

Reforming multicultural education in Finnish early childhood education and care: A comparative study of discourses in ECEC curricula

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Abstract

Finland was a relatively homogeneous society in regard of its population. The rapid influx of immigrants from the 1990s has resulted in multiple social problems. In consequence, the Finnish government has abandoned the assimilationist model for the adoption of multiculturalism which is still under experimentation. To better figure out how multiculturalism has been understood and carried out in Finnish early childhood education and care, we utilize thematic analysis in joint with critical discourse analysis methods to study Finnish core curricula for the early childhood education and care, published respectively in 2003 and 2016. Results suggest that since 2016, cultural diversity in Finland has been considered as an enriching resource to the society. The right of using and developing mother tongues has been included in Finnish multicultural early childhood education and care. Second, schools have replaced families and parents to become the primary responsible for supporting and developing cultural diversity. Third, different groups, namely Sami, Roma, and immigrants, enjoy differentiated supports for developing their culture in newly reformed multicultural ECEC education.

Keywords: Finland, multicultural ECEC education, curriculum, critical discourse analysis, thematic analysis, NVivo.

Introduction

The economic globalization has intensified mobility of people worldwide. Whether it is the internal migration across regions, or the immigration and emigration phenomena faced by many countries, the scale is unprecedented. Rapid population mobility places higher demands on multicultural education in various nations. Taking Finland as an example, the rapid growth of immigrant populations has wide-ranging social impacts and has also driven the development of multicultural education.

In Finnish academia, research on multicultural education has roughly undergone two phases, which can be summarized into two analytical frameworks (Dervin et al., 2012). At the end of the last century, Finnish scholars primarily understood multicultural education within the framework of ethnicity and nation-state. This model originated from an identification with the superiority of mainstream culture, viewing the cultural differences of others through the lens of mainstream culture. Talib (2006), in surveys and interviews conducted between 1994 and 1995, found that teachers generally perceived cultural differences within immigrant communities as a problem to be solved, believing that assimilation was the fundamental solution. Holm and Londen (2010) analysed Finnish basic education curriculum standards and educational policy documents, revealing that multicultural education in Finland followed a

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unidirectional assimilation model specifically targeting immigrant communities. This model emphasized the obligations of immigrant communities as outsiders, while completely overlooking the exchange and integration between mainstream culture and immigrant communities.

In contrast to the ethnicity-nation-state framework, over the past two decades, critical multicultural education has gradually become the core discourse system for Finnish scholars to understand multicultural education. Within this analytical framework, multicultural education is no longer limited to understanding cultural differences (Dervin, 2013, 2022). Talib (2006), in a follow-up interview with teachers in 2005, discovered that teachers' attitudes towards multiculturalism had shifted from 'simple understanding of differences' to 'tolerating differences'. However, Jokikokko (2005) pointed out that tolerance still viewed differences from the perspective of mainstream culture, failing to reflect cultural equality among ethnic groups. To promote the healthy development of multicultural education, there is need to seize opportunities for intercultural dialogue and exchange in everyday life, including work and learning environments, and to create open and safe dialogue spaces. Today, cultivating and enhancing cross-cultural communication skills and intercultural sensitivity are widely recognized goals of multicultural education in Finland (Wang and Jokikokko, 2022; Rissanen et al., 2016). Zilliacus, Holm, and Sahlström (2017) further emphasized that multicultural education should not only focus on communication and dialogue between cultural groups but also address structural inequalities among diverse groups. Only multicultural education built on a foundation of fairness can truly achieve social integration.

In summary, the discourses of multicultural education in Finnish academia have transitioned from a conservative understanding and acceptance of cultural differences to a critique of mainstream cultural centrism, advocating for equal dialogue and promoting structural equality among diverse groups. Does this shift in Finland's academic discourse on multicultural education manifest in educational policy documents? To better address the challenges posed by the rapidly diversifying population, Finland underwent basic education reforms in 2014, aiming to enhance educational quality and promote educational equity. This reform led to the introduction of the *National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care* in 2016 (Jokikokko, 2016). Compared to the first early childhood curriculum standards in 2003, what specific changes occurred in the 2016 early childhood education curriculum standards? How did multicultural education discourses shift in concrete terms? Currently, there is no specific discussion in existing academic research in English. In this study, we hope to clarify the turn towards multiculturalism in Finnish early childhood education by comparing and analysing the 2003 and 2016 national early childhood education core curriculum standards.

