEARS)	YOUNG CHILDREN (3-5 YEARS)	PRESCHOOLERS (6 YEARS)*	MIXED AGES (1-5 YEARS)	
0-20%	3	9	3	2	17
21-40%	7	8	6		21
41-60%	4	10	2	1	17
61-80%	6	11	1		18
81-100%	1	4	3		8
Total	21	42	15	3	81

\* Compulsory schooling starts at 6, but the first year is a transitional year.

## Data collection

The collection of textual data was conducted using the LangPeda tool. It concentrated on the first form (language-aware and multilingual environments) and the question *What types of children's linguistic repertoires are represented in books, pictures, games, plays, and texts in ECEC?* This broad question was developed into the following three sets of questions to be asked by the participant groups: 1) How are the linguistic repertoires of children represented in books, pictures, games, plays, and texts? Could you give some examples of how these repertoires are represented in different situations? 2) How are the linguistic repertoires of children represented indoors and outdoors in your ECEC unit? 3) Who is responsible for representing the language(s)? What could you develop in your group and how?

The data collection occurred with the help of research assistants who were educated during a professional development project on language awareness and multilingualism (the project was called "Teachers as Researchers and Developers of Their Operating Culture and Work Community"). Research assistants were used for two reasons: to emphasize the possibilities of the LangPeda tool in practice and to ensure the quantity and coverage of the data (the assistants came from different municipalities). The research assistants collected the data from their municipality. They organized discussion sessions with the participant groups, asked the pre-developed questions during the sessions, and assisted the groups in their discussions by compiling the textual data in the documents. Aside from these tasks, the assistants were advised not to interfere. Each discussion session lasted 1-1.5 hrs. The data collection's progress was intended to reflect the usage situation of LangPeda and how the tool was supposed to be utilized as part of the everyday practices of ECEC. That is, with the help of questions from LangPeda, the participant

groups self-assessed the learning environments of their own ECEC group and reported the barriers and enablers present in them in relation to representing the children's linguistic repertoires.

However, because the participants' discussions were not recorded, the textual documents were potentially affected by the thoughts and preferences of the research assistants. To minimize misunderstandings and increase trustworthiness, after each discussion session, the group was invited to read the document and revise it if needed. Eventually, the documents contained 81 written notes with both participants' quotes and more general descriptions of the characteristics of the multilingual learning environments. Presumably, a research assistant from one's municipality (i.e., not an external scholar) lowered the threshold for providing truthful information.

The research assistants anonymized the data; however, the data cannot be considered fully anonymous because the groups may recognize themselves from the quotes and other details in this article. The study was conducted in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from the municipalities and all the staff members. Participation in the study was voluntary, and the participants were allowed to interrupt their involvement at any point. The data collection and analytical steps are visually presented in Figure 1.

