

ECEC Teachers' Reported Practices and Attitudes Toward Read-Alouds in Nordic Multilingual Classrooms

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Abstract

This study investigated teachers' self-reported read-aloud practices in multilingual early childhood education and care (ECEC) classrooms in Finland, Norway, and Sweden. A total of 170 ECEC teachers participated in a survey about read-aloud practices. Data on literacy practices were analyzed quantitatively, and reasons for read-aloud approaches were qualitatively analyzed. The results showed that the ECEC teachers reported overall similar read-aloud practices regardless of the number of multilingual children in their classrooms; still, some degree of difference in didactic choices was found. Thirty-eight percent of the teachers chose a different book when reading to multilingual rather than monolingual children. Their reasons included a view of multilingual children as having different reading needs than monolingual children, such as simpler books with more illustrations. Choosing simpler books might be beneficial early in second-language development, especially when using a dialogic reading style for making the book accessible to more children. On the other hand, these reasons might indicate an underlying perception of *all* multilingual children as in more need of a *teaching tone* with explanations and instructions and less of an *exchange tone* with an active exchange of knowledge in read-aloud practice. The overall results point to read-alouds as an important early literacy activity in ECEC classrooms.

Keywords: *read-aloud; multilingual children; early literacy; monolingual norm*

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Introduction

The number of multilingual children attending Nordic early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions has increased in recent decades, making multilingual

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classrooms the new norm. In 2021, 19.5% of the children in ECEC institutions in Norway came from linguistic and cultural minorities (Statistics Norway, 2023). The corresponding figures for Sweden and Finland were 25% and 9% respectively (Palviainen & Curdt-Christiansen, 2020). Following Langeloo et al. (2019), we define multilingual children as children who primarily speak a different language at home than the majority language of instruction, and therefore learn the second language more systematically in ECEC. The term multilingual children includes dual-language learners who have started to learn a second language before the age of three, for example, by attending ECEC from the time they were one year old, as well as children who learn a second language after they turn three.¹ One main task of ECEC is to support all children's language learning, and learning a second language is important for communication and participation in play, for example, as it is the common language of children and adults (e.g., Björk-Willén, 2018; Puskás & Björk-Willén, 2017). Although a multilingual child's total vocabulary knowledge might be the same as a monolingual child (e.g., Gort et al., 2012), several studies have shown that multilingual children often have less developed second-language skills when starting school compared with their monolingual peers, and might be at risk of school failure (see the systematic meta-analytic review by Melby-Lervåg & Lervåg, 2014). Although monolingual and multilingual children seem to follow the same developmental path for vocabulary and reading (Karlsen et al., 2016; Schaars et al., 2019), delayed vocabulary skills for multilingual children in ECEC seem to predict poorer reading comprehension in their second language up to the third grade (Schaars et al., 2019) and fifth grade (Gunnerud et al., 2022). Because of the significant role of reading comprehension in school learning, these findings highlight the importance of ECEC teachers preparing all children for later academic learning (e.g., Duke & Pearson, 2002). In an overview of the current knowledge on ECEC's role in supporting all children's language development, Björk-Willén (2022) concluded that acquiring an academic language in ECEC increases both monolingual and multilingual children's chances of grasping future school teaching. Hence, how ECEC teachers support multilingual children's language skills is of great importance.

In the current study, we investigated Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish ECEC teachers' reported practices and attitudes toward read-alouds in classrooms with multilingual children. We addressed the following research questions:

1. Do ECEC teachers in classrooms with many multilingual children differ from ECEC teachers with fewer multilingual children in their classrooms regarding the frequency of read-alouds? If so, in what way?

¹ Please note that as the language situation in Finland is bilingual, in our survey we have defined multilingual children as having other languages in addition to the two majority languages (Finnish and Swedish).

2. Do ECEC teachers in classrooms with many multilingual children differ from ECEC teachers with fewer multilingual children in their classrooms regarding attitudes toward facilitating read-alouds? If so, in what way?
3. Do ECEC teachers in classrooms with many multilingual children differ from ECEC teachers with fewer multilingual children in their classrooms regarding dialogic reading style? If so, in what way?
4. To what extent do ECEC teachers with multilingual children in their classrooms report a different choice of book for read-alouds with multilingual children? If so, what characterizes the reasons for the choice?

