

# Multilingualism and Multiculturalism in the Swedish-Medium Primary School Classroom in Finland - Some Teacher Views

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## **Abstract**

Finnish society, including the Swedish-medium school, has traditionally been considered linguistically and culturally homogeneous. During the last twenty years there has been a distinct development towards increasingly heterogeneous municipalities and schools, but with great local variations. The aim of his article is to present some teacher perspectives on this development towards linguistically and culturally more heterogeneous primary school classrooms, what kind of new challenges teachers experience and what tools they express the need for. The data consist of qualitative interviews and focus discussions with teachers and headmasters in Swedish-medium classrooms and CLIL classrooms, representing both urban and rural settings. The results show some variation concerning the types of multilingualism evident in different contexts and the views on multilingualism and multiculturalism. A number of challenges and needed tools are identified. These call for a professional, facilitating teacher role, as well as for complex societal networks.


**Keywords:** Swedish-Medium, Primary school, Linguistic minorities, Multilingual, Multicultural.

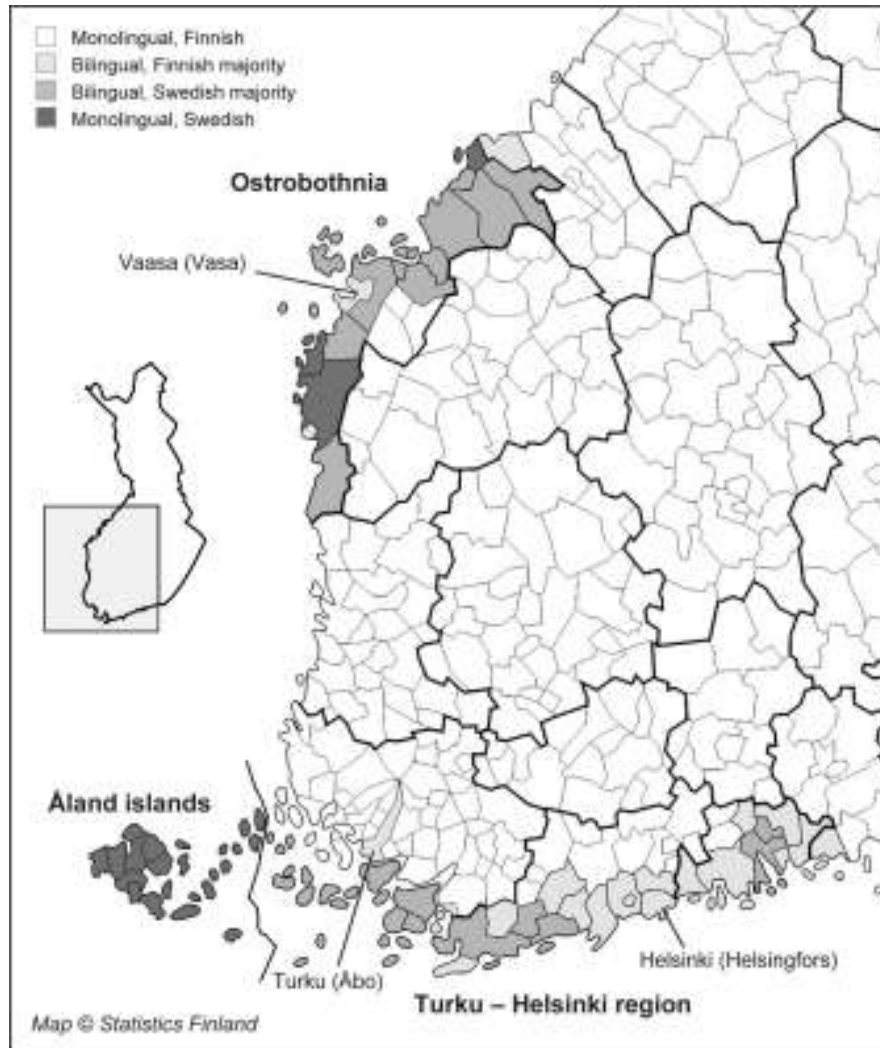
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## **Introduction**

Finland is one of the three countries in Europe that are constitutionally bi- or multilingual, that is where this status is regulated by basic law. This has been made to ensure the Swedish-speaking language minority (5.4% in 2012, Statistics Finland) the same rights as the Finnish-speaking majority. Mainly because of the historical background to Finland's bilingual status (see Sjöholm, 2004; McRae, 1997) the country has chosen to establish every individual's right to use her/his mother tongue in all dealings with national and local authorities by law, rather than applying a certain language status to a specific area. The Swedish-speaking population in Finland is mostly located in the darker areas indicated in Figure 1 below.

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*Figure 1. The mono/bilingual status of municipalities in the south-western parts of Finland (Sjöholm, 2004, p. 640).*

Even though Finland is an officially bilingual country as described above, Finnish society has paradoxically been regarded as linguistically homogeneous. The cultural aspect has been even less addressed. Some attempts have been made to identify the culturally unifying elements of Swedish-speaking Finns (e.g. Heikkilä, 2011), but these have generally failed to identify a unified cultural profile. Considering the area and different urban-rural conditions prevailing in the Swedish-speaking areas, that is hardly surprising. There are however some traditional events, where cultural difference between the language groups is pronounced, but otherwise cultural differences between speakers of Finnish and speakers of Swedish are rarely openly discussed or problematized in society. As a consequence, stereotypical ideas especially about the smaller language group still seem to thrive (cf. Smeds, 2004)

The preconception of Finland as monolingual and monocultural, applies to the educational context as well, probably because there are different schools for Finnish- and Swedish-speaking children. In international comparison, one can still claim that this is the case in many Finnish municipalities, but recently there has been a noticeable increase in ethnic and linguistic variation among inhabitants in several municipalities and hence also in the local schools.

The aim of this article is to present some teacher views on multilingualism and multiculturalism in the classroom and to discuss the challenges they experience and tools they express the need for. For the limited scope of this article qualitative interview and focus group data from two different studies are used to explore the aim of the study. The data have been gathered from teachers active in Swedish-medium comprehensive schools in Finland, in municipalities where it is known that there are some different languages and cultures represented. To make the train of thought easier to follow some general linguistic, educational issues, and use of terminology related to the Finnish context are briefly outlined below, followed by a presentation of some of the key demands identified on teachers in Finland.