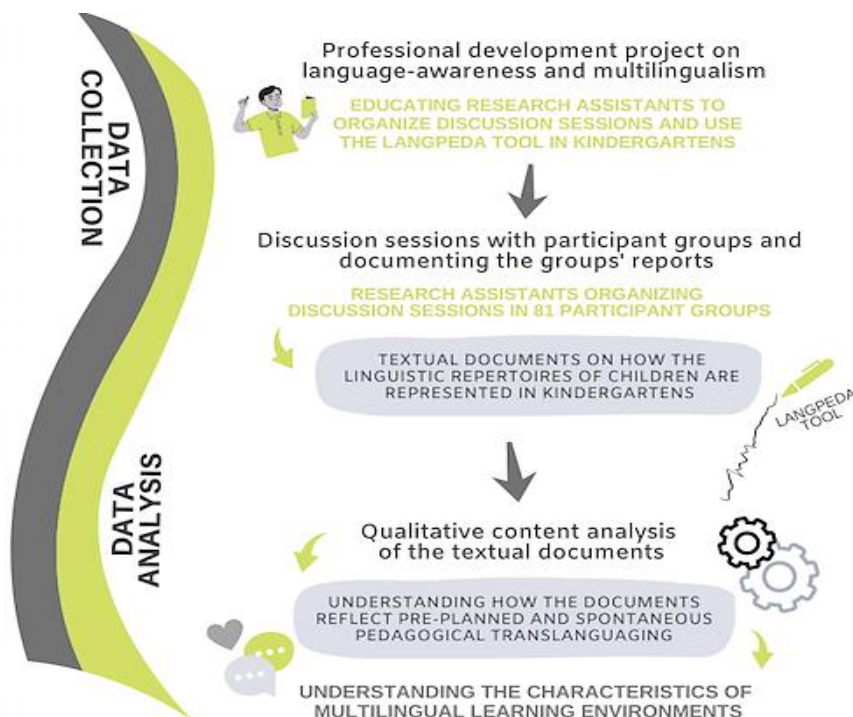


FIGURE 1 Data collection and analysis

## Data analysis

The textual data were examined using qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2012; Schreier, 2012; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Typically, content analysis answers “what” with no interpretation (cf. Schreier, 2012; Schwandt, 2003). However, in this study, this form of analysis was used in a way that allowed for interpretation based on theory and the content of the textual data. Therefore, the method offered tools to compare, categorize, describe, and test theoretical understandings (Krippendorff, 2012; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018).

After the data ( $N = 81$ ) were read, a pedagogical translanguaging lens (cf. Cenoz & Gorter, 2021, 2022; Cummins, 2021a; Duarte, 2019) was applied to examine the textual documents. The research team assumed that if the new language policies were represented in ECEC spaces and artifacts, there would be further opportunities for the creation of mental and social spaces (From, 2020; Gulson & Symes, 2007). The concept of pedagogical translanguaging was divided into pre-planned and spontaneous (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021, 2022), and the ECEC personnel’s textual data were coded into the following four categories: 1) pre-planned pedagogical translanguaging, 2) spontaneous (pedagogical) translanguaging, 3) no pedagogical translanguaging but an eagerness to embrace change, and 4) no pedagogical translanguaging and no eagerness to embrace change.

The consistency of the categories was confirmed by having the first three authors read the textual documents separately, code them according to the chosen categories, and discuss and compare categorizations. During this discussion, consensus was reached on all documents. With a few textual documents, we grappled with the notion that pre-planned and spontaneous pedagogical translanguaging could be viewed as a continuum, as outlined in the theoretical framework (see Cenoz & Gorter, 2021, 2022). Challenges in defining the categories were related to how to delineate between examples of pre-planned and spontaneous pedagogical translanguaging (Categories 1 and 2) and between demonstrations of eagerness to embrace change that contradicted the theoretical framework (Categories 3 and 4). For instance, if a group’s reports clearly demonstrated Category 1, this did not imply that spontaneous (pedagogical) translanguaging (reflections of Category 2) would never occur in that group. In a few documents, the use of a specific application that allowed a multilingual child to listen to an audiobook with different linguistic resources was mentioned. However, the documents implied that the use of the application was not systematic and that the languages represented were not discussed after listening. Hence, it was decided to code this example as a reflection of spontaneous (pedagogical) translanguaging (Category 2) instead of pre-planned translanguaging (Category 1). Overall, the analysis aimed to categorize the reports based on where they undeniably achieved the “highest placement” on the four-category

spectrum. Thus, it was important to carefully consider the subtle reflections that demonstrated an eagerness to embrace change (differentiating Category 3 from Category 4), even if they seemed to oppose the Finnish national curricula's (EDUFI, 2022) and educational linguists' (e.g., Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; 2022; Creese & Blackledge, 2015; Duarte, 2019) arguments concerning linguistic repertoire as a learning resource and the significance of pedagogical translanguaging. It is worth noting that while textual documents directly reported that the children's language(s) were not represented in the kindergarten spaces and artifacts, if the same documents also reflected the ECEC personnel's thoughts on how to reduce barriers to constructing multilingual learning environments (e.g., the personnel's desire for professional development on linguistic diversity), then the reports were coded into Category 3.

After the data were categorized, the textual documents were read more closely and with consideration for different levels of abstraction. Ultimately, this heuristic approach led to describing the characteristics of ECEC spaces, including barriers and enablers. Although the focus was a qualitative description of the above-mentioned categories, the study also produced quantitative insights into the organization of the data (for quantitative information in qualitative analysis, see Krippendorff, 2012). The results were supported by direct quotes from the reports. To ensure anonymity, the groups were coded based on the number of the group (1–81), the age of the children (toddlers, young children, preschoolers, or mixed ages), and the percentage of multilingual children in the group (according to the participants' estimations).