Although the national conditions of China and Finland differ, both countries prioritize promoting educational equity and improving educational quality in their respective approaches to multicultural education and minority education. While preserving cultural diversity, both countries also strive to enhance the development of minority groups and strengthen social cohesion. Bilingual education is a crucial area of focus in this context (Wang and Lehtomäki, 2022). The Chinese 'National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)' [*Guojia zhongchangqi jiaoyu gaige he fazhan guihua (2010-2020)*] explicitly emphasizes the need to vigorously promote bilingual education and implement bilingual education in Chinese and minority languages in regions with ethnic minorities. Taking the Chinese Liangshan region as an example, in 2018, the State Council Poverty Alleviation Office of China, the Chinese Ministry of Education, and the Sichuan Provincial Government jointly launched the 'Learn Mandarin in Preschool' initiative in Liangshan Prefecture. Through the 'One Village, One Preschool' approach, they are actively promoting early childhood education in the Liangshan area, aiming to address poverty at its roots. However, the strategies for advancing early childhood education in

Liangshan are still in the exploratory stage, lacking comprehensive policy guidance. This practical concern leads us to study the multicultural early childhood education in Finland as to better understand the transferability of pedagogical conception across borders.

The comparative methods used here is illustrative rather than a parallel comparison (Bereday, 1964). This article primarily focuses on two questions: What are the specific requirements for multicultural education in Finland at the early childhood education stage? and What specific shifts have occurred in multiculturalism within Finnish early childhood education? To address these questions, the study examines the 2003 and 2016 national core curriculum standards for early childhood education and care. By utilizing theme analysis and critical discourse analysis methods, performed by the NVivo12 qualitative analysis software, the study codes and analyzes content related to multiculturalism within the two national core curriculum standards. This approach aims to gain a detailed understanding of the evolution of multicultural education in Finland. The findings of this study will be further considered for its transferability in the development of early childhood education practices in ethnic minority regions in China.

Data and methods

Research data

The national core curriculum guidelines are the most important guiding documents for educational practitioners in their teaching practices. To understand the role of multicultural education in Finnish early childhood education, this study focuses on Finnish national core curriculum for early childhood education and care. Specifically, we have selected two sets of text data: the National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland, 2003/2005 (hereafter referred to as the 2003 guidelines) and the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016 (hereafter referred to as the 2016 curriculum).

The choice of the 2016 curriculum as a comparative object stems from its explicit statement at the outset, emphasizing adaptation to the rapidly changing social environment in Finland (2016, p. 52). This emphasis makes it particularly representative for discussing the shift in early childhood multicultural education. In this study, local early childhood education curriculum standards are not included. While Finnish local governments have considerable autonomy in formulating curriculum standards, the national standards serve as blueprints for local standards and better reflect the overall landscape of multicultural education in Finnish early childhood education.

Research methods and processing

In this study, we employ an inductive logic to conduct thematic analysis of official text data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Einarsdottir et al., 2005). By combining thematic analysis with critical discourse analysis methods (Fairclough, 2001), we investigate specific content related to multicultural education in the two curriculum standards. Although there is ongoing debate in academia regarding the objectivity and effectiveness of critical discourse analysis methods, integrating text analysis with social context remains beneficial for understanding the historical context of multicultural education development in Finland (Fairclough, 1993). Braun and Clarke (2006) assert that thematic analysis involves identifying, analysing, and reporting themes within text data, and the process of text analysis and theme extraction must be clear and transparent.