#### *The Finnish context*

According to the most recently published statistics on the residents in Finland (Statistics Finland, 31.12.2012) the most frequently used mother tongues are Finnish (89.68%), Swedish (5.36%), Russian (1.15%), and Saami-languages (0.04%). Numerous other languages are spoken by the remaining 3.77%. The most frequent foreign residents come from Estonia, Russia, Sweden, Somalia, and China. Hence, the proportion of speakers of foreign languages with 4.9% as the national mean is still very low in comparison to most other countries, but there are remarkable local and regional variations. For instance in the municipalities in the Helsinki region the proportion of speakers of foreign languages is over 10 % (Mattila & Björklund, 2013). The proportion of speakers of other languages than Finnish or Swedish may rise to similar proportions also in some small rural municipalities, such as Närpes, a small rural municipality along the west coast. Interestingly enough, Teuva, the rural neighbor municipality to the east of Närpes, reports a proportion of speakers of other languages under 1 % (Mattila & Björklund, 2013, p. 43).

Regarding education, parallel education systems have been established for speakers of Finnish and Swedish. Both systems are governed by the same laws and national curricular frameworks and will be briefly presented below. Generally speaking, the Finnish education system consists of a nine-year comprehensive school, most often starting the year when the child turns 7 years old. There is no longer any official division into primary level (grades 1-6) and lower secondary level (grades 7-9), still these levels are often taught in different facilities, especially in rural areas. There is also a difference in the type of teachers engaged at the different levels. Grades 1-6 are generally taught by teachers with a general educational profile, while grades 7-9 are taught by subject specialist teachers. In order to qualify as teacher at any level of comprehensive education or secondary education in Finland one has to have a Masters' degree either in education or in a specific subject.

Children also have the right to one year of pre-school education. This consists of preparatory education provided by the municipality before the actual start of comprehensive school. In Finland the municipality is responsible for arranging comprehensive education for all children, and the children are required to acquire skills in accordance with the curricular guidelines. This requirement expires the year the child turns 17 (Lag om grundläggande utbildning, 21.8.1998). However, neither pre-school nor comprehensive school are obligatory at present. Parents are free to choose to teach their children themselves, but once families choose to have their children attend comprehensive education, children are, of course, also expected to attend. The number of private schools in Finland is low in comparison with, for instance to the number of private schools in Sweden. The existing private schools are most often located in urban areas and have been founded to cater for the needs of families who want a specific educational profile (e.g. Rudolf Steiner school), language profile (e.g.

the German school), or confessional profile (e.g. Christian school). Regardless of profile, the private schools have to fulfill the requirements stated in the present national core curriculum for comprehensive education (NCC, 2004).

After the completion of comprehensive education children can choose to apply for secondary education. Secondary education is divided into two different branches, a general civics branch primarily preparing for tertiary level studies (Swe. Gymnasium) and a more specialised and practical vocational branch (Swe. Yrkesutbildning). Within both branches, the different programmes usually last for three years. It is also possible to combine Gymnasium education with Yrkesutbildning, in some cases.

Tertiary level education is offered at universities and polytechnic institutions and is open for students who have successfully completed secondary education. The educational system is regulated by national laws, regulations and national curricular frameworks.

In accordance with the NCC (2004) and existing legislation, pupils in the Finnish comprehensive school are required to study their mother tongue and literature. The present curriculum recognises Finnish, Swedish, Saami, and Sign language as mother tongues in which teaching is to be arranged within the general frames of funding for the schools. Teaching in Romany and immigrant home-languages are separately funded and regarded as additional subjects. Studies in the mother tongues of minority language pupils are thus provided if and to the extent the local municipality can afford it.

Finnish as second national language (SNL) is usually studied from grade 3 in the Swedish-medium schools, whereas Swedish as a SNL is usually studied as so called B-language from grade 7 in the Finnish-medium schools. Most pupils in Swedish-medium schools study two A-languages, which means that the B-language is replaced by the optional A-language in lower secondary school grades 7-9. In addition to this, optional foreign language studies can be chosen in lower secondary. The national language programme is currently under revision and a new national curriculum is expected to be passed in 2016.

In 1998, only 2.1% of the pupils enrolled in Swedish-medium primary schools in Finland had a mother tongue other than Swedish or Finnish. Less than half of the pupils (40.9%) reported that they came from standard Swedish homes, 21.8% reported Swedish dialectal background, 30.3% of them came from bilingual (Swe-Fi) homes, and 4.9% from monolingual Finnish-speaking homes (Sjöholm & Östern, 2007, p.201). The proportion of pupils with a mother tongue other than Swedish or Finnish was very low, but still the statistics as a whole indicate that there was some linguistic heterogeneity in the Swedish-medium comprehensive school in Finland.

During the last decade there has been a slow increase in the overall percentage of minority language pupils, but the most prominent trend in both the Swedish and Finnish-medium schools is that there are great local variations. In some schools over half of the pupils may have a minority language background, whereas another school within the same municipality may have less than 1% (cf. Kuusela et.al, 2008). Regardless of these variations future linguistic and cultural variation can be expected to grow within the Finland-Swedish educational context.

In this article, the term linguistic (and cultural) heterogeneity is used to encompass all linguistic (and cultural) variation in the classroom, including both language and dialect variants. The other national language, in this case the national majority language Finnish, is a tricky case, since it actually functions as a minority language in a few local Swedish-speaking contexts. Hence, the concept minority language is used in

a broad sense, including all language backgrounds other than the school language (in this case Swedish/Swedish and English). In other words, the concept includes both so called national minority languages (such as Saami and Romany) and languages that more recently have become a part of Finnish society e.g. through immigration (such as Somali, Vietnamese, Baltic languages, Serbo-Croatian languages). When the concept immigrant language is used, it strictly refers to a language of recent immigration. The key concepts multilingual and multicultural are broadly defined as the presence of more than two languages and more than two cultural perspectives in a given context. The terms thus refer to a given situation or context, but can also include individuals. When the user of several languages is referred to specifically, the term plurilingual is used. For the limited scope of this article the choice has been made to present data from teachers active in Swedish-medium schools in Finland, in municipalities where it is known that there are some different languages and cultures represented. In the following section a perspective of the future demands on the Teachers in the schools in Finland is presented.