## **Results – The characteristics of multilingual learning environments**

Of the 81 sampled groups, 27 (33.3%) reflected pre-planned pedagogical translanguaging when constructing multilingual learning environments, 25 (30.9%) showed spontaneous (pedagogical) translanguaging, and 21 (25.9%) showed neither but exhibited an eagerness to embrace change. However, eight groups (9.9%) had no desire to change their monolingual practices. In the following subsections, we discuss the characteristics of learning environments that recognize multilingualism as a resource, thus addressing the first research question. The discussion progresses from examining those at the “highest placement” to analyzing textual documents that do not demonstrate an eagerness to embrace change (Category 1 to Category 4). Concurrently, we address the second research question and identify the barriers and enablers in each category.

## Pre-planned pedagogical translanguaging

In 27 groups (33.3%), children's multilingual repertoires were consistently and comprehensively represented in physical spaces and artifacts. The data reflected a construction of spaces where linguistic diversity was worthy of being cultivated, and the use of multiple languages as a resource in play-based and child-centered learning activities was supported (cf. Creese & Blackledge, 2015; Cummins, 2021a; Kirsch & Mortini, 2021). This data, which illustrates the category of *pre-planned pedagogical translanguaging*, aligns with both the theoretical framework (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021, 2022) and the Finnish national core curriculum for ECEC (EDUFI, 2018, 2022). The representations of multilingual repertoires were not limited to one space; rather, they were visible on the walls and during play, reading sessions, math-learning moments, musical sessions, games, and everyday activities. Thus, the ECEC personnel seem to have possessed the ability and knowledge to act as agents in transforming reformed language policies into practices. The following example illustrates this kind of holistic representation:

There are different writing systems represented on the walls of the kindergarten. For instance, we have written "good morning" in all the children's languages. Afterwards, the children made observations on how the letters in words can be pronounced differently in different languages. We have discussed, for example, why the word "good" is pronounced "gud" in English, and why in the word "morning" we do not hear the typical Finnish "r" sound. Or why, if we write in Turkish, there is a letter "u" with umlauts but in Finnish there is not. This way, if a new child joins our group, the others are interested in whether there will soon be more languages on the wall. We also use a digital application where the children can listen to a book with various linguistic resources. Furthermore, the children sing and perform songs in the languages they have expertise in. "Happy birthday to you" can be sung in Finnish or, if a child has a linguistic background—let's say—in Russian, we can sing it in Russian. If we play the vocabulary game "my ship comes loaded with," the children are encouraged to name words using all their linguistic repertoires. We can borrow books from the library in all the children's languages as we also have children who can read in our group. (Group 56, preschoolers, 50% multilingual children)

### Example 1

As this example shows, a multilingual learning environment was not created by employing a single pre-planned translanguaging practice (e.g., a text written on a wall or a multilingual book or song); the physical multilingual spaces helped make multilingualism part of the mental and social spaces as well (cf. From, 2020; Gulson & Symes, 2007). This was done in such a way that the representations of language(s) in the environment appeared to generate linguistic negotiations ("We have discussed why...") and the collaborative sharing of linguistic resources ("If we play, the children are encouraged to name words using all their linguistic resources"; cf. Creese & Blackledge, 2015; Kirsch & Mortini, 2021). Furthermore, in the pre-planned multilingual

environments, children were supported in taking on expert roles based on their linguistic abilities (“If a new child joins our group, the others are interested in whether there will soon be more languages on the wall”), increasing their experiences of inclusion. The data show how the theoretical framework of pedagogical translanguaging, which advocates for stronger development of children’s multilingual identities (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021, 2022), can intertwine with everyday practices.

The documents also demonstrated that, as appropriators and agents of language policies, ECEC personnel can strengthen children’s agency as learners in social interactions (cf. Arvola et al., 2020; Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; van Lier, 2008). In such interactions, children’s agency may increase as they transition from a learner (i.e., they are primarily recipients of ECEC personnel’s language) to an expert in their own language (cf. Lehtonen, 2021). Such a transition can be observed in the textual documents when the children were given opportunities to actively participate in the learning space, such as “teaching” language to the personnel or other children. In the following two examples, the staff’s pre-planned actions for multilingual environments motivated the children to share and recycle their linguistic awareness in interactional play-based activities.