Read-alouds as a literacy practice for multilingual children in ECEC

The quality of the language environment in ECEC classrooms has been found to predict monolingual Norwegian children's language skills (Hansen et al., 2023). Several studies have shown that read-aloud activities can provide rich language inputs for young children. Read-aloud frequency and print exposure through storybooks at home explained 12% of the variance in oral language skills of children aged 2–6 years (Mol et al., 2008). However, this meta-analysis included mainly monolingual children. Later systematic reviews included multilingual children and showed that reading aloud can benefit second-language learning, including explicit and implicit word learning (Fitton et al., 2018; Hur et al., 2020; Larson et al., 2020). Some of the included studies (Hur et al., 2020; Larson et al., 2020) used dialogic reading strategies or interactive reading styles (i.e., specific approaches to engage the children during the read-aloud). However, the positive effects on vocabulary knowledge from second-language interventions have shown a fade-out effect when the children's vocabulary skills were measured in the long term after the intervention program ended (see Rogde et al., 2016). In the current study, we did not investigate a read-aloud program; the ECEC teachers reported ordinary read-aloud activities as a social literacy practice in classrooms with multilingual children. Nonetheless, Rogde et al.'s (2016) findings highlight the importance of continuing regular read-alouds in ECEC to give optimal support to children's second-language development.

Some studies have incorporated home languages in read-aloud activities (Gort et al., 2012; Grøver et al., 2020). Gort et al. (2012) examined teachers' use of and the function of questions in read-aloud activities, including the nature and distribution of questions in the children's first language (Spanish) and second language (English) to support the children's meaning-making and multilingual development. The results showed several language-learning opportunities for the children. However, it was mainly in English read-alouds that the children were given the opportunity for expanded and complex language use and much less so in the Spanish read-aloud activities. There were several reasons for this. For example, the books had different contents, which could have limited the teachers' questions. In addition, the individual teacher's ability to pay attention to and ask questions about the book content

provided the conditions for complex language use. The researchers emphasized that the lack of opportunity to participate in equivalent extended dialogues in Spanish could have hindered the children's ability to develop their linguistic potential in both languages. Grøver et al. (2020) assessed the effects of a read-aloud intervention in 123 Norwegian ECEC classrooms. The intervention lasted one year and significantly impacted the children's second-language vocabulary and grammar skills. The authors stated that engaging children in conversations around books promoted their language growth. There was also improvement in the children's first-language vocabulary skills when words that appeared in books were highlighted for use at home and shared in the family's preferred language.

In a Swedish case study investigating ECEC teachers' support of language and literacy, read-alouds were one of several educational tools that teachers used to create enjoyable and socially comfortable experiences in ECEC; however, the teachers stated that there might be long periods when they did not read any books to the children (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021). Additionally, not all teachers prioritized children's literacy development. One teacher argued that multilingual children needed to develop their second language through read-alouds, whereas for children with Swedish as their first language, read-alouds were more about listening and being able to concentrate. It also appeared that the teachers sometimes replaced words in the books with simpler words if they believed they were too difficult for the multilingual children (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021).

ECEC teachers' scaffolding in read-aloud activities with multilingual children

ECEC teachers have a central role in planning and scaffolding read-aloud activities. Research with monolingual children has shown that it is not only the frequency of read-aloud activities that can facilitate children's language skills but also adults' reading style and use of questions during the reading (Blewitt et al., 2009; Horst et al., 2011; McKeown & Beck, 2006; Walsh et al., 2016). Blewitt et al. (2009) found that asking questions about the words in focus was important for learning. Furthermore, the use of scaffolding, which means starting with easier questions the first time a word appears in the read-aloud and gradually increasing the questions' difficulty, gave the children a better understanding of words' meanings. Walsh et al. (2016) found that high-demand questions stimulated better vocabulary learning. Low-demand questions could involve naming items, whereas high-demand questions could include inferences, explanations, or predictions from the child. Neither of these studies found an impact in regard to the question placement; that is, the questions could be asked during or after the reading. Furthermore, the questions used in read-aloud activities must be adjusted to fit within the children's proximal zone of development (Vygotsky, 1978); in other words, they should not be too difficult, as that could frustrate the children, or too easy, as that could make the children lose interest in the story (Walsh & Hodge, 2018). Additionally, repeated exposure to stories has

been linked to incidental language learning and narrative development for monolingual and multilingual speakers, which is another kind of scaffolding in children's language learning (Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Lever & Senechal, 2011). This means that teachers need to plan the read-aloud activity according to the progression from lower to higher-demand questions (Walsh & Hodge, 2018) to ensure that their read-aloud strategies meet the children's needs.