After selecting the 2003 guidelines and 2016 curriculum of Finnish national core curriculum for early childhood education and care, we thoroughly read both documents to familiarize ourselves with their content. Next, based on the question “What is multicultural education in Finnish early childhood

education and care?” We preliminarily extracted all statements related to multiculturalism from the two curriculum standards. The selection of multicultural-related statements is based on the current understanding of multicultural education in Finnish academia and aims to broadly encompass aspects such as gender, religion, worldviews, ethnicity, and language (Zilliacus et al., 2017) .

Subsequently, using an inductive analytical approach, we observed the statements related to multiculturalism in both curriculum standards. We employed NVivo12 qualitative analysis software to iteratively scrutinize, code, and progressively extract relevant themes from the multicultural-related statements in the two curriculum standards. Finally, based on the identified themes, we constructed a mind map as the analytical framework for the text (see Figure 1). Within this framework, we integrate two paradigms of multicultural education research prevalent in Finnish academia and utilize critical discourse analysis to discuss the specific shifts in multiculturalism within Finnish early childhood education and care.

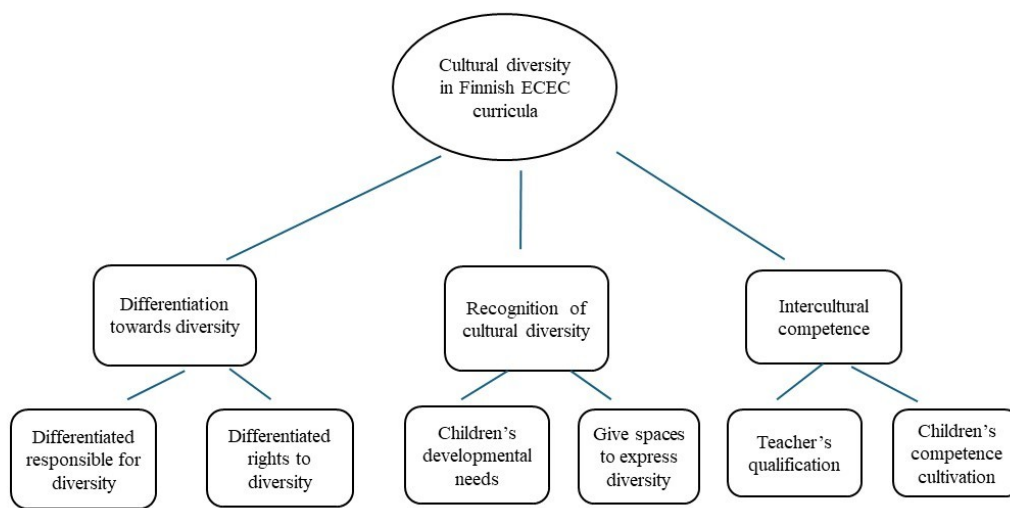


Figure 1. Framework of analysis

Research Findings

Shift in Multicultural Narratives Evidenced by High-Frequency Terms

The preliminary analysis of content in both curriculum standards suggests that the 2003 curriculum guidelines consist of a total of 741 lines, with 62 lines related to cultural diversity, accounting for 8.37%, while the 2016 curriculum consists of a total of 1737 lines, with 258 lines related to cultural diversity, accounting for 14.85%. From the perspective of content proportion, the 2016 version of Finland’s national core curriculum for early childhood education demonstrates a significantly higher focus on multiculturalism.

To analyse high-frequency terms, we utilized NVivo software’s functionality for extracting words with the same root. We selected the top 20 high-frequency terms from each curriculum standard and further merged semantically similar terms. It is important to note that ‘educator’ and the adjective ‘educational’ share the same root, but Nvivo did not separately count them. To enable a more accurate comparison with the 2016 curriculum, we meticulously ascertained the specific frequency of use and proportion of the term ‘educator’ in the 2003 curriculum. (see Table 1).

