

Swedish Preschool Teachers Perspectives on Multilingual Children's Emergent Literacy Development

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Abstract

This study is a part of a small research project designed as action research project. The aim of this study in which six preschool teachers participated in focus group interviews, is to increase understanding about preschool teachers' didactic work to create conditions for multilingual children's emergent literacy development in preschool. The preschool teachers' descriptions show that multilingualism is seen as part of everyday life and not for specific occasions. In the analysis of the preschool teachers' statements, four important conditions for literacy development emerge; learning environment, language practices, text practices and play activities. In terms of support for multilingual children, preschool teachers say that cooperation with parents has a significant role for children's emergent literacy development.

This study highlights the importance of paying attention to multilingual children's emergent literacy processes already in preschool.

Keywords

multilingual, emergent literacy, social language environment, preschool teacher

1. Introduction

This study aims to increase understanding about preschool teachers' didactic work to create conditions for multilingual children's emergent literacy development in preschool. Swedish preschools are facing major challenges in dealing with an increasing number of children who are multilingual, in the sense that Swedish is not their only and/or first language. The preschools need to pay attention to differences with regard to linguistic socialisation both as language development within the different languages, but also taking advantage of the strengths in children developing several languages at the same time (Salameh, 2012). It is therefore important to illustrate multilingual practice in preschool, with the aim

of showing how several languages can be used as a resource in both play and learning (Björk-Willén, 2014).

The revised curriculum for the preschools (Swedish National Agency for Education, Curriculum for preschool, 2016, p. 98) has clearer goals to aim for specified with regard to the development of the children's language, reading and writing. These goals were clarified back in 2010 when political decisions were taken regarding the reform of earlier curriculums for the purpose of implementing early measures for education and learning in preschools and schools. In Sweden, preschools are thus included in the educational system where children have the right from the age of three to education and a place in a preschool at least five hours a day. The targeted measures aim to increase equivalence and efficiency in the educational system with the emphasis on the children's earlier leaning and knowledge development. However, there are no specified goals to aim for with regard to multilingual children's emergent literacy development. The curriculum states that the preschool shall contribute to children with foreign backgrounds receiving support to develop a multicultural affiliation.

With regard to language development among multilingual children, the preschool curriculum states that the preschool shall contribute to children with a mother tongue other than Swedish being given the opportunity to develop both the Swedish language and their mother tongue (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 98).

1.1 Multilingualism

Multilingualism as a concept was first used in an educational context at some point during the 1990s. The concept of multilingualism is multifaceted and includes several dimensions such as learning about and in several languages (Björk-Willén & Kultti, 2014; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013; Wedin, 2011). The Swedish National Agency for Education's report (2013) states that in an educational context, preschools and schools should take into account the fact that there are different perspectives on multilingualism, *individual multilingualism* and *institutional multilingualism*. Individual multilingualism is described as the use of more than one language in day-to-day life. Institutional multilingualism is a question of an organised way of working according to specified multilingual programme in the operations that makes use of the multilingualism of the staff and children on a day-to-day basis.

Today it is more common that children come into contact with a new language at an early stage, before they have developed the spoken language used in the home environment. Children may, for instance, come from families where both speak different languages and the child meets a further language at preschool. Multilingualism among children is not only related to parents with foreign origins; parents can also apply one language in the home but have multilingual children because, for instance, the family has lived abroad for a time and the child has had the opportunity to develop a new language that they have been able to use in day-to-day life (Wedin, 2011). Children's conditions for language development can thus differ substantially, depending on what "baggage" they take with them to the preschool. There is also the question of how children's different conditions are met in the preschool

and primarily what view the preschool teacher has of multilingualism. According to several researchers, more knowledge is required concerning multilingualism and learning in preschools and schools. This mainly concerns making people aware of the norms that prevail in the preschools and what consequences these might have for children's language and emergent literacy development (Björk-Willén & Cromdal, 2009; Evaldsson & Cekaite, 2010; Kultti, 2014).