We have borrowed books in different languages from the library. For example, I have read a book written in Somali to a child who spoke the language, even though I do not know any Somali. Sometimes the words were correct and the child said “YES! YES!” And sometimes the words were wrong, in which case the child told me why they did not understand. (Group 70, young children, 45% multilingual children)

Example 2

A game comes to my mind that children like to play outdoors. In the game, a member of the ECEC personnel says a word in Finnish about a certain topic; then the children say the same word in the languages they know. So, it is as if the children were teaching the personnel their own languages. This game is popular. Even though, as a member of staff, I did not always learn how to pronounce the words, the children enjoyed their roles as experts. The game certainly strengthened their knowledge of the Finnish language. (Group 72, young children, 75% multilingual children)

Example 3

In these examples, the children were presented with possibilities for linguistically agentic actions and for increasing their knowledge about language(s) (see the definition of language awareness in the Introduction). The examples illustrate how multilingual learning environments were constructed in ways that sought to provide ECEC personnel and children with opportunities to collaborate, discuss, wonder, question, forget, be inspired, and learn from each other while doing things with language in different contexts and surroundings. This reflects a sociocultural understanding of language learning as the development of a personal repertoire that occurs through participation in various social activities (cf. Duarte, 2019; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). The data also indicated that one of

the characteristics of the pre-planned construction of multilingual spaces was striving to empower linguistically diverse children emotionally, socially, and intellectually (cf. Cummins, 2000; Kirsch & Mortini, 2021). The reports documenting that languages are used in spaces “even though I did not always learn how to pronounce the words” convey an orientation in which even emerging linguistic expertise is regarded as important and worthy of representation (cf. Lehtonen, 2021). Children and personnel are encouraged to make their language(s) visible, even if they do not know the language “perfectly” or “completely,” which aligns with a repertoire-based understanding of language skills (see Blommaert & Backus, 2011; Dufva, 2020). Creating such collaboratively working spaces that enable learning from each other can serve as a powerful means to reduce linguistic hierarchies when it is not only the language of the majority population that is represented (cf. Creese & Blackledge, 2015). Indeed, when learning environments intentionally recognize multilingualism as a resource, crossing linguistic boundaries and playing with linguistic repertoires can eventually become part of ECEC centers’ everyday practices and culture.

### **Spontaneous (pedagogical) translanguaging**

The reformed language policies (EDUFI, 2018, 2022) related to the mainstreaming of representations of multilingualism appeared to be partially realized in 25 groups (30.9%). The primary characteristic of this category—*spontaneous (pedagogical) translanguaging*—was that the children’s linguistic repertoires were somewhat arbitrarily represented in the learning environments, and they were not always recognized as a resource for increasing communicative potential (cf. Cenoz & Gorter, 2021, 2022; Symons, 2021). The following example addresses a case where the crossing of linguistic boundaries had spontaneous pedagogical value. The space and practices in question were managed in such a way that the children’s language(s) supported extempore learning and social participation.

For example, when we are walking outdoors, the children may talk to the adults a lot in their own languages and explain what can be seen in the environment. The children’s linguistic repertoires become visible most often while playing free and during games. Also, the children may say to each other words and phrases in other languages, but these do not lead to any real discussion. These phrases are mostly learned from some game or computer programme in English, and they kind of seem to belong to the game that is being played. (Group 69, young children, 70% multilingual children)

#### Example 4

It must be acknowledged that there is a limit to how far one can go in building multilingual collaborative activities when a child does not share the same linguistic resources as other children or personnel. However, as seen in Example 4, the representation of linguistic



repertoires in outdoor spaces clearly increased children’s participation (“The children may talk a lot in their own languages and explain what can be seen in the environment”). Nevertheless, the repertoires were not employed for meaning negotiations or other collaborative learning activities (“These do not lead to any real discussion”). These findings confirm the research on educators’ difficulties in implementing pedagogical translanguaging (cf. Cenoz & Gorter, 2021, 2022; Honko & Mustonen, 2020b; Repo, 2023). Furthermore, in the example, the children’s languages were portrayed as their “thing” — something with which the personnel did not interfere (“They become most often visible while playing free or during games”). This suggests that languages may randomly become visible or remain hidden in the learning environment. Similar spontaneity was echoed in other documents that contained phrases such as the following: “When the children are playing, several languages can be mixed,” “During discussions, Finnish and English may be used interchangeably,” and “Someone may sometimes act as an interpreter for what the others said.” The use of “may” and “can” indicate that the children are free to translanguage together, but the creation or absence of a multilingual space is arbitrary and the responsibility of the children themselves. In keeping with the characteristics of spontaneous (pedagogical) translanguaging, kindergarten spaces could be constructed as multilingual in just one respect; for example, somewhere in the physical space might be random multilingual texts, or the group may occasionally wish “Bon appétit” using different languages. This may be due to the ECEC personnel’s evolving abilities and knowledge manifesting in the agency to normalize multilingualism as part of the kindergartens’ social and mental spaces.