From Table 1, we can observe that ‘culture’, ‘difference’, and ‘language’ are the most frequently used terms in both curriculum standards. In terms of overall frequency, these three concepts collectively accounted for 13.42% the 2003 curriculum guidelines, while the 2016 curriculum guidelines, they accounted for 13.78%. However, the emphasis on these concepts differs between the curricula published in these two periods. In the 2003 curriculum, the expressions related to multiculturalism were more abstract. The usage of ‘culture’ and ‘difference’ (10.13%) significantly exceeded that of ‘language’ (3.29%). In contrast, the 2016 curriculum highlights language as a crucial carrier of multiculturalism (7.72%), and emphasizes the practical language use to reflect the value placed on cultural differences. It is evident that the 2016 curriculum considers language an essential component of multicultural early childhood education and care in Finland.

Terms	2003			2016		
	Number	Proportion (%)	Similar expressions	Number	Proportion (%)	Similar expressions
Culture, Diversity	40	10.13	Culture, Cultural, cultures backgrounds, background different	91	6.06	cultural, culturally, culture, cultures diverse, diversity, different, differently
Language	13	3.29	language, languages	116	7.72	language, languages, linguistic, linguistically bilingual, bilingualism
Parents	12	3.04	family, families, parents			
Personnel	2	0.51	educators	16	1.06	personnel
Finnish	10	2.53	Finnish, society	22	1.46	Finnish
Sami	11	2.78	Sami	16	1.06	Sami
Roma	6	1.52	Roma			
Swedish				16	1.06	Swedish
Worldview				16	1.06	worldview, worldviews

- The blank space in the table represents the same high-frequency word missing.

The frequency of vocabulary usage also reveals a shift in the responsible entities for protecting and promoting multiculturalism. In the 2003 curriculum, parents and families were central to multicultural responsibility (3.04%). However, in the 2016 curriculum, ‘parents’ and ‘families’ did not appear among the top 20 high-frequency terms, with their proportion decreasing to 0.51%. Instead, the term ‘educator’ (1.06%) is more closely associated with multiculturalism in the 2016 curriculum. Additionally, compared to the 2003 curriculum, the proportion of indigenous Sami people and long-established Roma immigrants

in multicultural expressions decreased significantly in the 2016 curriculum. Conversely, there was increased emphasis on different worldviews (1.06%). These shifts are related to the increase in foreign immigrant populations and changes in the domestic ethnic composition.

In summary, Finnish government has transitioned from a stance of principle to a practical approach regarding multiculturalism. It advocates acknowledging and transmitting multiculturalism through the teaching languages which are the mediums of instruction. Furthermore, the responsible entities for multiculturalism have shifted—from private family domains to public spaces represented by schools and their personnel—making the state and government key actors in multicultural protection and preservation. Lastly, influenced by changes in population structure, the focus of Finnish multicultural composition has gradually shifted from traditional indigenous minorities to foreign immigrant communities.

Shifts in the Connotations of Multicultural Education in Finnish Early Childhood Education

To further understand the evolution of multicultural education policy in Finnish early childhood education and care, we conducted a detailed coding and thematic analysis of multicultural-related content in both curriculum standards. Three closely related themes emerged: recognition of cultural diversity, differentiation towards diversity, and intercultural competence (see Figure 1).

Recognition of Cultural Diversity

The Finnish national core curriculum for early childhood education and care acknowledges the social and cultural diversity in Finland. In both versions of the curriculum, gender, language, historical culture, ethnicity, religious beliefs, and worldviews are constitutive elements representing Finland as a multicultural society. Any discriminatory behaviour towards diverse culture is opposed in Finnish society. However, the discourses regarding multicultural expressions differ between the two curriculum standards. The 2003 curriculum predominantly uses expressions such as ‘pay attention to’, ‘encourage’, ‘support’, and ‘appreciate’, reflecting a clear distance from the perspective of mainstream culture, allowing space for expressing cultural differences. In contrast, the 2016 curriculum advocates an open and respectful attitude towards cultural differences, considering them as valuable resources that can enrich children’s lives and learning environments, and thus an integral part of Finnish culture.