#### *Demands on the teacher*

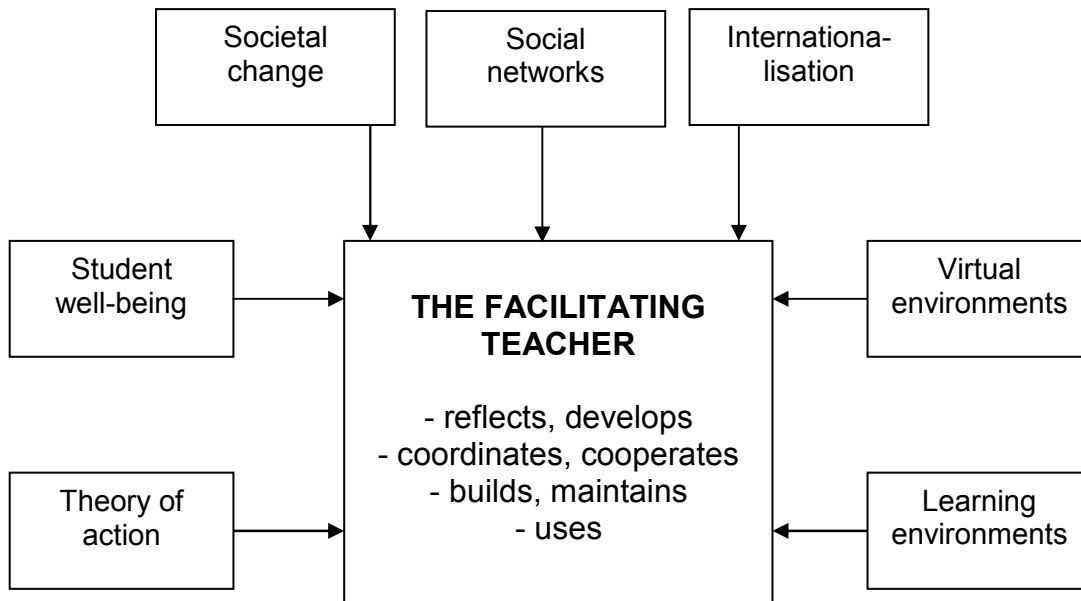
What the future of teacher education in Finland will look like remains yet to be seen, but there seems to be forces working in opposite directions (cf. Nyman & Uljens, March 2013). Many official documents and reports (both national and international) proclaim the need for professional teachers capable of independent and reflective development in a changing world. On the other hand, there are also official national directives and commercially produced teaching materials that seem to work in the opposite direction as noted by e.g. Kohonen (2006b, p. 2). Also elsewhere in the world similar trends of taking authority from teachers and reducing them to the role of executing ready-made plans have been noted (Hargreaves, 1994, pp. 117-118). In 2006 also Sjöberg and Hansén (p. 10) recognised the difficulty of foretelling what the future will bring, but still claimed that the major trends seem to be pointing towards the ideal of a professional teacher, as defined above. From her Norwegian perspective Eriksen (2006, p. 33) states that we are currently living in an era of reforms that places the future teachers in our schools in a crucial and very demanding position.

National reports on the need for teacher education and in-service courses for teachers in Finland recognise a number of remarkable changes in the traditional role of teachers and their working environment. The major issues mentioned in the final report of the OPEPRO project (Luukkainen, 2000b, pp. 230-239; Luukkainen, 2000a, pp. 26-36) concerning the changes in the everyday work of teachers bring forward a complex picture of the teacher as an active agent in relation to a wide range of factors, which are indicated in Figure 3 below:

In Luukkainen's summary (2000a) of the national project several new demands on teachers emerge. Several of these issues are also evident in the more recent national strategy report on teacher education in 2020 (Niemi & Rähkä, 2007). The teacher of the future is described as a reflective practitioner, who constantly develops the practical theory on the basis of which successful educational decisions are made. This action oriented theory needs to be based upon the teacher's beliefs about the central concepts: human beings, knowledge, and learning.

The teacher is also described as a coordinator of cooperation with other experts and a spokesman for her/his learners, meaning that - contrary to the traditional teaching-centred role of the teacher - it is her/his responsibility to consider the well-being of her/his pupils and support their favourable development. All issues are not to be solved by the teacher her/himself, but the teacher is responsible for pointing out and perhaps

even prompting her/his pupils in the right direction, to the right authorities (e.g. medical experts, social-welfare agencies, the police).



*Figure 2. The demands on future teachers as active agents on the basis of Luukkainen (2000b), taken from Björklund 2008, p. 35.*

Hence, the teacher is seen as an active agent in a constantly changing society, with the ability to develop her/his own profession in accordance with the general directions of societal change, but also as a professional with the will and capacity to take part in societal discussions in order to actively affect the direction of development. Therefore, knowledge about societal mechanisms and democratic methods of influence are important means of developing the whole school community.

To make this possible the teacher also needs to become a creator/initiator and maintainer of personal relationships and social networks of a wide variety. The teacher's work is mainly regarded as a "work with human relations, where relational competence, social- and communication skills are emphasised" (Luukkainen, 2000b, p. 236, my translation) in order to manage complex issues related to the social environment, students' learning difficulties, cultural heterogeneity, and guidance of students.

In relation to the teaching of groups of pupils with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds Coelho (2012, pp. xv-xvi) lists concrete challenges related to welcoming and integrating newcomers whenever they may arrive during the year, how to adapt the curriculum and provide differentiated instruction for pupils at different levels of language proficiency, how to incorporate linguistic and cultural diversity into the curriculum and learning environment, and how to involve the parents. She recognises the fact that many teachers have not received specific pre-service training to meet these challenges, but comes to the same conclusion as Luukkainen regarding the responsibilities of the teachers, namely, to facilitate the life-long learning paths of each individual pupil.

It is interesting to note how strongly Coelho (2012) promotes the creation of multilingual school and classroom environments, in order support the linguistic development and identity formation of children with a minority language background. She refers to a study by Collier & Thomas showing that bilingual enrichment

programmes supported the learning of minority language students. Hence, different types of language and content integrated approaches (e.g. CLIL, partial immersion) might be of use in the linguistically heterogeneous classrooms. This might call for a more open approach to the presence of other languages than the predominant language of teaching also in the mainstream Swedish-medium schools in Finland, and would presuppose some methodological awareness and general knowledge about language learning on the part of all teachers, as a basis for their theory of action.

Coelho (2012) also points out the importance of providing minority language students with ample and scaffolded opportunities to communicate orally and in writing across the curriculum, something which is also stressed in a recent report focussing on developing the focus on language in the Swedish-medium schools in Finland (Slotte-Lüttge & Forsman, 2013). Finally, Coelho, stresses the importance of reaching out to and engaging the parents of the minority language pupils in the education of their children. This might be unexpected, depending on the cultural background they represent. The importance of making use of professional translators is highlighted in relation to communication with the parents.

In this connection it also becomes necessary to see the teacher as an effective utiliser of different learning environments in- and outside school. The teacher is expected to act in such a way that the school atmosphere enhances students' enterprising initiatives. The teacher's role as a facilitator of pupils' learning in virtual learning environments receives special attention. It is the responsibility of the teacher to critically analyse the educational value of the work done in such environments and also to cater for the pupils' process of socialisation.