The data suggested that a barrier to creating a multilingual environment was constructed by views of multilingualism as something that was “allowed” or “tolerated.” Acknowledging it as an asset when planning learning situations, as supported by the Finnish curriculum (EDUFI, 2018, 2022) and scholars (e.g., Cenoz & Gorter, 2021, 2022; Creese & Blackledge, 2015), did not seem to be reflected in the textual data in these cases. Examples 5 and 6 (below) demonstrate how the children’s linguistic repertoires seemed to surface only in “free-play” situations, during which the participants were spontaneously allowed to make their linguistic expertise visible. According to these examples, the staff said that they were eager to support linguistic diversity and respond to development needs (possibly identified by LangPeda) as part of their tasks; however, the children’s growth as multilinguals was not systematically aided.

Sometimes, the languages children use become visible in games and play-based activities. Russian and English are used. Children's linguistic repertoires are not represented in books, pictures, or artefacts. The books and the pictures' texts are in Finnish. Children's languages do not come up in a pre-planned way during instructed practices and situations, such as morning circles. However, for example, in our group, the children who know Russian use Russian among themselves. In addition to Finnish, I can hear children speaking English when they play. (Group 31, young children, 70% multilingual children)

Example 5

The physical books are in English. When playing outdoors, children sometimes teach each other words in their own languages. Secretly, they may also teach some "unwanted" words. However, this is done in a humorous way as they giggle at those words. The whole ECEC personnel group should be responsible for how the linguistic repertoires are represented. And yet, no one has taken responsibility for this. (Group 20, preschoolers, 40% multilingual children)

Example 6

Such examples of spontaneous translanguaging show how, in many ECEC centers and kindergartens, language approaches that recognize children's entire linguistic expertise (EDUFI, 2018, 2022) are still slowly shifting from the policy level to the grassroots level of orientations and practices (cf. Honko & Mustonen, 2020a). There appeared to be a number of ECEC groups in which a staff member occasionally negotiated linguistic meanings or collaboratively crossed language boundaries with the children, thus accidentally supporting the development of the children's linguistic repertoires. Helping ECEC personnel recognize these occasions and making their educational potential visible could increase staff's expertise in implementing pre-planned pedagogical translanguaging.

### **No pedagogical translanguaging but an eagerness to embrace change**

Among the participants, 21 groups' (25.9%) documents did not reflect any kind of pedagogical translanguaging; however, these groups demonstrated an eagerness to embrace change in different ways. The following quotes describe some of the barriers to transforming multilingual language policies into practices:

We are working on this. No attention has been paid to it. We have not asked about [the languages of the children]. ... We would need to develop our own linguistic repertoires first. My English is bad, and communicating with the parents is difficult. On a child's birthday, we could listen to a congratulatory song on YouTube in the language of the child and use it as an aid. We could also borrow books from the library in the children's languages. (Group 22, preschoolers, 90% multilingual children)

Example 7

Finnish is the common language of the group, which is why we use it. The children's languages are not represented in the games, the pictures, or the texts; the same goes for the play-based activities and the toys. However, we could borrow books in different languages from the library . . . Then again, if the member of staff does not know how to read the book with the child or is not familiar with the alphabet, it is a bit difficult. Our task in ECEC is to teach Finnish language and culture. We could ask the parents for stories and folk tales related to their languages and cultures and ask them to translate them into Finnish. If there was a story that could be found in many languages, we could use it during instruction. (Group 65, preschoolers, 80% multilingual children)

#### Example 8

As shown in these two examples, the children's linguistic repertoires were not yet visible in the physical, mental, and social spaces of these ECEC institutions ("No attention has been paid to it," "We have not asked," and "The children's languages are not represented"). A potential barrier to ECEC personnel acting in language-aware ways and transforming language policies (EDUFI, 2018, 2022) into multilingual learning environments appeared to be a somewhat (self-)critical view, with the staff reporting that their own linguistic repertoires were somehow insufficient for translanguaging ("My English is bad" and "If the member of staff does not know how to read ... it is a bit difficult"). In such cases, the personnel's preparedness to act was developing ("We are working on this"). However, this view echoes a misconceived understanding of language skills, compared to how sociolinguists (e.g., Blommaert & Backus, 2011; Dufva, 2020) regard the collection of linguistic resources that a person accumulates throughout their life. In accordance with such a dynamic understanding, one cannot categorize linguistic resources as either good or bad but could instead focus on how these resources have been or could be developed in various interactions.