In a qualitative study (Palviainen et al., 2016), five ECEC teachers from Finland and Israel reflected on their multilingual practices. They were all concerned with using a flexible approach that included all languages, scaffolding contextual and linguistic support by using body language, verbalization of action, and sensitivity and adjustment to children's individual needs. Furthermore, teacher-child interaction with multilingual children was investigated in a systematic review including 31 studies (Langeloo et al., 2019). Although many of the interactions were comparable to the interactions teachers had with monolingual children, the results showed that teachers used different strategies for multilingual children. For example, they created a safe learning environment by following consistent classroom routines, using the home language and culture as emotional support. However, one of the reported strategies was the use of simplified language with short and less complex teacher-child interactions, indicating unequal learning opportunities for multilingual children. The authors argued that teachers must be aware of possible biases in interaction and not allow multilingual children to be consistently exposed to less challenging and engaging learning activities. The findings of Langeloo et al. (2019) align with a Danish ethnographic fieldwork study (Palludan, 2007) in which the ECEC teachers used a *teaching tone* with multilingual children and an *exchange tone* with monolingual children. The teaching tone included explanations and instructions while the children listened and followed the adult's guidance. In the exchange tone, both children and adults asked questions and gave answers, thus actively exchanging knowledge. However, the role of the teacher's input is unclear. A longitudinal study (Bowers & Vasilyeva, 2011) compared the effect of teachers' speech (amount, lexical richness, and structural complexity) on monolingual and multilingual four-year-olds over one school year. The vocabulary growth of the multilingual children was positively related to teachers' total number of words but negatively related to teachers' complexity in speech, arguing for structural simplicity in speech. Lexical richness was related to growth for monolingual children. Although this study was not large and there might be other important factors influencing vocabulary growth, it shows the complexity of the role of teacher input.

The current study

In the current study, we investigated Nordic ECEC teachers' reported practices and attitudes toward read-alouds in classrooms with multilingual children. The national language policy for ECEC is visible in the curricula. In Finland, Norway,

and Sweden, the curricula highlight support for children's second-language learning but also for children's first languages. For example, in the Norwegian curriculum, this is stated as "linguistic diversity becomes an enrichment for the entire group of children and encourages multilingual children to use their mother tongue" (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017, p. 24). In the Finnish curriculum, it is expressed as follows: "The language skills of foreign language speaking and plurilingual children, as well as the development of their linguistic and cultural identities and self-esteem, are supported in early childhood education and care" (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018, Chapter 4.6). In the Swedish curriculum, it is stated as follows: "Children with a mother tongue other than Swedish should be given the opportunity to develop both the Swedish language and their mother tongue" (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 9). Although the policy documents in the Nordic countries point to a multilingual perspective in which multilingualism is seen as a resource, there are critical issues, such as monolingual native-speaker norms and practical challenges, in supporting language diversity (Alstad & Sopanen, 2021; Palviainen & Curdt-Christiansen, 2020).

As multilingual classrooms are becoming the standard in Nordic countries, there is a need for more research on how ECEC teachers can support multilingual children's language development (see Hofslundsen et al., 2020; Palviainen et al., 2016). Because personal experience might influence teachers' practices and views in this area (see Borg, 2017), we wanted to investigate the possible differences in how teachers support multilingual children's language learning, depending on whether there are many or few multilingual children in the classrooms.