The teacher is also seen as a facilitator of the pupils' process of internationalisation. This presupposes a sufficient communicative competence in several languages, familiarity with the relevant cultures, and skills in project administration. Explicit attention is not given to the multicultural environment in the classroom as a potential resource in fostering pupils' towards internationalisation and intercultural competence. In my opinion, the skill to create these potentially fruitful arenas for exchange within the limits of the own classroom or school might be just as demanding on the teacher as managing international projects.

The factors mentioned above are general guidelines for teachers and teacher educators for successful development of the Finnish educational system for future needs. One might react to the fact that actual subject knowledge is not emphasised. That is related to the fact that subject knowledge is one of the key components of a modernist teacher role, whereas the discussion above focusses on the demands on the teacher in a post-modern society. Within this perspective other components of teachers' competences emerge. Rather similar suggestions are brought forward by Andersson (2002, p. 73), who argues for a thorough reform of the education system in Sweden. He would like so called educational centres (Sw. bildningscentrum) to be established. In these educational institutions of the future Andersson wants teachers to take on a much wider perspective of roles namely, as stimulators, supervisors, mentors, and teachers. Also Eriksen (2006, p. 40) mentions similar trends in official Norwegian guidelines. The brief outline given above clearly shows that the major Western trends in educational change seem to be quite similar in Finland. One can also note a similar risk for contradictory views between some of the demands mentioned both at a global level and a national level. It is, for instance, possible to see a contradiction in the emphasis on increased use of new mass and distance technologies and the need for individualisation and differentiation, or in the stressed focus on the individual learner and the need for a more developed intercultural

competence. The ability to decipher official documents and apply the guidelines in multilingual and multicultural classrooms, thus seems to call for professional teachers, aware of the changes in society and committed to facilitating the learning-paths of their pupils.

### **Method**

The aim of this article is to present some teacher views on multilingualism and multiculturalism in the primary school classroom and to discuss the challenges they experience and tools they express the need for. The research approach is qualitative phenomenological and the data consist of qualitative semi-structured interviews and focus discussions conducted within two different projects, with teachers and headmasters in regular Swedish-medium classrooms and CLIL (for definition see Marsh, Mehisto & Frigols, 2008) classrooms, representing both urban and rural settings. Thus the ambition with the sample is to present a satisfactory variation of teachers with at least some experience of multilingual and multicultural primary school classrooms, in order to provide a varied view of the phenomenon and challenges related to it. The sample has thus not been chosen in order to be fully representative of the whole population of teachers in Swedish-medium schools in Finland.

As indicated above, the data has been drawn from two different studies namely, a small longitudinal case study called CLIL i Svenskfinland (approx. CLIL in the Swedish-speaking parts of Finland) and an on-going case study called Vem integreras och på vilka villkor (VI VILL, approx. Who is integrated and on what conditions). Both studies are qualitative, longitudinal and involve teachers working with pupils in grades 1-6. The studies also share the feature that they are not only surveys, but also contain components of action-oriented developmental work. The interviews and focus discussions presented in this article consist of approximately 17 hours of empirical data.

The total number of respondents is 10, four female and six male. This can be seen as a rather good balance, but is not representative of the gender distribution in grade 1-6 schools in Finland, where females are commonly in majority. The respondents are all qualified teachers with a teaching experience ranging from 4 to almost 40 years and at least some experience of multilingual and multicultural groups of pupils, since their teaching contexts are situated in one urban and one rural municipality in the Swedish-speaking parts of western Finland with a substantial proportion (approx. 10%) of inhabitants with mother tongues other than Swedish or Finnish. The immigrant languages represented in the different schools vary, but include e.g. Vietnamese, Serbo-Croatian language varieties, Russian, English, Chinese, and a variety of less frequent languages. Because of the small number of participants, more detailed information about the individual respondents cannot be shared for research ethical reasons. Taking into account the teaching contexts and background features of the respondents, the sample can be regarded as valid in relation to the aim and research questions of the present study. The fact that the data has been gathered within two different research projects could be seen as a potential problem in terms of reliability. However, precaution has been taken to minimize any possible bias resulting from the fact that the data has been gathered in slightly different ways (the CLIL- data through focus group discussions, VI VILL-data through individual interviews) and within studies with slightly different foci.

The research questions guiding the process of analysis were formulated as follows:

- 1) What views of the multilingual and multicultural classroom emerge in the data?
- 2) What challenges are explicitly mentioned?



### 3) What tools do the teachers express the need for?

In the process of content analysis the data has been categorised in accordance with the three research questions, and these three categories have then been analysed further in order to find possible qualitative differences in the perspectives represented in the data. In that respect the procedures of analysis can be regarded as data-driven at the more detailed level. In this process - moving from broad categories to more specific ones - the transcripts of interviews and focus discussions have been used as the main source of data. In cases where the raw transcripts have been ambiguous or insufficient the original recorded versions of the interviews have been used during the process of analysis, to add a further dimension of authenticity.

## Results

In this section the results will be presented in the order provided by the research questions, starting with the views brought forward of the multilingual and multicultural classroom.

### *Views of the multilingual and multicultural classroom*

The teachers describe the linguistic landscape of their school and classroom/s in concrete terms. All of the respondents work in school environments that can be described as multilingual and multicultural at least to some extent, but in their descriptions both similar and slightly different views/perspectives on the multilingual and multicultural classroom emerge. Quite rich descriptions of the presence of different language backgrounds and learning paths are given, whereas the multicultural aspects receive less spontaneous attention. In this presentation, both perspectives are included in the categorisation made. The degree of multilingualism described in the data can be classified into three qualitatively different categories:

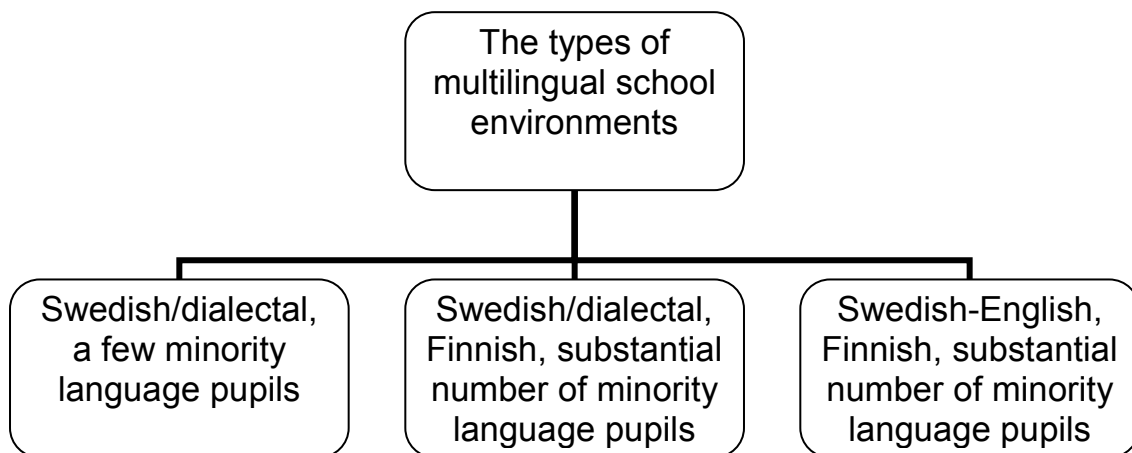
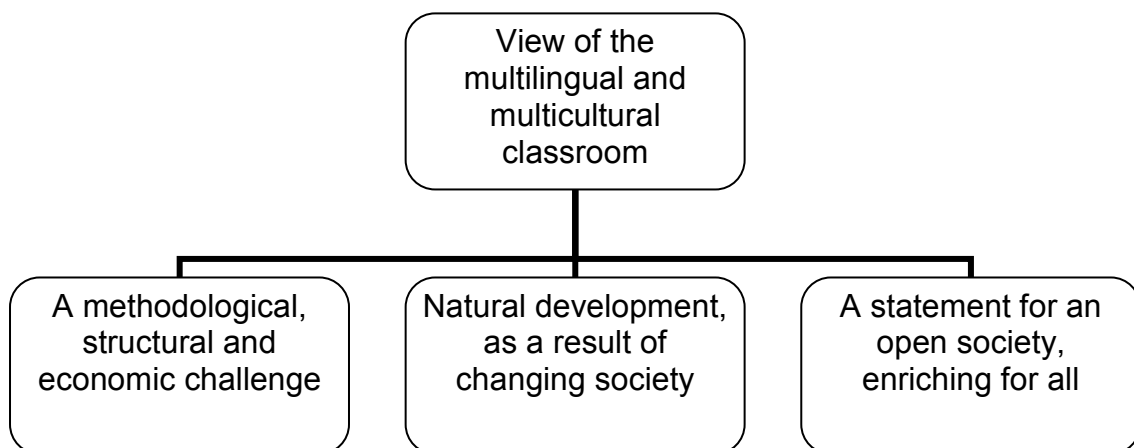


Figure 3. *The types of multilingual school environments described.*

Figure 3 illustrates the different types of multilingualism described in the classrooms of the teachers participating in this study. Even though the results are not generalizable, it is interesting to note that there is no description of a classroom where there would be a vast majority of minority languages. The most consciously multilingual classroom described is the bilingual education programme, where pupils come from numerous different language backgrounds, even though the majority usually represent a Swedish/bilingual Swedish-Finnish background. Within this programme, conscious efforts are made to support a multilingual environment and the pupils' possibilities to develop receptive and productive skills in both languages of teaching as well as

sensitivity towards numerous different languages (but not necessarily the pupils' mother tongues).

In the other categories the presence of the local Swedish dialect as the mother tongue of a majority of the students is stressed. This is by no means representative of Swedish-medium schools in Finland, but it can be compared to the fact that a substantial proportion of the pupils in the Swedish-medium school in Finland are bilingual Swedish-Finnish. In this context, however, the majority language Finnish exists only as a marginal minority language. In addition to this, there is either a substantial proportion (30-50%) of minority language pupils, or just a few, most often representing different languages.



*Figure 4. Views of the multilingual and multicultural classroom.*

The data contains several different and varied views on the multilingual and multicultural classroom. These can be categorised into three qualitatively different perspectives. It ought to be pointed out that individual teachers in this study most often are represented within several perspectives.

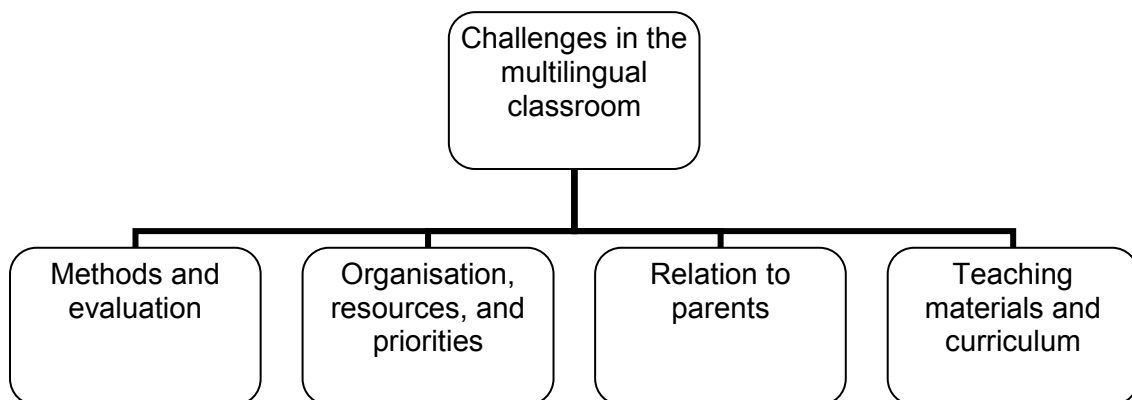
The first, and most frequently represented, perspective deals with the multilingual classroom as an arena of new linguistically and/or culturally related challenges for the teacher. The variations in language skills and cultural backgrounds are described both as didactic/methodological and organisational challenges. These challenges will be discussed in more detail under the second research question. However, what ought to be mentioned here, is that the attitudes towards these challenges tend to differ somewhat. Some statements signal adaptation and even resignation for the fact that there are challenges like this to be dealt with, while other respondents stress the fact that these new challenges are rewarding, i.e. provide a necessary incentive to develop one's own methodological repertoire and/or view of the teaching activity. Also the national curricular guidelines are mentioned as a challenge. It is obvious that some teachers in multilingual and multicultural classrooms do not find that the curricular guidelines have been adapted to the growing linguistic and cultural heterogeneity they find themselves in.