	Publicly operated ECEC services in Finland are based on general ECEC goals, paying attention to the child's cultural background and mother tongue (2003, 33).
Give space to express diversity	In ECEC, the child's own culture, customs and history are studied and appreciated, and they form a visible part of the daily activities (2003, 34).
	In ECEC, children are encouraged to use their own language. (2003, 34).
	Cultural diversity is perceived as a resource (2016, 32).
	Children's varying linguistic and cultural backgrounds and capabilities are perceived to enrich the community in a positive way (2016, 52).
	Early childhood education and care is built on a diverse Finnish cultural heritage, which continues to be formed in interaction between the children, their guardians, and the personnel (2016, 22).
Children’s	Each child is encountered in accordance with his individual needs, personality and family culture, and has a feeling of being treated fairly regardless of gender or social, cultural and ethnic background (2003,

developmental needs	15). In early childhood education and care, the previous experiences of children, their interests, and their competences are the starting point for learning. It is important that new knowledge and skills learned by children are connected to their developing competences as well as the world they experience and their cultural background (2016, 23).
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The Finnish national core curriculum standards for early childhood education and care not only express Finland's stance on cultural diversity but also emphasize the importance of recognizing cultural differences in children's growth from a pedagogical perspective. The 2003 curriculum standards highlighted the role of acknowledging cultural differences in meeting children's cultural awareness and needs for equal treatment. In contrast, the 2016 curriculum standards consider cultural diversity as the cornerstone of children's growth and a prerequisite for their healthy development. This shift indicates that the two sets of standards have transitioned from a 'etic' to a 'emic' position in understanding the relationship between cultural differences and children's developmental needs. Regarding the understanding of children's growth requirements, the focus has shifted from emphasizing the value of 'equality' which is core in the mainstream culture to the recognition of the continuity of children's individual growth processes.

Differentiation towards diversity

In academic discussions, class, gender, race, language, religion, and ethnicity are key aspects of Finnish multicultural education. While in the 2003 and 2016 curriculum standards, ethnicity emerges as a core aspect of Finnish multicultural early childhood education and care. Language, as a vital tool for cultural expression, is significant indicator of rights to diversity within early childhood education and care. Finnish legislation mandates that governmental institutions ensure access to early childhood education services for individuals whose mother tongue is Finnish, Swedish, or Sami. However, other ethnic groups exhibit varying language rights within early childhood education and care.

For children with immigrant backgrounds, the 2003 curriculum primarily emphasized their integration into Finnish mainstream society. Early education employed immersive language learning methods, allowing immigrant children to naturally acquire the national official languages (Finnish and Swedish) through interactions with teachers and peers. Additionally, early education institutions were responsible for providing information to immigrant parents, helping them understand the goals and principles of Finnish early childhood education and care. In contrast, the 2016 curriculum altered the requirements for immigrant children to learn the national languages. Learning Finnish or Swedish is no longer mandatory; instead, language learning is determined based on each child's specific needs and circumstances.

Existing research highlights the close link between language rights and political contexts (Wang and Lehtomäki, 2022). In the context of globalization, Finnish government emphasizes the cultivation of bilingual and multilingual abilities in children. The 2016 early childhood education and care reform advocates for bilingual education, aiming to spark children's curiosity about languages and enable those from diverse language backgrounds to naturally acquire different languages through play and interaction. Bilingual education comes in two forms: large-scale and small-scale. Large-scale bilingual education primarily focuses on Finnish, Swedish, and Sami—the three national languages. Other languages can also be included in large-scale bilingual education, provided they constitute at least 25% of activities. Small-scale bilingual education aims to stimulate children's interest in language learning and foster positive attitudes towards different languages. It allows for the use of languages other than Finnish, Swedish, and Sami in educational settings, as long as they do not exceed 25% of activities. Language nests are another

form of small-scale bilingual education, specifically designed to support immigrant children in constructing their cultural identity and cultural self-esteem through the mother tongue.