The preschool can be regarded as an arena for the language and emergent literacy development of monolingual and multilingual children, where the preschool teachers take part in literacy activities in an interplay with the children (Norling, 2015a). This enables us to take into account the perspective of institutional multilingualism in this study, as it is a question of what conditions are provided in the preschools. The perspective of individual multilingualism can also be taken into account when studying the problems with regard to conditions for children and multilingual children in preschools.

1.2 Emergent Literacy Processes

The path to literacy differs from one child to the next. Some learn to read and write in an apparently seamless manner by taking part in various language and text practices, other children have a much more difficult path with many hold-ups and obstacles. The following describes some areas that are given substantial significance for emergent literacy development for both monolingual and multilingual children.

The emergent literacy concept can be regarded as a description of small children's processes for learning to read and write, that is, the processes that take place before the formal written language. These processes are based on the children's earlier experiences in an interaction with their environment and social events and practices (Barton, 2007). Reading and writing are thus not a phenomenon that suddenly takes place when a child begins school (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

There are some factors that research points to as particularly beneficial for the emergent literacy processes. One of these concerns linguistic awareness that is, being able to detect the difference between the content and form of a language. Phonological awareness is considered particularly important, as it is a question of understanding that the spoken sounds, phonemes, are represented by letters, graphemes (Kamhi & Catts, 2012; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) have developed a classification model, *Components of emergent literacy*, which is based on earlier research result with regard to factors that promote emergent literacy development, which includes two domains, *outside-in* and *inside-out processes*. Four components represent the domain outside-in, the verbal language, storytelling, basic knowledge of written text (for instance that one reads from left to right, from top to bottom) and pretend reading. The domain inside-out is represented by five components, knowledge of decoding, phonological awareness, syntax awareness, sounding and play-writing. Furthermore, Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) emphasise further factors that promote development, such as phonological memory, studied repeating, such as alphabet and numbers and internal motivation for learning literacy skills. The classification model gives an overall understanding of which processes are significant for children's processes towards attaining

literacy skills and where language plays a significant role in the development of children's emergent literacy skills.

Norling (2015a) has examined children's social language environment in the preschool in her study. The results show primarily three dimensions that are significant for the development of the preschool's social linguistic environment, *play strategies*, *emotional strategies* and *communicative strategies*. Each dimension contains indicators regarding significant strategies in both the attitude of the staff and their commitment for the purpose of providing the right conditions for emergent literacy development among monolingual and multilingual children. Examples of promoting indicators are smaller groups, access to play material based on the child's interests and cultural identity, varied language, multimodal tools, feedback, expansive language, sensitivity, child perspective and positive climate (see Norling, 2015b). Language awareness entails a metacognitive dimension and there are indicators that multilingual children develop this ability better than monolingual children because of their access to different languages (Salameh, 2012).

Learning to read and write requires that children have orally mastered the language they are to develop literacy skills in (Hyltenstam, 2010). One key factor, in particular with regard to reading comprehension, is vocabulary. Expanding and semantically organising their vocabularies is very important for children who are developing their second language. In addition to the lexical factors, the cultural background knowledge that children have is very significant for the way in which they can participate in the preschool's reading and writing activities.

1.3 Didactic Work to Create Conditions for Multilingual Children

Research has emphasised in different ways the value of stimulating learning environments and teaching during the children's early years at preschool to promote emergent literacy development (Damber, 2016; Grøver Aukrust, 2008; Norling, 2015a; Rezzonico, Goldberg, Mak, Yap, Milburn, Baletti, & Girolametto, 2016). Within the huge amount of research done in recent decades, some didactic areas have crystallised as particularly important in promoting emergent literacy development, especially with regard to multilingual children.

Something described by Grøver Aukrust (2008) is how *role-play and let's pretend play* give children an opportunity to develop various language competences. The play, which in the case described is a shop, gives the children scope to communicate with one another and for the multilingual children they have the opportunity to switch between their different languages when they talk about the goods in the shop, to change codes. In this play there is also a wealth of opportunities to practice reading and writing activities. According to Grøver Aukrust, planning and participating in this type of play is also a type of preliminary stage to understanding and being able to build up a story or a text.