The second perspective emerging in the data brings forward the increasing heterogeneity of the classroom as a natural development, closely related to the ongoing changes in the surrounding community. Within this perspective, teachers express that multilingualism is a natural part of life for a majority of the world's population, and hence ought to be regarded as something natural. In a natural multilingual situation, the language awareness and interest in different languages of the pupils has a chance to

develop. This is also the politically correct opinion, in the sense that the national curricular framework brings forth a view of multilingualism as natural and of growing plurilingualism as an encouraged development. However, neither the national curricular guidelines, nor the teachers are consistent in stressing, or even mentioning, the possible benefits to be drawn from the different languages and cultures represented in the classroom.

Finally, the third perspective present in the data is related to the multilingual classroom as a deliberate political statement in favour of an open and tolerant society, embracing multilingualism and multiculturalism. Within this perspective, statements concerned with plurilingualism as an asset are represented, as well as the few statements where it is clearly indicated that the different languages and cultural backgrounds represented in the classroom are to be used in order to develop the language awareness, curiosity and sensitivity of all pupils. In a multilingual classroom the pupils have the opportunity to develop these skills to a greater extent than within a monolingual classroom. The crucial importance of creating and maintaining openness towards different perspectives is stressed within this category, as well as a strong ethos towards one's own profession: "What we are keeping busy with is really important!" Furthermore, this perspective also includes a few statements about the multilingual classroom as a conscious statement for an open society, as opposed to the monolingual ideal for school and society promoted by neo-nationalist movements. As examples of this neo-nationalistic trend both the programme of the so called True Finnish party in Finland and the rather recent regulations towards monolingualism in the Ukraine were mentioned by the respondents.

#### *Current challenges in the multilingual and multicultural classroom*



*Figure 5. Challenges in the multilingual classroom*

As indicated above, the challenges encompass numerous different concrete areas in the classroom, the school and national educational domains. In this presentation, they have been categorised into four rather wide categories ranging from the methodology of the multilingual classroom to the national frameworks for education, such as teaching materials and curricula.

The methodological challenges mentioned, are most commonly related to finding the right – both supporting and challenging – language level in different subjects and the kind of activities that would help students develop both receptive and productive language skills in the school language/s. Oral communication skills are often mentioned within this perspective. In terms of understanding, the need to simplify and provide synonyms is mentioned. Some teachers mention the frequent migration patterns among some groups of minority language students: "If they just stay for a

couple of years, how much time should we invest in teaching them Swedish?”. Another challenging area is evaluation, where it is regarded as tricky to decide when to evaluate both language and content and how to arrange evaluation of one or the other. The statements within this category clearly indicated how dependent formal education is on the students’ receptive and productive skills in the language/languages of instruction and the respondents show awareness of the fact that this is a challenge and responsibility shared by all teachers.

Another area of challenges in the multilingual classroom is related to the actual organisation of the schedule and groups of pupils in order to maximize flexibility and use of economic resources. Most teachers in this study stress the importance of teaching in Swedish as a second language (SSL), but they also want to maximise pupils’ opportunities to participate in regular Swedish as a mother tongue classes. Furthermore, in times of strict budget frames for the educational sector, teachers express the wish to prioritize SSL and mother tongue classes for minority language pupils in favour of teaching in their different religions, which is given priority in legislation. The municipality is required to organise teaching in the pupils’ religion if there are a minimum of three pupils representing that faith in the municipal schools. This is mentioned both as a methodological challenge and as a “sinkhole” of resources, since these often extremely small groups eat a lot of the common resources for education.

Communication and collaboration with parents is another recognised area of challenges in the multilingual and multicultural classroom. This is perhaps the area where the different cultural perspectives are expressed most clearly. The first barrier in the communication with parents is the linguistic. Even within the Swedish-speaking community, the choice of standard or dialect variants in communication with the parents is regarded as a marker of whether relations are to be close or more distanced. With that situation as a starting point, it is obvious that building relations to parents where there is no shared code of communication, or communication has to take place in a language both parties do not master fully, may feel daunting at times. Interpreters are used to some extent, but they are not always available when less common minority languages are concerned. Also, finding the balance between using a shared SL or letting parents practice their limited Swedish skills is considered as challenging, since the communication with parents is most often concerned with meaningful messages and it is critical that the parents understand “not only the words at a superficial level, but also the true meaning of the message”. Here, it is clear that the respondents are referring to another possible barrier in communication with the parents, namely a cultural. For instance in an expression like “tomorrow we go swimming”, numerous messages are implicitly encoded, e.g. towel and swimming gear need to be taken along to school, arrival on time is essential, not to miss the bus to the swimming hall, a cap might be needed if it is cold outside etc. The teachers admit to not always being aware of all the dimensions taken for granted in messages of this kind, where even local situated knowledge is sometimes taken for granted. The same goes for communication and understanding what might be implicitly implied by the parents, regarding e.g. traditions. Teachers mention the frustration with children who are absent without previous notice, for e.g. religious holidays, that the school is not aware of, and that are not recognised as holidays in the municipality. In communication with majority language students on the other hand, there is sometimes a challenge in balancing the attitudes and ideas expressed in untrue statements such as “Why do the immigrant pupils get all the extra resources?”.

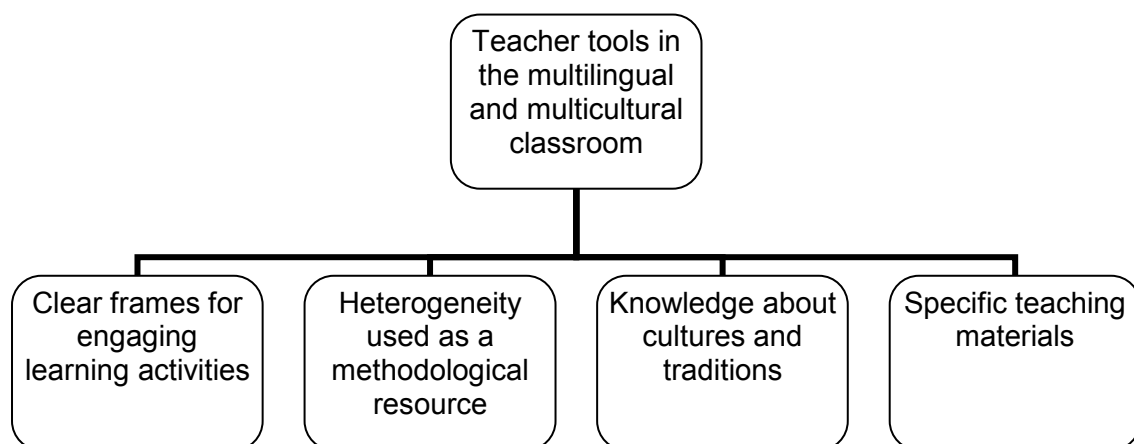
The final broad category identified in the data material is related to the availability of suitable teaching materials and the demands of the national curricular guidelines. Texts

in textbooks intended for the primary level, especially grades 4-6, are often regarded as rather difficult in terms of choice of vocabulary and length. This argument by the teachers seems to be related to the pupils' ability to understand texts in general, regardless of language background. Some teachers clearly state the opinion that, generally speaking, pupils' reading comprehension skills are weaker among primary school children today. In relation to pupils with a minority language background, text-based tasks are often seen as obstacles, since they measure pupils' limited linguistic skills rather than their actual content knowledge. There are also specific subjects where teaching materials are particularly scarce. The ones particularly mentioned by the teachers in this study are textbooks on ethics (the subject taught to children not participating in education in any particular religion) and Islam. In the bilingual classes the teachers also experience the challenge of finding teaching materials in English that are in accordance with Finnish curricular guidelines and also at a suitable linguistic level for young pupils.