Regarding the Sami language and culture, both curriculum standards consistently emphasize preservation and protection. The 2003 curriculum positioned the Sami as the sole indigenous ethnic group in Finland, with early childhood education and care committed to supporting the development of the Sami language. Cultural activities related to Sami culture were conducted in early education settings through collaboration with parents and Sami cultural representatives, but these activities were exclusively for children whose mother tongue was Sami. The 2016 curriculum further emphasizes strengthening Sami children's group identity and their awareness of their own culture. It advocates providing opportunities for Sami children to learn and use their mother tongue. In the bilingual education framework proposed by the 2016 early childhood education reform, the Sami language is treated similarly to Finnish and Swedish, falling under large-scale bilingual education. For bilingual education, the curriculum standards require a separation between education and care. For instance, if the immersive teaching language is Sami, the care component should use either Finnish or Swedish.

Concerning the ancient Roma immigrant community, the 2003 curriculum did not explicitly address the preservation and development of their language. Instead, it focused on supporting the Finnish or Swedish language skills development of Roma children. In contrast, the 2016 curriculum encourages positive self-identification among Roma children, emphasizing the self-awareness of their own culture and history. Early childhood education and care aims to provide opportunities for Roma children to learn and use their mother tongue. While the 2016 reforms have improved language rights for this ancient immigrant community, the gap still exists compared to the national languages such as Finnish, Swedish, and Sami.

In summary, the rights enjoyed by various ethnic groups in Finnish society, particularly language rights, exhibit significant differences. Finnish multicultural early childhood education policy is closely linked to societal changes. As the immigrant population rapidly grows and cultural backgrounds become increasingly diverse, respecting cultural differences among immigrant groups becomes a political choice to promote social integration. For the stigmatized Roma community, fostering children's ethnic self-esteem and confidence is a pathway to social equity and integration. Respecting the wishes of the Sami, protecting indigenous Sami culture through the education system facilitates their social inclusion. However, early childhood education policy also reinforces ethnic boundaries to some extent, distinguishing Finnish indigenous Sami people from other ethnic groups.

Intercultural Competence

The two curriculum standards hold differing educational perspectives regarding diverse cultures. Concerning the cultivation of children's intercultural communication abilities, the 2003 curriculum aims to teach children to view cultural differences with a positive attitude. However, due to the lack of specific practical guidance, this 'positive view of cultural differences' appears more like an advocacy of principle. In contrast, the 2016 curriculum emphasizes practicality. It requires children to shift from objectively respecting cultural differences to actively understanding and comprehending those differences. Children are encouraged to learn of others from diverse cultures, including their languages and customs. The purpose of this understanding is to prevent simplistic judgments based on personal traits, thus avoiding social discrimination rooted in ethnicity, gender, or other individual beliefs.

Reinforcement of considerate behaviour and action towards others as an educational goal means that children learn to think of other people and are about them. They think positively of themselves, other people, and other cultures and

	environments (2003, 14).
Cultivation of children's abilities	help the children develop their capacity to understand and respect the general cultural heritage and each child's linguistic, cultural, religious, and ideological background (2016, 18).
	Children are encouraged to get to know other people, languages, and cultures (2016, 26).
	Children must have an opportunity to develop their skills and make choices independently of reasons associated with, for instance, gender, origin, cultural background or other reasons related to the person (2016, 22).
	Educators also transmit earlier generations' experiences and cultural heritage and various aspects of scientific knowledge to children through the environment and various joint activities (2003, 33).
	The personnel are responsible for creating an atmosphere that respects diversity (2016, 22).
Teaching skills	Personnel members must have knowledge of different cultures and worldviews and an ability to see things from different perspectives and put themselves in the place of others (2016, 33).
	The personnel provide the children with a model for encountering different people and diversity in languages, cultures and worldviews positively (2016, 22).
	The personnel must acknowledge that they act as a linguistic model for the children and pay attention to their personal language use. The personnel encourage children in diverse language use (2016, 33).

From the perspective of teaching skills requirements, the 2003 curriculum standards required preschool educators to serve as conveyors of mainstream culture and knowledge. However, the revised 2016 curriculum standards call for early childhood education professionals to abandon ethnocentrism and treat members of different cultural groups equally in educational practice. Moreover, educators are expected to understand the languages, cultures, worldviews, and religious perspectives of minority ethnic groups. Through their words and actions, educators should actively influence children's attitudes towards diverse cultures. Furthermore, educators must recognize the importance of learning different languages and serve as role models for multilingual abilities. They should create diverse language and cultural environments for children, fostering respect for differences and encouraging the learning of diverse languages and cultures.