Another key area that is highlighted is the value of *meeting and processing texts in various ways*. As pointed out by Damber (2016), monolingual and in particular multilingual children need to meet written language at an early stage to build up their vocabulary and become familiar with written grammatical constructions.

Reading books in multicultural children's groups thus offers very good opportunities for the educators to get the children involved in others' experiences and perspectives through the stories, both through the actual texts and also in talking about the different ways the text can be interpreted (p. 224).

There are also studies showing that preschools that *encourage literature* and *creative activities* around the texts see positive consequences (Fast, 2007) and particularly with regard to multilingual children (e.g., Axelsson, 2005). Other studies show that teachers who encourage parallel language practices and multimodal tools based on the children's interests and identity, so called *identity texts* (Cummins et al., 2005) are significant. In the didactic work on creating the conditions for children to become readers in terms of creating meaning, using texts and analysing texts, the meeting with literature and being exposed to and working with this genre has great significance (Damberg, 2010; Hedman, 2012). Even if the studies are aimed at school teachers, these activities can also include preschool teachers' methods of working in the preschool, as children need meaningful literary practices at an early state. In the preschool *storytelling activities* are highlighted for multilingual children as a good way of creating meaning and developing language awareness (Björk-Willén, 2014; Rezzonico et al., 2016). Cummins et al. (2005) consider that multilingual children who are given the opportunity to process linguistic concepts in their different languages parallel with one another and to transfer them from one to the other will be supported in the development of their *biliteracy*, that is, the children's literacy development in more than one language.

Phonological awareness is one of the basic conditions for being able to learn written language (Kamhi & Catts, 2012). By offering children of preschool age *structured language play* one draws attention to and trains their awareness of language forms (Lundberg, Frost, & Petersen, 1988; Poskiparta, Niemi, & Vauras, 1999). Hedman (2012) emphasises the necessity of children who are learning to read and write in a second language *are made aware of the linguistic aspects* of their respective languages, for instance, the orthography of different languages. In the quotation below, Snow, Griffith and Burns (2005) summarise some important factors that promote emergent literary development for multilingual children.

When the school culture values the linguistic and culture backgrounds of English-language learners, encourages the enhancement of native-language skills and communicates high expectations for academic achievement in English, this augurs well for students (Snow, Griffith, & Burns, 2005, p. 147).

The quotation mainly concerns the learning environment in schools, but can also be applied to preschools and similar results have been seen in Swedish studies. For instance, Damberg (2010) shows that *inclusivity* and *high expectations* of children have a positive effect on the multilingual children's reading comprehension and interest in reading. Dahlbäck (2016) also emphasises the importance of inclusivity, but illustrates the importance of *aesthetic forms of expression*, too, as a means of motivating and challenging the emergent literary development of multilingual children. Gibbons (2008) says that it is important that children are given the opportunity for linguistic negotiation and that the

language is not simplified to make understanding easier. A simplification of the language could mean that multilingual children are not given the opportunity to develop the knowledge-targeted language used in preschool and school. It is important that both monolingual and multilingual children are given access to expansive language in preschool (Norling, 2015b), an intercultural environment that supports the children's parallel linguistic and text practices (Cummins et al., 2005) to support multilingual children's emergent literacy processes. Thus, preschool teachers play an important role with regard to multilingual children's conditions for emergent literacy development, which raises the following research question:

How do preschool teachers describe their work on promoting multilingual children's emergent literacy development in the preschool?