Similarly, the textual data reflected the view that one's linguistic repertoire should be "ready" before it is used ("We would need to develop our own linguistic repertoires first"). However, as the pedagogical translanguaging lens (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Creese & Blackledge, 2015; Cummins, 2021a; Duarte, 2019) is rooted in seeing language learning as developing a repertoire, these reflections can be interpreted as contradicting the theoretical framework of this study. Furthermore, this study leaned on a sociocultural understanding of (language) learning (Duarte, 2019; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; van Lier, 2008; Vygotsky, 1962/1986), assuming that multilingual children benefit from co-constructing knowledge in play-based activities—possibilities for crossing linguistic boundaries, negotiating language, questioning, wondering, and showing their expertise (cf. Gort & Sembiante, 2015; Repo, 2023). However, if ECEC personnel prefer mostly monolingual learning spaces, linguistically diverse children may not become full agents of their learning, as this kind of learning environment does not align with the intended way of supporting learning. In other textual documents of this analytical category, some of the

barriers to implementing pedagogical translanguaging were expressed with the following statements: “There has not been time to look into the matter,” “All the learning materials are in Finnish,” and “There has not been enough assistance and training.” In some documents, members of the ECEC personnel even stated, “Not all the children have noticed that they have a language in common,” which indicates that little attention had been paid to the children’s languages and language use in the learning environments. In other words, the children were not encouraged to utilize their whole linguistic repertoires.

The distinguishing feature of this category was that the groups expressed positive thoughts related to the possibility of constructing multilingual learning environments (e.g., “We could listen,” “We could borrow,” and “We could ask the parents”). Example 9 supports this, presenting the staff’s desire for professional development focused on multilingualism and their eagerness to discuss relevant practices with language-learning experts.

Our group needs training, collaborative discussions, and exchanges of experiences in this regard [how to represent children’s linguistic repertoires] because we feel that there are not enough tools to make languages more visible. (Group 18, young children, 20% multilingual children)

#### Example 9

The multilingual objectives of the Finnish national core curriculum (EDUFI, 2018, 2022) were described as “difficult” to interpret, highlighting a need for further training. Similar mismatches between the policy and practical levels in teacher education have been suggested in other studies focusing on what hinders the transformation of research-based knowledge on multilingualism into practical implementation (Alisaari et al., 2019; Repo, 2020, 2023). The need for professional development has been linked to differing interpretations of the language policy. Despite an eagerness to embrace change, the views of the ECEC personnel echoed linguistic hierarchies; for example, the English language was favored over others. Some of the textual documents in this category overly emphasized the use of English as the key to multilingual spaces (“My English is ...”). Acknowledging that English may have been part of the staff’s linguistic repertoires, it was interesting to observe how English was highlighted, even though the participant groups were asked to report on the representations of *all* the linguistic repertoires of the children. It should be noted that the largest immigrant groups in Finland are users of Russian, Estonian, Somali, and Arabic (Statistics Finland, 2023).

## No pedagogical translanguaging and no eagerness to embrace change

Despite the Finnish national curriculum's (EDUFI, 2018, 2022) emphasis on multilingualism, eight documents (9.9%) showed no signs of pedagogical translanguaging and no eagerness to embrace change. In these groups, the children's linguistic repertoires were invisible in the learning environment, and languages were not discussed collaboratively. Examples 10 and 11 (below) demonstrate how this small number of participant groups seemed to consider representations of linguistic diversity unnecessary.

Are the languages visible? No. Well, I do not know. Should all 11 of their languages be made visible? Well, the languages are not visible, but the strengthening of children's Finnish language is. This is influenced by the fact that languages are such a personal thing. Does everyone want their languages to be seen? Is it appropriate? Is it necessary? (Group 39, preschoolers, 30% multilingual children)

### Example 10

The languages are not visible at the moment. Together, we have decided that our focus should be on developing the Finnish language. When it [making visible the linguistic repertoires] becomes relevant, we'll see. We will look into it if it becomes relevant. The children are not interested in this topic yet. The children do not even remember which language their father speaks or, for example, what a certain word means in the languages they know. This has not been raised as a big topic for now. (Group 40, young children, 50% multilingual children)