Concluding discussion

Finland has experienced a rapid influx of immigrants and refugees from the 1990s, which has been gradually diversifying its previously highly homogeneous society. The emergent social issues related to immigration and refugees have posed unprecedented challenges for Finnish society. Concerns such as persistently high immigrant unemployment rates, social security, and racial discrimination have drawn widespread attention (Talib, 2006). In response, Finland has shifted its policy towards minority ethnic groups from an assimilation model to multiculturalism. Concurrently, academic research on multicultural education in Finland has transitioned from mainstream cultural centrism to critical multicultural education, emphasizing dialogue and communication among cultural groups. To explore how academic research is reflected in educational policy documents, this study focuses on the 2016 reform of Finnish national core curriculum standards for early childhood education and care. By comparing the content before and after the reform, we investigate the transformation in Finnish approaches to multiculturalism in early childhood education and care.

The analysis reveals that the 2016 curriculum reform reflects Finland's shift from the multiculturalism in principle to its practical implementation, which is in consistence with the findings of Zalliacus, Holm, and Sahlström (2017). The critical multicultural education advocated by Finnish academic community is also evident in the curriculum reform. In concrete, Finnish early childhood education and care has abandoned, at least in the official discourses of curriculum, mainstream cultural centrism, adopting an open and respectful attitude towards cultural differences. It views cultural diversity as a valuable and integral resource to constructing Finnish social culture. The 2016 curriculum also emphasizes the premise that acknowledging cultural differences is essential for children's healthy development. Furthermore, the academic community's emphasis on developing intercultural competence and sensitivity aligns with the 2016 curriculum's focus on nurturing children's intercultural communication competences. In Finnish early childhood education and care, language serves as the primary tool and medium for practicing multicultural education. The shift in responsibility for protecting and promoting multiculturalism has moved from private domains (such as families) to public spaces represented by schools and teachers. Finally, the rights enjoyed by different ethnic minority groups regarding multiculturalism vary significantly. The treatment of Sami culture in Finland has evolved from 'support and protection' to 'strengthening group identity' and 'fostering cultural awareness'. For the ancient immigrant community of Roma, the focus was on cultivating positive self-identification and encouraging active integration into the Finnish society. While the 2016 reforms have improved language rights for these minority groups, there is still a gap in the rights of language use compared to the national languages such as Finnish, Swedish, and Sami.

Overall, Finland acknowledges cultural differences within its early childhood education process. By involving teachers and fostering collaboration between home and school, it provides space for the development of cultural differences, recognizing multiculturalism as a precious resource for shaping Finnish social culture. Bilingual education in early childhood education and care represents a practical innovation for multicultural integration. Respecting marginalized groups and nurturing their cultural self-esteem reflects principles of social equality and serves as a political choice to promote social integration. Importantly, Finnish education policy does not adopt a one-size-fits-all approach when dealing with different cultural groups; instead, it considers each group's specific circumstances. The bilingual education measures proposed for different ethnic groups in Finland after the 2016 curriculum reform offer valuable insights for early childhood education in other similar circumstances.

The background and challenges faced by minority education in China differ significantly from Finnish multicultural early childhood education and care. However, both countries share common goals of preserving cultural diversity and promoting the development and integration of various ethnic groups (Jokikokko, 2005; Talib, 2006; Holm et al., 2010; Wang, 2018; Ma, 2019; Wang and Lehtomäki, 2022, 2024). Based on the official texts analysis, bilingual education for young children plays a crucial role in the Finnish multicultural education. In a similar way, multiple laws, regulations, and policies in China have explicitly addressed the relationship between the national language and minority languages since the 1980s (Wang and Lehtomäki, 2022). For instance, the 2001 "Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial)" (*You'eryuan jiaoyu zhidao gangyao*) issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education outlines overall requirements for bilingual education and education for cultural diversity in early childhood education. The 2012 "Guidelines for Learning and Development of Children Aged 3-6" (*3-6 sui ertong xuexi yu fazhan zhinan*) sets stage-specific goals for dialect regions and minority children to master both the national language and their ethnic or regional language, along with corresponding educational recommendations. The 2015 "Decision of the State Council on Accelerating the Development of Ethnic Education" (*Guowuyuan guanyu jiakuai fazhan minzu jiaoyu de jueding*) recognizes bilingual education as a crucial but under - developed aspect of ethnic education. It advocates the principle of "scientifically