1.4 Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical framework that forms the foundation for understanding the preschool teachers' perspective of multilingual children's emergent literacy development is based on Barton (2007) and Vygotsky (1986). Using Barton's (2007) theory regarding emergent literacy development as a base, the concepts language practices and text practices are used as concepts in the analysis of the focus group interviews. Language practices can be described in our analysis as activities where mainly multilingualism is practised and can be seen as a tool in communication and interaction with the environment to create meaning and understanding. Text practices are defined as activities in which multilingual children have access to both producing and reading texts in several languages. Using Vygotsky's (1986) theory as a base, one can see it as multilingual children's interaction with friends and preschool teachers and access to material in the environment and how the environment can contribute to the development of multilingual children. The analysis of the data is based on which environments and didactic strategies are described as promoting multilingual children's emergent literacy development.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

This study involved the participation of (n=6) active preschool teachers from a preschool. All of the participants are qualified preschool teachers with between two and twenty years of work experience in preschools. The preschool consists of two units with seven members of staff in each unit, and the preschool teachers taking part in the study represent both of these units, since they have teacher education at university level. The preschool is a multicultural preschool and represents different socio-economic and geographical areas. The preschool is located in an area where there are a lot of children and adults who are multilingual. There are children with sixteen different languages at the preschool and several members of staff are multilingual.

2.2 Procedure and Analysis

This study is a part of a research project, Children and multilingual, children's conditions and transitions for language, reading and writing development in preschool, preschool-class and primary school year one. The research project has the character of an action research project Coghlan and Barnnick (2012), and has been carried out in collaboration between training preschools and training primary schools.

In this study the preschool teachers have actively taken part in discussions regarding the research question and the analysis of data materials. Focus group interviews (Wibeck, 2000) were held and the interviews were transcribed in full. A latent content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) where the meaningful linguistic units responded to *what* in the research question was in focus, were marked and systematically entered into an analysis matrix meaningful linguistic unit, condensed and categorised. Further, the statements were condensed into written language using great caution to ensure the meaning and content of the statements was not damaged (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Based on the categories, the overall theme could be analysed with the support of theoretical starting points (Barton, 2007; Vygotsky, 1986). The first stage of the analysis work (meaningful linguistic units, condensation, categorisation and themes) was done by researchers in the project to facilitate the work on ensuring the participants could understand the material. The second stage of the analysis work involved giving the participants access to the material with written and oral explanations for the themes we found in the material. After this, each participant received their own analysis base, that is, the analysis matrix to enable them to critically examine, reflect, analyse, discuss the analysis process.

In an action research project that is based on *action learning* it is useful to get the participants actively involved in the process and thereby give them the opportunity for insight and understanding into how the analysis process has been implemented. It is when the participants are given the opportunity for analysis and reflection in a democratic process that learning and development can occur (Coghlan & Barnnick, 2012).

The participants worked in cross-groups where they discussed, analysed, reflected and commented on the material and processed the overall questions that had arisen in the analysis work. The participants' comments were taken into account and added a further perspective to the participants' descriptions. Ethical issues were taken into account in accordance with the Swedish Research Council's guidelines (2011), the information requirement, the consent requirement, the confidentiality requirement and the right of use requirement. The participants were informed in writing and orally and asked whether they wished to take part in the development project. Consent was given both orally and in writing. The ethical issues also concerned, for instance, editing statements regarding linguistic confusion and emphasis to reduce the risk that a statement could be traced to an individual person. During the focus group interviews, the requirement for confidentiality was raised with regard to that which was expressed in the focus groups and that which was said during the discussions of the analysis work.

3. Results

Three overall themes can be distinguished in the preschool teachers' descriptions of the conditions for multilingual children in their school, *observe different languages, conditions for learning and development* and *support for multilingualism*.

Table 1. The Outline in the Figure above Shows the Three Overall Themes That Arose in the Analysis of the Focus Group Interviews

Observe different languages	Conditions for learning and development	Support for multilingualism
View of multilingualism	Learning environment, Language practices, Text practices, Play activities	Cooperation with parents

3.1 Observe Different Languages

In this theme it is mainly the descriptions of *views of multilingualism* that arise in the focus group interviews.

3.1.1 View of Multilingualism

The preschool teachers specifically say that their attitude to multilingualism plays an important role in encouraging children to use more than one language. Their attitude means that they encourage, challenge and themselves learn together with the children. Multilingualism becomes part of the day-to-day life rather than something for special occasions. Multilingual preschool teachers are also regarded as an asset in the preschool as they can provide support in communication between personnel and children as well as parents. One preschool teacher expressed it like this:

I think that one notices that they are affected by how we emphasise different languages; that we listen to children's songs in another language, for instance. It is our attitude to multilingualism that affects the use of their mother tongue.