### Example 11

Common to both examples is the expression of doubt about the reformed language policies ("Should all of their languages be made visible?" "Is it necessary?" and "We will look into it if it becomes relevant"). The personnel echoed a monolingual "Finnish-only" orientation, arguing that the barriers to making linguistic repertoires visible were linked to the goal of learning the language of the majority population ("Our focus should be on developing the Finnish language"). In contrast to theoretical understandings of the benefits of multilingualism (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017, 2021, 2022; Creese & Blackledge, 2015; Cummins, 2021a), a couple of groups even said, "It is forbidden to use languages other than Finnish in our kindergarten." This reflects the categorization of languages into favorable and unfavorable, which ignores scholarly work highlighting how expertise in one language supports gaining resources in another (e.g., Cummins, 2000). By reporting that the children were not familiar with their parents' and peers' linguistic resources ("The children do not even remember ..." and "The children are not interested ...") and that it was unclear whether the children wanted their repertoires to be made visible ("Does everyone want their languages to be seen?"), the ECEC personnel revealed that they were not prepared to agentively mainstream multilingual practices and instead exhibited prejudice (cf. Honko & Mustonen, 2020b; Tarnanen & Palviainen, 2018).

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The question arises of how children can become interested in each other's linguistic expertise if their languages are systematically hidden by the group of adults that is present in their everyday lives. The data in this category suggest that there are still ECEC institutions in Finland where learning environments are not constructed as multilingual spaces because the personnel view themselves as at the "top" of the language hierarchy and, from there, define what their linguistically diverse children want and are interested in. Here, the textual documents reflect the exercise of power. At worst, overlooking children's linguistic potential may become a form of discrimination (cf. Helót & Ó Laoire, 2011). If children's linguistic repertoires are not widely recognized as a resource for learning and inclusion, language can play a role in the reproduction of inequalities.

## **Discussion: Responding to needs and barriers**

This study shows how a physical space is also a social, cultural, and political space—a space that offers, enables, invites, and enforces certain patterns of social behavior (cf. Blommaert, 2013). In addition, this study strengthens the understanding of how language policies have (or should have) spatial consequences and the potential to manifest themselves mentally and socially. Multilingualism cannot be determined by what language users have or lack; rather, it is determined by how a learning space, through its structure, artifacts, and interactions, either facilitates or hinders students' abilities to utilize their whole linguistic repertoires (cf. Blommaert et al., 2005). If language learning is viewed as a social and cognitive process, then developing physical learning environments that enhance the agency of multilingual children, for example, by facilitating collaborative knowledge construction and turning linguistic resources into learning opportunities, is a direction toward which Finnish language-aware ECEC should be developed.

In this study, we addressed the issue of putting the reformed language policy into action and addressed research questions regarding 1) the characteristics of early learning environments that recognize multilingualism as a resource and 2) the barriers and enablers within such environments. Due to the non-recurrent nature of the data collection (textual documents that represented snapshot-like, experiential testimonies from ECEC personnel about their situations), the study could not examine any changes that occurred in the implementation of language-aware education policies. However, the analysis provides insights into the slow process of shifting educational institutions' agendas toward multilingual approaches. Characteristically, two-thirds of the groups reflected representations of children's linguistic repertoires in their learning environments, and an additional 26% showed an eagerness to change. Thus, the analysis suggests that there is an opportunity for monolingual orientations to transform. However, the inclusion of pedagogical translanguaging in ECEC institutions' spatial practices requires sufficient

resources, materials, and information about linguistic repertoire development (cf. Kirsch & Mortini, 2021; Lourenco et al., 2018; Repo, 2023).

Considering ECEC personnel to be language policy agents, this study revealed that ECEC personnel's preparedness to construct learning environments does not develop on its own, nor does it always flow top-down from policy-level objectives to practical implementation (cf. Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; Repo, 2023). In a quickly changing society, staff cannot be regarded as simply recipients of externally generated language policies that they are expected to agentively demonstrate and mainstream (cf. Hornberger & Johnson, 2007; Tarnanen & Palviainen, 2018). The analysis of the textual documents showed that representations of linguistic repertoires in early learning environments vary greatly a few years after the language-aware ECEC curriculum (EDUFI, 2018, 2022) was launched. To summarize the results of the analysis, Figure 2 presents the characteristics of the learning environments that are obligated—in theory—to recognize multilingualism as a resource.