and steadily promoting bilingual education”. This approach not only guarantees that ethnic minority students attain a basic proficiency in the national language but also respects and safeguards the rights of ethnic minorities. Specifically, it places emphasis on the improvement of a coherent and systematically structured bilingual teaching framework in regions with underdeveloped education. However, there is still a lack of curriculum standards specific to guide bilingual early childhood education in ethnic regions of China. For instance, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture has been promoting early childhood education since 2018 through the ‘one village, one preschool’ initiative, emphasizing proficiency in Mandarin Chinese since early years. However, little evidence is available to showcase the effects of this initiative. Wang’s (2017) research findings one year ahead still pointed out the undeveloped bilingual education in this area. When carrying out investigations and interviews with local officials and teachers in 2018, we have identified the lack of early childhood education teachers challenges in this area. Teachers were lack of confidence in their self- efficacy to meet the official requirements of helping children master the national language while improving their mother tongue proficiency.

Drawing from Finland’s experience in reforming preschool education curriculum standards and considering the current state of bilingual preschool education in Liangshan, we consider there would be potential transferability:

1. **Balanced Multicultural Development:** Leveraging the existing bilingual education resources in Liangshan, it is necessary to abandon the current understanding of using the mother tongue as a transitional tool in early childhood bilingual education. Instead, promoting simultaneous development of both Yi language and Mandarin Chinese will better facilitate the joint growth of bilingual proficiency.
2. **Cultivating Children’s Intercultural Competence:** Respecting the developmental characteristics of children’s language abilities during the early years and focusing on the simultaneous development of both languages. In concrete, it would be recommended that educators clearly define their usage of language, either Yi language or Mandarin Chinese, when carrying out different routines and activities with children, and their language use should be consistent and discernible during their interactions with children, rather than alternating between these two languages. This division of language use refers to educators’ consistent communication with children in a single language, and one educator can use only one single language with children.
3. **Fostering Minority Children’s Cultural Self-esteem:** Minority cultures are integral to Chinese culture (Yuan and Zhou, 2021). Nurturing self-esteem in one’s own culture from an early age not only promotes the preservation of minority cultures but also enhances children’s understanding and identification with Chinese culture. In practice, incorporating elements of minority culture into teaching content and activities benefits both cultural transmission and children’s self-confidence.

There are some limitations in this study. It is inevitable to hold a substantialist perspective to understand multicultural early childhood education in both Finnish and Chinese contexts, because our findings are mainly drawn from the analysis of the official discourses in the form of national curriculum. Although the Finnish understanding of multicultural education has shifted from the assimilationist approach to critical multicultural education where equality between cultures is emphasized, the understanding of cultural diversity remains substantialist with ethnicity and language as main criteria to set up the cultural boundary (Paavola and Pesonen, 2021). The multicultural early childhood education in China is based on similar premise. It is notable that promoting equality between ethnic groups on the basis of language rights could have its own bias of ignoring the language rights of people such as immigrants who are not

member of any identified language groups (Wang and Jokikokko, 2022). As the data of this research consists of national curricular, the findings cannot represent the actual practices in the early childhood education and care environment. For this reason, empirical research is needed to further understand the Finnish multicultural early childhood education and care. In this study, we have used an illustrative approach of comparison to reflect on the current encounters of multicultural early childhood education in Chinese Liangshan Yi Prefecture. In the future, a parallel comparison of national curriculum in both contexts could give more insights.

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