The preschool teacher's description shows an educational awareness of how preschool teachers' attitudes can affect norms regarding use of language in the preschool.

3.2 Conditions for Learning and Development

This theme brought to light four categories that preschool teachers describe as important conditions for learning and development *learning environment, language practices, text practices* and *play activities*.

3.2.1 Learning Environment

The preschool teachers say that the learning environment is significant and it is necessary for children to have access to various materials, aesthetic forms of expression and multimodal tools in the preschool so that multilingual children can, for instance, play with letters, symbols and words in the preschool.

The preschool teachers say that children who are given the opportunity to use material that encourages writing practices are motivated to take their own initiatives to learn written language.

When we are outdoors playing, “Come here Anita, we have found A of branches” (the children mean that the branches are in the form of the letter A). Just think, this means they have made the link from an A on paper to objects out in the forest.

The preschool teacher gives examples of how the outdoors can provide a stimulating environment for practising children’s experiences of letters. What the children have learnt indoors they apply in their play outdoors. The quotation indicates that the preschool teacher is available for the children and can confirm their discovery.

Learning tablets and digital blackboards are used regularly in the schools and preschool teachers say that they are a good complement to explain and clarify linguistic concepts. By showing pictures, children’s understanding and making sense of things develop, as they may not have had any experience of the concept before. The picture on the learning tablet can then put the term in a context where multilingual children are given the conditions to understand the contents of the concept. When telling stories and fairy tales it may also be useful to use a document camera to enlarge text and pictures so that all of the children can follow the story.

We have a tablet and then we put it under the (intelligible) and then we get the picture, this apparatus is like a modern version of an overhead.

The preschool teacher’s description shows that it makes life easier at the preschool to have access to various tools to encourage the children’s emergent literacy development.

Different forms of expression are something put forward by preschool teachers as one of the foremost activities for promoting children’s linguistic development. They say that it makes learning easier if they can practice nursery rhymes, singing, movement games and listen to music. When the children are doing one of these activities they reflect at the same time on concepts or words they have not heard before. The activities stimulate curiosity to explore the language, according to the preschool teachers. The teachers also say that they usually dance, sing and listen to music in several languages. They say that several of the children recognise this music and can relate it to their home environment. The preschool teachers also emphasise the importance of having multilingual preschool teachers who know songs in several different languages.

We dance and listen to music and we also listen to songs in other languages, and when the children hear, say Persian music the children from Iran they... well you can see their job “oh, now I understand too” and they start dancing and I feel that one can sing in different languages.

In the quotation the preschool teacher says that different means of expression are important to create understanding and to process concepts. The preschool teacher appears to observe that music and songs in different languages make it possible for children to relate to their cultural experiences.

3.2.2 Language Practices

Language practices are when the children in the preschool are observed and included in various linguistic contexts and activities. This could be when the preschool teachers talk to one another and when older children talk. Then the preschool teachers say that the children are given the opportunity to take part in a “language bath” where they hear and learn more advanced words. Often these conversations take place at a table where several children and members of staff take part.

We sit at a table and talk and include the children, I think it is enriching for them because the language is a little more advanced and the children sit and listen to it ... they sort of bathe in it ... the older children become role models and they learn from one another.

The preschool teacher describes how a normal routine situation at a table can become an opportunity for a language exercise of the staff are sensitive and allow all children to be included in the conversation. The preschool teacher also observes the significance of children who learn and become role models for others.

The preschool teachers also say that their attitude to language and the use of language plays a significant role for which language practices are used in the preschool. They say that they have noticed a difference with regard to their views on multilingualism in the preschool now that they have several multilingual preschool teachers. This also means that their attitude to the children’s use of language has changed from only talking Swedish to the children talking their home languages with one another in different contexts. The staff also talk different languages and the preschool teachers say that this benefits all of the children, even those who only speak Swedish. They teach one another different words and what things are called in different languages and they correct one another’s language use.