According to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, learning happens in the context of interaction and communication between children and adults. Language is thus seen as a cultural tool and a link to action (Vygotsky, 1978). Using language as a cultural tool for communication and social interaction allows people to express their experiences and share them with others. The sociocultural perspective implies values, knowledge, and various resources that are mediated by cultural tools, such as intellectual tools (psychological) and physical tools (artifacts). From this perspective, read-alouds in ECEC can be interpreted as a cultural and social practice in which language and text are mediated and appropriated.

The translanguaging turn (García & Wei, 2014) entails the view that languages are not separated systems but rather part of one unique repertoire from which individuals can choose suitable traits according to the context/situation. In practice, translanguaging means that several languages coexist with no hierarchy or borders between them (García & Wei, 2014). Translanguaging can be implemented using three functions: the symbolic function, whereby all languages are acknowledged; the scaffolding function, whereby all languages are acknowledged and used in daily routines; and the epistemological function, whereby all languages are used for content and language learning (Duarte, 2020).

Method

We developed a survey about teachers' read-aloud and early writing practices; however, only questions related to read-alouds are the focus of the current study. Quantitative analysis included the frequency of reading aloud and an evaluation of teachers' statements regarding this practice (RQ 1–4). Qualitative approaches included open-ended questions regarding the reasons for a particular book choice when reading aloud with multilingual children (RQ4). Together, these analyses provided a better understanding of teachers' practices.

Our study is part of a larger Nordic survey study about ECEC teachers' language and early literacy practices (Alatalo et al., 2023). The original sample consisted of 222 teachers, which represented 65% of those invited to participate. The survey was paper-based and distributed by student teachers who were in teacher training. No information that could identify the respondents or sensitive data were collected. According to the local ethics committee at one author's university, no further ethical review was required as the survey was filled out anonymously, and participation was highlighted as voluntary for student teachers and fully qualified teachers.

Each of the three Nordic countries has a national core curriculum for ECEC. ECEC is not mandatory, and the attendance rate varies from 92% of all children between one and five years of age in Norway (Statistics Norway, 2021) to 28% of children under the age of three and 68% between the age of 3 and 5 in Finland (OECD, 2016). The Nordic ECEC tradition is similar, for example, in the extensive use of informal learning, the emphasis on children's social development, play, and care, with children's participation as an important factor for learning (Broström et al., 2014).

Participants

In the current study, we only included participants who reported having multilingual children in their classrooms (defined as children with a first language other than Finnish or Swedish in Finland, Norwegian in Norway, or Swedish in Sweden). The participants included 170 teachers from Finland ($n = 38$), Norway ($n = 69$), and Sweden ($n = 63$). The teachers were asked to fill out the survey based on their current practice. This implies that questions one to seven in the survey probably reflect the teachers' ordinary read-aloud practice and not specifically their practice with multilingual children. However, as there were multilingual children in all these classrooms, we believe the teachers' ordinary practice matters. Almost all the participants (158 or 93%) had a bachelor's degree in ECEC. The teachers had a mean work experience of 15.12 years ($SD = 9.19$). However, the range of experience differed from having just started to work as a teacher (0 years) to 39 years of work experience.

Mixed-age groups are common in Nordic ECEC classrooms. In this study, there were 56 (33%) classrooms with children between one and three years of age, 15 (9%) with children between two and four years of age, 12 (7%) with children between one

and five years of age, and 87 (51%) with children between three and six years of age. The mean number of children in the classrooms with children under three years of age was 11.93 ($SD = 2.54$, range: 6–19). The mean number of children in classrooms with children over three years of age was 19.22 ($SD = 5.51$, range: 8–51). The mean number of multilingual children in the classrooms was 4.6 (27%; range: 1–30).

Materials and analysis

The following survey questions were used (given in Norwegian or Swedish):

1. How often do you normally read picture books with a group of children?
Never Once a week Twice a week 3 times a week Every day

Rate the following statements (from *not at all* to *somewhat true*, *true*, or *very true*):

2. It is necessary to have a goal with shared book reading.
3. The book needs to be at an appropriate level for the children.
4. The book needs to engage the children.
5. The children are allowed to express what they experience during reading.
6. The children are allowed to link the content of the text to their own experiences or other texts.
7. The children are allowed to participate and interpret what is happens in the text.

The first three statements were linked to attitudes toward facilitating read-alouds, whereas the last three statements were linked to attitudes toward dialogic reading style.