The curricular challenges mentioned are related to the knowledge-related profiles for a good level of knowledge indicated in the curricular guidelines. For instance in Evangelical Lutheran Religion (in which the majority of pupils in the schools in Finland take part), the demands are regarded as unrealistically high. Another problem is related to evaluation. Since the profile of good knowledge is to result in a mark of 8 (on the range 4-10, where 10 is the best), it is considered difficult to choose what to include in e.g. tests in order to be able to test if students have earned a higher mark than 8. There is even a problematic ethical aspect for teachers in testing what they have not actually been asked to teach based upon the curricular guidelines. However, the teachers in this study refer to this problem in pragmatic terms rather than in terms of an ethical dilemma. None of the challenges related to the curriculum are in fact referring specifically to pupils with minority language backgrounds, but one can easily see that they are relevant in a linguistically and culturally heterogeneous classroom, where the need to base methodological choices and evaluation on principles that can easily be verified and explained to the parents are needed.

#### *Teacher tools needed in the multilingual and multicultural classroom*

The tools the teachers in this study mention that they need in their work in the more or less linguistically and culturally heterogeneous classrooms they work in, can be categorised into four broad and qualitatively different categories, as shown in Figure 6 below.



*Figure 6. Teacher tools in the multilingual and multicultural classroom*

Especially in the bilingual education programme, a clear emphasis on involving the pupils in the learning process has proven to be a step in the right direction. In this linguistically and culturally heterogeneous environment, the pupils were informed of, made accountable for, and even invited to set clear learning goals for shorter sequences of learning within subject integrated themes. One could expect possible opposition to this form of working among pupils with experience of more authoritative learning systems, but that did not seem to be the case. According to the respondents this approach turned out to lead to increased focus (e.g. in keeping deadlines), self-directedness and interaction among the students, thus resulting in better learning outcomes in terms of both productive linguistic skills and content knowledge. These clear frames of reference also made it possible for the parents to gain a better insight into and support the learning processes of their children. One could thus expect clear frames of reference, and concrete learning goals, in addition to methods fostering self-directedness and active agency in education to support the linguistic and content-knowledge related development of pupils in linguistically and culturally heterogeneous classrooms (cf. Little, 2004, who focuses on learner autonomy in language learning).

Another area of focus prominent in the teacher data is the expressed possibility to make use of the linguistic and cultural heterogeneity present in the classroom. Several concrete examples given by these teachers illustrate the usefulness of a contrastive stance. Most often these deliberate efforts to compare are related to the languages and/or dialects represented by the students in the classroom or taught at school. The objectives mentioned for applying this kind of methodology are related to strengthening the language awareness and linguistic sensitivity of the pupils, to point out that they are free to use all linguistic resources available and to the wish to make all languages represented at the school "visible". Other teachers mention the felt need to include all languages in the classroom more explicitly, but claim that they have not done it, because of time pressure or to avoid stigmatizing the linguistic minority/minorities in their groups of pupils. This fear of stigmatising the differences among the students is more prominent, when religious studies and other cultural aspects in teaching and social activities at school are concerned. The respondents have often chosen not to make use of the cultural and traditional knowledge available among the pupils to avoid embarrassing them or to avoid emphasizing the differences in cultural backgrounds among the pupils. This is most prominent among the teachers in the monolingual education programme.

In the bilingual education programme teachers express a readiness to discuss different perspectives and traditions. The students' natural curiosity is encouraged and most often these discussions come spontaneously and the differences in traditions, e.g. related to eating habits, once discussed openly are readily accepted by the pupils. One reason for this acceptance may be related to the continuous flow of people from different countries present in the school. Another necessary prerequisite for this type of open dialogue is described as follows: "But the school cannot become such that the culture of the "native" pupils is oppressed. One has to know where one stands oneself, in order to be able to discuss other perspectives. ... If you bring matters to a head, every opinion becomes a prejudice and that cannot be a reasonable point of departure". The view that one has to know one's own culture and traditions in order to be able to discuss openly with others is mentioned by several teachers in this sample. In the latter part of the quotation a strong stand-point for an open dialogue is taken, as opposed to very cautious ways of trying to avoid all possible cultural markers and traditional elements of the cultural majority at school. Even though the type of open dialogue outlined above has not been realized in all schools, there is an explicit wish among some teachers to try to create common arenas for such discussions especially in ethics/religious studies. Today pupils in the schools in Finland are offered studies in

their own religions or in ethics, if the pupil does not belong to a particular religion, or it is not possible to arrange education in their own religion. Hence, what is emphasized here is a move towards openly recognizing also the Swedish-medium primary school classroom as pluralistic, including traditional elements of all traditions and opening them for discussion, rather than continuing to separate different cultural groups in some subjects and “deculturalise” the rest of the curriculum (cf. Wardekker, 2001).

The third category highlights the need for more knowledge about the different cultures represented in their classrooms. The teachers mention a need to avoid unnecessary cultural and language-related misunderstandings within the school context. In connection to this, the different temperaments of the pupils are mentioned, and it is obvious that these differences are at least to some extent depicted as culturally or ethnically related phenomena rather than as individual traits. Knowledge about traditions, perceptions of school and education, religious holidays, and motifs for certain habits are mentioned as important, especially in the communication with the parents. For instance, the different traditions and regulations regarding fasting are mentioned as a challenging area, since it directly affects the pupil's ability to participate in the school activities and can be seen as contradictory to the ethos of the schools in Finland, where every pupil is offered free school lunch on a daily basis. The school lunch is, in fact, regarded as part of the curriculum and one of the fostering activities of comprehensive education. Thus, the cultural knowledge required by the teachers is aimed at providing them with the background knowledge they feel they need in order to e.g. ask the right questions, realize what information they need to give explicitly, and be able to discuss parental requirements respectfully. It is also worth pointing out, that while culturally related knowledge is emphasized, knowledge of the pupils' mother tongues is hardly mentioned at all.