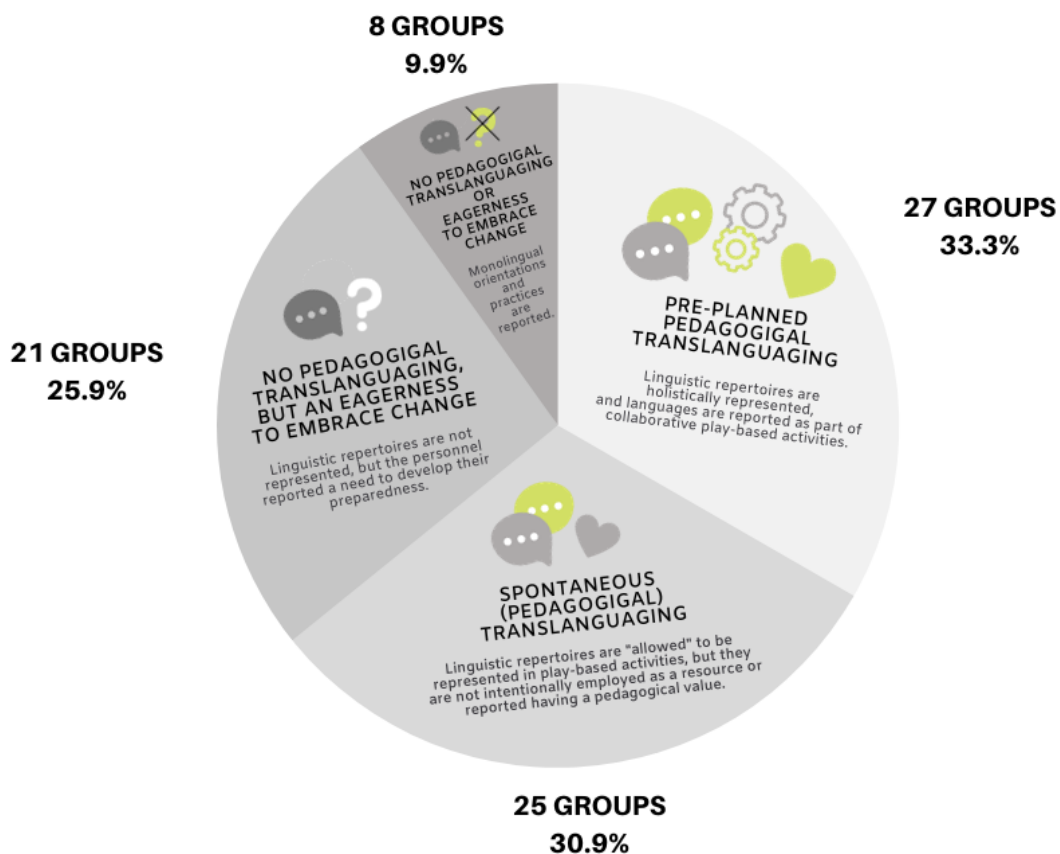


FIGURE 2 A visual summary of the 81 ECEC groups' reports

Figure 2 illustrates the gradual realization of the multilingual turn. Fewer than 10% of the participant groups did not show an eagerness to embrace change, while more than 60% reflected either spontaneous or pre-planned pedagogical translinguaging. Furthermore,

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the reports reiterated the view that, by using the LangPeda tool (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2020), it is possible to obtain information about the needs and barriers encountered in the construction of multilingual learning environments (cf. Aerila et al., 2023). To address the second research question, the barriers are connected to personnel's views that do not fully align with how educational linguists and sociolinguists understand language learning and emergent multilingual repertoires. This misconceived understanding may perpetuate linguistic hierarchies and the exercise of power through language, reinforcing existing inequalities. These issues could be addressed through professional development on language awareness, including the topic of pedagogical translanguaging. In the future, the needs of staff could be met by offering systematic education with enough time and assistance for them to reflect on their views, the curricular guidelines, and research-based sociocultural pedagogical practices (cf. Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; Kirsch & Mortini, 2021). The effort to support increasing linguistic diversity in the Nordic context would be more effective if it occurred in all kindergarten environments and if children's linguistic repertoires were holistically represented in pre-planned collaborative activities. Characteristic of Nordic democracies, their ECEC environments have previously been praised for child-centered and equitable approaches to early learning. To sustain the core values of these societies in practice in a changing world, it is relevant to discuss the barriers and enablers of every child's inclusion, continuously reassess and negotiate our views, and stay eager to change – asking how we could position linguistically diverse children as active participants in learning.

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