8. Is there a difference between the books you read to monolingual children and multilingual children? Yes No
9. If you answered “yes,” please explain your thinking around this: _____.

In the original version of the survey, we used the term *flerspråklige barn* in Norway and *flerspråkliga barn* in Finland and Sweden in question eight for “multilingual children.” The Finnish respondents worked in groups where Swedish was the main language of instruction. Although some children from Swedish–Finnish bilingual homes in Finland are indeed multilingual, the current study’s use of the expression “multilingual children” does not include children that speak both Swedish and Finnish at home, as they are both official languages in Finland. We made this distinction as children from Swedish–Finnish bilingual homes have two first languages and participate in early childhood education in (one of) their first language(s).

The quantitative analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 27, with descriptive analysis of frequency and *t*-tests for independent samples. To compare

the ECEC teachers who had different numbers of multilingual children, we grouped the teachers according to whether they had 30% or more multilingual children in the classroom. This cutoff point was above the national level of multilingual children in the three countries (range: 9–25%) and 3% above the mean number of multilingual children in our sample. Taken together, we assumed that the ECEC teachers’ role in classrooms with more than 30% multilingual children would be more challenging, with the increased linguistic diversity and variety of home languages that the teachers probably could not speak (cf. Langeloo et al., 2019).

The open-ended question was analyzed qualitatively (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). First, the qualitative data were read through several times. Second, the data were coded and condensed into categories. We started with an inductive content analysis, according to literacy practice, to investigate the reasons the teachers gave. Third, based on the categories, themes emerged. After this main analysis, we used a more deductive approach to test if the translanguaging concepts (symbolic, scaffolding, and epistemological; Duarte, 2020) would be found in the data. The qualitative analysis was double-checked by two of the authors, and any disagreement was solved through discussion.

Results

Descriptive statistics of the read-aloud frequency were used to answer Research Question 1 (Table 1). There was no significant difference between classrooms depending on the number of multilingual children in how often the ECEC teachers reported book reading ($t = 0.77, p = .44$). Most of the teachers reported reading aloud three times or more each week.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of ECEC teachers’ reported read-aloud frequency for a group of children

	Never	Once a week	Twice a week	3 times a week	Every day	Mean (SD); median
Total sample (<i>n</i> = 167)	1 (1%)	17 (10%)	21 (12%)	47 (28%)	81 (49%)	3.14 (1.03); 3
Teachers with less than 30% multilingual children (<i>n</i> = 112)	1 (1%)	12 (11%)	14 (13%)	34 (30%)	51 (45%)	3.09 (1.05); 3
Teachers with more than 30% multilingual children (<i>n</i> = 55)	–	5 (9%)	7 (13%)	13 (24%)	30 (54%)	3.24 (1); 4

Note: Responses from three participants are missing.

We used the following approach to investigate the second and third research questions. The first three statements were viewed theoretically as one construct to answer Research Question 2 about attitudes to facilitate read-alouds. The last three

statements were viewed theoretically as one construct to answer Research Question 3 about attitudes toward a dialogic reading style. When the internal reliability of the two constructs was analyzed empirically, the dialogic reading construct had a satisfying internal consistency of $\alpha = .71$, whereas the facilitating construct did not ($\alpha = .28$). Hence, for the facilitating read-alouds construct, the three items were analyzed separately (see Table 2).

Examining the second research question, the analysis showed that teachers with more than 30% multilingual children agreed more on the need for a goal with reading than the others, whereas teachers with less than 30% multilingual children agreed more on the level of the books needing to be appropriate. Examining the third research question, the analysis showed that some attitudes toward a dialogic reading style were more prominent among the teachers with more multilingual children, such as the importance of active children expressing themselves during reading, linking the children's experiences to the book, or participating and interpreting the content.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and t-tests of ECEC teachers' attitudes related to (a) facilitating read-alouds, and (b) dialogic reading styles, grouped according to whether there were under/over 30% multilingual children in the classroom