3.2.3 Text Practices

The preschool teachers say that it is useful if there is access to writing material and texts that stimulate the children to explore, play and test different ways of producing texts. If the material is based on the children’s interests and if there are texts in different languages, this can increase the children’s interest in text practices, according to the preschool teachers.

We put up the Swedish alphabet and as we have so many different languages, we also put up the Arabic, Persian and Turkish ones and just doing this made the children more interested and they went and looked “but oh, this is my language”, that alone...

The quotation implies an intercultural attitude, where the preschool teacher is trying to take into account multilingual children’s experiences. Multilingualism is regarded as an asset to motivate children’s interest in text practices in all of the languages spoken in the preschool.

3.2.4 Play Activities

The conditions for play are also described as important for multilingual children’s learning. The preschool teachers say that they must give time and be sensitive so they do not disturb the play. Play must be on the children’s own terms so that they talk to one another, reach agreement and negotiate over different roles in the play. The preschool teachers also encourage the children to play in the

language they are most comfortable using. It is while playing that children teach one another both Swedish and other languages, say the preschool teachers.

The child who speaks English, she has talked a little here and then there is another child who is interested and has learned from her. After a while they have started to talk English together when they play. It is the playing that is the most important thing, this is how they learn from one another.

The preschool teacher's description shows that she has observed that a child who speaks English has inspired another child to learn English. The quotation implies that the preschool teacher sees their play as a means of exploring language in interaction with their playmates.

The preschool teachers in the preschool also say that they base the play on the children's interests. Learning can take place everywhere, if one is sensitive and responsive. One preschool teacher describes the children's initiatives for learning like this:

The most important thing is that one captures the children's curiosity when they show an interest in letters or whatever, that one picks up on this and continues with it.

It is clear in the preschool teacher's description that it is important to be there and to be responsive to the children's interests and their curiosity when they explore written language in their play.

3.3 Support for Multilingualism

The preschool teachers describe the support primarily as *cooperation with parents*.

3.3.1 Cooperation with Parents

With regard to multilingualism specifically, the preschool teachers say that special support is needed for communication with the parents of the multilingual children. Partly that it benefits the children if their parents feel they are involved in the preschool and also the parents gain an insight into the preschool's work, according to the preschool teachers. The teachers also encourage the children to ask their parents about the meaning of various words. The children reconnect the word with the Swedish word and then the children learn the languages in parallel. The preschool teachers say that it can also be an advantage if there are members of staff who speak the same language as the parents. Then the children hear adults speak a more advanced language and at the same time multilingualism becomes a part of daily life. The preschool teachers point out that it is important that the parents speak their home language with the children. The parents have the possibility to borrow books in different languages at the preschool and the teachers encourage the parents to read to their children. In the quotation below the preschool teacher describes how they create opportunities for cooperation between members of staff and parents:

It can be good to stimulate several languages and then cooperate with the home and the parents. We have book cafés, we invite families in twice a year and we have books in several languages and the parents are welcome to come in and borrow them, or borrow Swedish books.

In the quotation the preschool teacher describes how they offer parents and children the opportunity to take part in a book café. There are books in different languages, which also shows that the preschool teachers observe all of the languages and that they are all important. The book café activity involves

inviting parents to take part in the activity and there is something for the children and adults to talk about together.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study is to deepen the understanding of preschool teachers' didactic work to create the conditions for multilingual children's emergent literacy development. The descriptions imply that the preschool teachers use didactic strategies to promote the emergent literacy development of multilingual children.

The preschool teachers' descriptions show that multilingualism is regarded as part of the daily life and not just something for specific occasions. The analysis of the statements shows that the preschool teachers describe four important conditions for multilingual children's literacy development: learning environment, language practices, text practices and play activities. With regard to support for multilingual children, the preschool teachers say that they primarily cooperated with the parents.