Finally, specific kinds of teaching materials are also seen as necessary tools in the multilingual classroom. This has been mentioned above under challenges. However, what is perhaps most interesting, is the way in which several teachers talk about the need for specific teaching materials. As a matter of fact, they state that there would be a need for such and such a textbook, but also indicate that they by no means expect such materials to be produced. In the Swedish-medium schools in Finland teachers have become used to the fact that rather few textbooks are produced for their needs in comparison to materials available in the Finnish-medium schools. The market is simply not big enough for a variety of materials, which of course means that there is hardly any national market worth mentioning to publishing houses for Swedish-medium materials produced with minority language pupils in mind, for bilingual education programmes or for education in different religions. One possible solution to this problem could be turning towards producing broader resource materials, supporting a more integrative teaching stance, possible to use across the curriculum and with students representing different levels of proficiency in the school language/s.

## **Conclusions**

The results of this study show that linguistic and cultural heterogeneity is clearly represented in the Swedish-medium school in Finland, at least in the contexts where these teachers are teaching. Thus, it is time to leave the conception of the so called monolingual Finnish school and society behind, at least as far as the Swedish-medium schools are concerned. However, even if both national languages, different dialects and numerous European and non-European languages are represented in the classrooms of the teachers in this study, the contexts are by no means superdiverse (see Møller & Jørgensen, in this issue). None of the environments described, claimed to have a majority of linguistic minorities. Nonetheless, the results indicate that the

linguistic and cultural environments are complex and tend to differ to some extent. This makes them more demanding to describe and discuss. Also, one has to expect concrete solutions and developmental needs to be context specific to some extent.

The complexity is emphasised in the qualitatively different views that emerge of the multilingual and multicultural classrooms. These views clearly illustrate the economic, structural, social and political dimensions of multilingualism and multiculturalism. This might, in fact, lead to tensions among school staff, especially if the views and consequently also attitudes among teachers and other staff vary greatly. The variation of views also indicate that national and municipal decision-makers need to make explicit decisions about what kind of school environment one strives to create and what roles the different linguistic and cultural backgrounds are to be given. The present NCC (2004) does seem to support a view of additive multilingualism and stress the importance of intercultural competence, whereas the division of religious studies into separate subjects seems to result in less dialogue and awareness of other outlooks on life among pupils, even though these are in fact represented in the classroom. Some of the scepticism of the teachers towards the different subjects within the field of ethics and religions, might also be triggered by the fact that small groups in one subject will affect the total amount of weekly lesson hours available for divisions into smaller groups in other subjects.

The teachers in this study clearly indicate that the linguistically and culturally heterogeneous classroom itself carries a potential for fostering curious, linguistically aware and sensitive citizens ready for open dialogue in a pluralistic and continuously changing society. Thus, it can also be seen as a threat, if one aims at preserving a linguistically and culturally homogeneous society, where the aim would be to assimilate pupils who represent deviating cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The potential to foster interculturally competent pupils will not be rendered useful, unless teachers and decision-makers are ready to face the fact that many of the Swedish-medium schools in Finland are hampered by monolingual and monocultural bias (cf. Davies, 2008). Within the explicitly bilingual programme the awareness of different perspectives and openness for dialogue seems to be more pronounced. This result seems to rhyme very well with the principles and experiences of learner autonomy brought forward by Little (e.g. 2004). Further investigations into these inclusive and empowering teaching methods could be useful, in order to develop the notion of a dynamic multilingual school in Finland.

The tension between the traditional monolingual notion of the school and the existing multilingual groups of pupils is further exemplified in the results of experienced challenges and the tools teachers indicate they would need in their multilingual and multicultural teaching contexts. The challenges mentioned show tendencies both towards the need to assimilate minority language pupils and towards developing schools as authentic multilingual environments, equipping all pupils for life in a multilingual and multicultural society. At a more concrete level, one can see that the challenges are related to the teacher's own methodological skills and readiness to communicate with parents representing different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This means that both pre- service and in-service teacher education needs to take into account the present challenges of the multilingual and multicultural classroom. The two other categories, related to the organisation and priorities in education as well as curricula and teaching materials, indicate the necessary engagement of local and national decision-makers, as indicated already above. Hence, what we get is a complex network, where a shared awareness of and a shared agenda with regard to the linguistic heterogeneity in the schools is necessary, if future action in the chosen direction is going to be effective. The network hinted at above can be compared to the



network necessary for optimal foreign language education in the Swedish-medium schools in Finland described by Björklund (2008). The challenges indicated are not a matter that can be effectively dealt with only within the Swedish-medium schools, but political decisions need to be made also at the national level, by decision-makers who are aware of the linguistic and cultural complexity of the primary classroom in Finland today. This is where the active agency of the teachers comes in. As indicated by Luukkainen (2000b) more than a decade ago, active agency in society, and within cross-professional networks seems to be one of the key components for developing school environments.

Regarding the need for specific teaching materials, the Swedish-medium school in Finland faces a double minority challenge, in the sense that only a limited number of textbook series are translated to or produced for the Swedish-medium schools, and for minority language children virtually no specially adapted materials are available, since the groups of pupils are too small to make it economically lucrative. Hence, national education authorities need to take on the costs for developing and producing such materials. However, it might also be time to consider in more general terms what kinds of materials are the most suited for schools embracing the idea of fostering plurilingual and interculturally competent citizens. Perhaps textbooks chunking up the world into different subjects are not the best option, but rather more subject and language integrated resources, digitally available, thus making them easier to keep up-to date and also to adapt by teachers and pupils?

However, some of the challenges and tools are definitely within the reach of the individual teacher her/himself. All teachers have the freedom to apply methods that support pupils' self-directedness, as well as methods that consistently take into account the languages present in the classroom and raising all pupil's linguistic awareness, curiosity and opportunities to develop their linguistic abilities (cf. Slotte-Lüttge & Forsman, 2013). In that respect the teacher's role has not changed to any greater extent. However, in relation to the need for culturally related knowledge, an enhanced dialogue with parents, ample resources for education, diverse teaching materials, and adapted curricular guidelines we are definitely indicating the need for an extended teacher role, where skilful active agency is demanded by teachers as individuals and as a collective group. The skill to build and maintain networks becomes one of the key components of the teacher's competence.



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