	<i>Teachers with less than 30% Mean (SD)</i>	<i>Teachers with over 30% Mean (SD)</i>	<i>t-test</i>	<i>d</i>
(a) Facilitating read-aloud items				
– It is necessary to have a goal with the read-aloud.	3.01 (0.77)	3.27 (0.73)	-2.12*	.76
– The book needs to be at an appropriate level for the children.	3.56 (0.58)	3.24 (0.84)	2.90**	.67
– The book needs to engage the children.	3.5 (0.58)	3.35 (0.82)	1.37	.67
(b) Dialogic reading style				
	10.06 (1.49)	10.69 (1.30)	-2.68**	1.43

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. d = Cohens d

To answer Research Question 4, we first investigated the frequency of ECEC teachers' reporting of reading different books to multilingual children and then qualitatively examined the reasons for this. Among the 170 ECEC teachers, 105 (62%) reported that they did not read different books with multilingual children than monolingual children, but 64 (38%) reported choosing different books. Among the 64 teachers who reported choosing different books, 51 explained why they did so. First, these explanations were read through and coded based on the content regarding literacy practice. This process ended in 18 codes. These codes were then discussed and sorted into eight categories and three themes: "reading style for the multilingual child," "beliefs about the multilingual child," and "translanguaging function" (see Table 3). The responses indicated a reading style for multilingual children consisting of materials such as simpler books with more illustrations, pointing to pictures, explaining, and talking instead of reading the text. One teacher wrote, "Multilingual children in

Table 3. Overview of themes with examples of responses from ECEC teachers

The reading style for the multilingual child	Views on read-alouds for multilingual children	Translanguaging function
<p>Simpler books</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Books with less text – We start at a lower level – Often more difficult books for monolingual children and simpler books for multilingual children <p>Lots of illustrations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Simple children’s books with everyday pictures – For multilingual children, I choose books with more pictures. – Multilingual children need less text and more pictures; Swedish children need more text and fewer pictures. 	<p>Individual adjustment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – A simpler language depending on how far the child has come in the Swedish language – It needs to be balanced for the children, to find a book that is challenging for those with strong language but easy enough for children with weaker language skills. <p>Create interest and motivation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – It depends on their understanding. I want it to be on a level that makes it enjoyable and rewarding for that child. – To give the child a positive experience of the read-aloud, the book should be engaging and the level of the language just above their capacity. 	<p>Symbolic function</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – We need to consider their first languages and what language skills they have. <p>Scaffolding function</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – We have books for different first languages with Swedish text underneath. – The text is written both in Swedish and in the children’s first languages, so in that way, there is no difference.
<p>Pointing and talking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – We talk about, point out, explain, and label pictures. – Adjust the reading to the child. Simplify, and talk about the content. – The difference is not the books but how I talk about and focus on the text. 	<p>Attitudes and ideas</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Many languages can affect language learning. Children with more languages often need to strengthen their languages. – Books for multilingual children need to be easier for them to understand. 	

this age group often have more difficulties in understanding the content, therefore we use short, simple content.” Another teacher wrote, “If there are children who only speak another language and I want to direct the read-aloud to them, I choose a simpler book, with more pictures and fewer words.” This implied a simplified approach to communicating around the book’s content. The ECEC teachers also made individual adjustments to meet children’s language skills in their second language. One teacher wrote, “If the book is too difficult, I will simplify the reading and talk about the book.” Some of the choices were reported as being made to encourage the child to feel more interested, motivated, and engaged during the read-aloud, thus following a theoretical view of learning in the child’s proximal zone. For example, one teacher wrote, “Children with language difficulties can lose interest if there is too much text they do not understand.” Another wrote, “I will choose a book depending on the child’s language skills and the possibility to challenge the child.” However, some of

the reasons given by the ECEC teachers indicated a view of multilingual children as being at risk, having weaker language skills, and needing to strengthen their language skills. For example, one teacher wrote, "It has to be simple sentences with few words and the pictures must be visible." Another teacher wrote, "The content must be easier to understand for multilingual children."

Using Duarte's (2020) concepts of translanguaging function in a deductive analysis, only three of the ECEC teachers' responses were interpreted as having such a function. Two teachers reported having books in the children's languages and the national language. These responses indicated a scaffolding function, that is, acknowledging the children's languages and being able to use or at least show the languages to the children.