4.1 Views of Multilingualism

According to the descriptions given by the preschool teachers, the preschool places considerable emphasis on offering the children ample opportunities to develop their spoken language. This occurs in different ways, for instance, by including children in conversations in a deliberate way. Priority is also given to allowing the children to take part in activities that in various ways benefit linguistic development and understanding of words: songs, rhymes, play, and games. There are major differences between spoken language and written language to the extent that they belong to different communication systems (Hagtvet, Frost, & Refsahl, 2016), but at the same time they can be understood as two sides of the same coin. The development in spoken language forms a basis for developing written language (Vygotsky, 1986), and activities that stimulate spoken language development among children in preschool age in this way provide a foundation for the development of written language. One talks about "making use of opportunities for conversation". For those children who are multilingual, the preschool teachers especially emphasise the importance of observing different languages and giving the children the opportunity to practice their different languages. This is done, for instance, by using the children's languages in different contexts, such as songs, stories, names. To learn to read and write in Swedish one must have good semantic and lexical ability (Hyltenstam, 2010). In this way, the activities in the preschool to develop the children's vocabulary and their spoken mastery of the language are important.

In the preschool the preschool teachers work to stimulate language development on the basis of what might be called a holistic approach. The children's language development is observed and stimulated in various situations during the course of the day, and with regard to the multilingual children this concerns more than one language. It is regarded as valuable for the children and their families that the preschool observes other languages than Swedish. According to research, children's language development cannot be distinguished from the social context in which it takes place (Cummins et al.,

2005). Children are socialised through language and there is a connection between the two processes, language development and learning. This means that children's socialisation can take different forms, based on their different experiences and cultures (Evaldsson & Cekaite, 2010; Norling, 2015a; Wedin, 2011).

It is interesting that the preschool teachers' attitude and work on giving multilingual children good opportunities to develop both one and more mother tongues and Swedish through play, the positive attitude to several languages and the cooperation with the children's homes so clearly follows the legislation on schools and the intention in the curriculum that children shall have the conditions to develop both Swedish and their mother tongue. The preschool teachers' descriptions are in line with the task for the preschool stated in the Swedish Education Act (SFS, 2010, p. 800) that they shall "contribute to children with a mother tongue other than Swedish having the opportunity to develop both the Swedish language and their mother tongue (Chap. 8, Section 10).

In the interviews there is no explicit mention of the curriculums to any great extent. On the other hand, they arise in a more implicit way. The core of the language-stimulating activities described by the preschool concerns in various ways offering each child the opportunity to develop his or her language(s), with regard to vocabulary, concepts and communication through day-to-day activities, play and aesthetic forms of expression. The work appears to be firmly anchored in the goals to aim for stipulated for development and learning in Swedish National Agency for Education 98/2016. Whether curriculums are a support or an obstacle to creating good learning environments for children and pupils to develop multilingualism is of course a subject that can be discussed.

It's hard to argue that we are teaching the whole child when school policy dictates that students leave their language and culture at the schoolhouse door (Cummins et al., 2005, p. 39).

That which is expressed in the quotation also arises in a study by Fast (2007), who shows that the preschool rarely makes good use of children's different linguistic and cultural experiences and the social capital they bear with them. However, in this study the preschool teachers' statements indicate the opposite, as they stress the significance of taking into account multilingual children's different languages and cultural experiences and the importance of cooperation with multilingual members of staff and the children's parents.

4.2 Multilingual Children's Conditions for Emergent Literacy Development

According to Kultti (2014), it is a challenge for parents to preserve the child's mother tongue if the use of the language is limited in the preschool. During the focus group discussions, the preschool teachers stress that they consider it important to have cooperation between the home and the preschool. The preschool teachers appear to try to support the parents in maintaining the children's mother tongues by offering the parents the chance to borrow books in various languages, to read to their children and by organising a book café where children, parents and preschool teachers can communicate with one another in several languages, something that implies the preschool has an institutional perspective. However, the institutional perspective in this study relates to the Swedish National Agency for

Education's (2013) definition of institutional perspective as the preschool taking part in this study does not have an explicit multilingual programme where several languages are used in an organised way on a daily basis. The preschool in this study is multilingual at individual level, but has activities in which multilingualism has become the norm.