Discussion

In this study, we aimed to investigate the reported practices and attitudes toward read-alouds among a group of Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish ECEC teachers with multilingual children in their classrooms. We examined the teachers' reported frequency of read-alouds, attitudes toward facilitating reading and dialogic reading style, and book choices when reading to multilingual children. First, we investigated whether the teachers' amount of read-alouds depended on the number of multilingual children in their classrooms. There was no significant difference between classrooms with fewer or many multilingual children in terms of how often the ECEC teachers reported read-alouds. Overall, most of the ECEC teachers reported having read-alouds three times a week or more. However, because all the ECEC teachers in this study had multilingual children in their classrooms and given the positive effect of read-alouds on language learning, it is debatable whether it is sufficient that only half of the teachers reported daily read-alouds given the importance of ECEC as a language-learning arena for multilingual children (see, e.g., Fitton et al., 2018; Grøver et al., 2020). Furthermore, we do not know if these read-alouds were something the children could freely choose to attend, which could make the actual frequency lower. Because language is appropriated through social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978), not only is the frequency important but also the quality of the interaction.

Investigating Research Question 2 about facilitating read-alouds, we found that the ECEC teachers rated the statement "the books need to engage the children" similarly regardless of their classroom diversity, signaling a similar attitude. However, the teachers did not agree on the necessity of having a goal with the reading or that the book had to be at an appropriate level, which was also found in another Swedish case study (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021). The attitude of the teachers with more multilingual children in their classrooms toward having a goal for the read-aloud was higher, but at the same time, they were less concerned with the book level. Perhaps the number of multilingual children could be a reason in itself; one could imagine that the goal of the read-aloud was, for example, connected to a certain theme that month (such as friendships or sustainability) and the books to read were therefore chosen regardless

of the appropriate second-language level of the group as the language diversity in the classroom could be broad.

This finding could also be related to the attitudes shown in Research Question 3, of a more dialogic reading style in the classroom with more multilingual children. It could be hard to find a storybook that would suit all the children. Hence, a dialogic reading style could be a useful approach to engage all the children and adjust the text and content to the group of children. In dialogic reading, the teachers ask questions, prompt, and use other strategies to actively engage the children during read-alouds (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Although open questions might be more inviting to answer, they often demand the ability to make inferences, which could be hard for children who have just begun to learn a new language. Grøver (2018) argued that when a child has limited knowledge of the second language, simple “yes” and “no” questions could be an appropriate way to engage the child in the dialogue around the book. By using simple questions at first, and then higher-demand questions later (Blewitt et al., 2009), teachers can scaffold the children’s second-language learning in the read-aloud.

The fourth research question provided nuanced information about book choice. Whereas more than half of the ECEC teachers used the same book for all children, 38% did not. The analysis of ECEC teachers’ reading styles and views showed differences in support of multilingual children’s language development. On the one hand, second-language support within the proximal zone of development is important. On the other hand, the differences in book choice could imply that some of the children are not given equal learning opportunities, as discussed in Langeloo et al.’s (2019) systematic review. The responses were characterized by a choice of simpler books with more illustrations and a reading style that consists of pointing to pictures, explaining, and talking, implying a simplified approach to communicating the book’s content. This finding is in line with an earlier Swedish case study (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021). Some of the responses suggested a teaching tone in the respondent’s reading practices, indicating perceptions that some multilingual children cannot manage challenging texts in books unless the ECEC teacher leads, talks, and simplifies the language. Gort et al. (2012) found that more word-focused questions were asked in second-language read-alouds. This could indicate an underlying monolingual norm, whereby the children are seen as less competent and not able to express themselves in the expected language, as some of the ECEC teachers expressed (see Table 3). However, this finding could also indicate a read-aloud practice supporting the children’s content understanding through pictures and simplifying the input, as the read-aloud was done in the children’s second language. This strategy is not without empirical support. Bowers and Vasilyeva (2011) found that whereas multilingual children’s vocabulary growth in the second language was positively related to the teachers’ use of many words, it was negatively related to the complexity of the teachers’ language use, such as the number of words per utterance. Larson et al. (2020) described explicit instruction on target words as a promising method for young children in learning a second language. Based on this, a simpler reading style with pointing and looking at pictures while talking

about target words could be a justified language input, especially in the first period of second-language learning. Unfortunately, we do not know the second-language skills of children in different classrooms and can only hypothesize about the reasons behind the teachers' responses.