Research shows that the views on and knowledge of multilingualism are important for the conditions offered regarding multilingual children's learning of language (Damber, 2010; Snow et al., 2005). According to Cummins et al. (2005), multilingual children are anchored in the linguistic concepts that prevail in the expressions and culture of the home environment. Therefore, Cummins et al. say that teaching should promote the transition of children's experiences of concepts in the home environment to the linguistic concepts applied in learning of text practices in a new language. That is to say, the transition between languages supports the children's parallel text practices which is also called *biliteracy*. In the preschool teachers' descriptions of work at the preschool, it is clear that it is significant to have access to writing materials and texts and that the texts are based on the children's interests and that the preschool offers texts in different languages. The preschool teachers say that this can encourage the children's interest in written language practices. Here it seems that the preschool teachers have experience and knowledge of which conditions promote the development of biliteracy among multilingual children.

5. Limitations

The results of this study are based solely on six preschool teachers actively employed at a multicultural preschool in Sweden. Having said this, the statements are so varied and the analysis of data did not show any differing opinions with regard to the didactic work on encouraging multilingual children's emergent literacy development in the preschool. If this study had been carried out with a larger number of participants, there would probably have been greater variation and different opinions on the emergent literacy development of multilingual children. Nevertheless, the study shows that there are didactic strategies that are applicable in the preschool and confirm what earlier research has described as important in promoting emergent literacy development at preschool.

6. Conclusions

Initially in this paper, multilingualism is described from the perspectives of *individual* multilingualism and *institutional* multilingualism. The preschool teachers' descriptions mainly show the conditions for multilingual children based on the perspective of individual multilingualism, that is, that the schools are Swedish-speaking at institutional level but multilingual at individual level and where the staff speak only Swedish while the children are multilingual. However, the preschool showed an institutional perspective, where the preschool is Swedish-speaking but multilingual at individual level and where the children and staff use several languages in communication with those with whom they share a language. However, the preschool in this study does not have a multilingual programme where several languages

are used on a day-to-day basis, which the Swedish National Agency for Education (2013) defines as the institutional perspective. The results of this study can contribute to a broader perspective on the institutional perspective, *a preschool that is multilingual at individual level but has activities in which multilingualism has become the norm*.

Several examples illustrate the institutional perspective in the preschool where the preschool teachers' descriptions show an attitude where they describe multilingualism as part of the preschool's daily work, for instance, when children and preschool teachers speak their home language with one another in various contexts. This can also be regarded as a "diversity perspective that includes individuals, interaction and contexts" (Kultti, 2014, p. 25).

Sweden has in recent years taken in a large number of newly-arrived children. It is important to show that these children also carry with them various types of "baggage" and the preschool is often the first institution that children and parents meet in the process of integration in the new country. In the cases where parents and children speak several languages in the home and their everyday life, the child can be regarded as multilingual. But if the child only speaks one language in the home, the child is not per definition multilingual, but can become multilingual after a time if the child is given the opportunity to learn the Swedish language at preschool parallel with the language spoken at home (Björk-Willén, 2014; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013). It then becomes important that there are the skills in the preschool to create opportunities and conditions for these children to develop multilingualism and biliteracy skills. This provides a good base for multilingual children's future possibilities to benefit from the teaching and from intellectual and linguistic challenges.

It may seem a challenge for preschool teachers to make use of all multilingual children's language in their teaching, but it is not a question of being able to speak all of the languages (Kultti, 2014; Kultti & Pramling, 2016). The most important thing is the attitude, to be curious and to acknowledge the children's linguistic identity and be open to parallel text practices. Multilingual children's possibility to use linguistic concepts, aesthetic forms of expression, parallel to text practices. The preschool teachers give several examples of how they work with aesthetic forms of expression, such as dance or song to reinforce the children's different languages. Multilingual preschool teachers are seen as an asset in the school as they can talk to children who speak the same language. In this way, the preschool teachers' attitude and didactic strategies can be related to research that shows that parallel language practices and multimodal tools based on children's interests and identity

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