Read-alouds as social practice in multilingual classrooms

Ensuring social practice for multilingual children in ECEC is not an easy task for teachers. It has been estimated that 150–300 different languages are used in the Nordic countries (Palviainen & Curdt-Christiansen, 2020), and although the ECEC teachers might be multilingual themselves, it is unlikely that they master all the children's first languages. A few of the responses indicated a symbolic or scaffolding translanguaging function of the read-aloud, such as acknowledging the children's identity by having storybooks in different languages. It is probably the case in this study, as in previous studies, that ECEC teachers experience the need to balance two competing norms when including multilingual children in everyday language practice (Harju & Åkerblom, 2020; Sjöberg & Eneflo, 2019). For example, when teachers actively encourage children to speak their second language, there is a risk that their first language will become invisible (Puskás & Björk-Willén, 2017). The second language is the common language, the target language, and the language the teachers know, which makes it a language with high status. On the one hand, the teachers see themselves as mediators of the majority language and culture, but on the other hand, they are expected to emphasize multilingualism and multiculturalism, often with limited resources in the knowledge of other languages and in materials to use.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size was small and not representative of each of the three countries. Second, we only collected survey data; the qualitative data came from one open-ended question. Hence, we only know what the ECEC teachers report that they do. Third, the participants were divided into two groups based on a cutoff point of 30% multilingual children in the classroom. We used this cutoff to explore differences in the informants' responses; however, their responses might have been affected by earlier work experiences outside the present situation. The results must be interpreted causally. Fourth, we used a 4-point Likert scale to eliminate the misuse of the midpoint, but this could have led to bias as the participants were forced to take a side (Chyung et al., 2017). However, there was an opportunity to comment on the responses, which some of the respondents did.

Conclusions and implications for practice

We examined the frequency of read-alouds, teachers' attitudes toward read-alouds, and teachers' book choices when reading to multilingual children. Multilingual

classrooms may challenge ECEC teachers to rethink their monolingual pedagogical strategies (Cummins, 2007; Portolés & Martí, 2020). Through participation in literacy practices such as read-alouds, children can express what they experience and be socialized into a common culture through cultural tools such as multilingual texts and various languages. Thus, the teacher's role is to initiate and encourage children within their proximal development zone (Vygotsky, 1978). This means that children carry out tasks and perform academically at a higher level than they would be capable of without the teacher's scaffolding. An optimal scaffolding approach in read-alouds would imply that the ECEC teachers know the type of questions to ask (Walsh et al., 2016) to make sure the read-aloud fits within the child's proximal zone of development (Vygotsky, 1978). On the positive side, in our study, there seemed to be the same amount of read-alouds in ECEC with many or fewer multilingual children, and the attitudes revealed a strong belief in the children's active learning using a dialogic reading style. Thirty-eight percent of the ECEC teachers did not read the same book to multilingual children as they would to monolingual children. The reasons for this revealed a view of multilingual children as at risk and in need of simpler books, which could be appropriate if the child had limited second-language skills but could also imply a devaluation of multilingual children's previous literacy practices, for example, at home. The challenge for teachers in how to modify their language practices to fit the multilingual children's zone of development has also been found in other studies (Puskás, 2017).

This study has three implications for practice and research. First, teachers should aim to include all children in read-alouds where they use an exchange tone to prepare them for later academic learning. ECEC teachers have an important role in preparing all children for school (e.g., Duke & Pearson, 2002), including teaching the second language and preparing for the later academic language used in school. Future research should include observational data to investigate what is done in read-alouds with multilingual children, and should possibly also explore correlations between children's language skills and teachers' attitudes. Second, by including children's first languages in the ECEC text environment and books, the teacher can emphasize the importance of the first language, communicating that it matters and recognizing that the ECEC includes multilingual children (Cummins, 2021). Third, more critical awareness of multilingualism and language practice in multilingual classrooms, language as power, and analysis of language as a problem or a resource is warranted also in ECEC teacher education (see Alstad & Söpanen, 2021).

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