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Professional agency and emotional climate in bilingual preschool

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Abstract

This study investigates teacher agency in preschool bilingual education, focusing on the ways in which educators deal with linguistic, cultural, and relational dynamics in Finnish–Russian early childhood contexts. Drawing on educators' reflections, the findings show that professional agency extends beyond curriculum delivery to include identity work, creative self-expression, and the cultivation of an affective environment that supports children's linguistic, socio-emotional, and cultural development. Interviewed members of the staff highlight the significance of their native language and cultural experience as foundations for transmitting knowledge and values, while also recognizing the need for professional development to deepen their understanding of bilingual acquisition processes. The study further demonstrates that bilingual education is shaped by the emotional climate, relational atmosphere, and affective atmosphere of preschools, where cooperation with parents, collegial support, and child–teacher bonds play decisive roles. At the same time, educators face challenges such as heavy workloads, limited resources, and difficulties in engaging parents, which reveal a tension between the ideal of collaborative bilingualism and the realities of everyday practice. The research aligns with global perspectives on flexible bilingual strategies—such as the "one teacher–one language" approach and translanguaging—and underscores the importance of systemic support, professional development, and inclusive policies. The findings suggest that effective bilingual education requires not only linguistic expertise but also emotional commitment, cultural sensitivity, and empathetic collaboration across teachers, parents, and institutions..

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Introduction

Bilingual education in early childhood has gained increasing attention as societies grapple with linguistic diversity, migration, and the preservation of minority languages. In preschool contexts, the task of supporting bilingual development extends beyond the teaching of vocabulary and grammar: it involves cultivating an affective environment and an emotional climate in which children, teachers, and families feel supported, valued, and connected.

In the full immersion model, 70–100% of the day's activities are conducted in the target language. This method emphasizes communication through which both models and specific words should be learned. In partial immersion, approximately 50% of the day is spent in the child's second language, and the remaining time is spent in their native language. This approach allows for a balanced introduction to both languages. The two-way immersion model brings together children from different language groups, allowing them to learn from each other while developing skills in both languages. Finally, the language can be taught in specially organized classes. The multicultural environment of a bilingual kindergarten promotes tolerance for the behavioral peculiarities of children and adults from different ethnic backgrounds and understanding of cultural differences, enriching the experience acquired by children, especially when a friendly, emotionally supportive atmosphere prevails in the group. Emotional contact encourages the use of all languages. The family language policy has become much better known to the preschool teachers.

Insights from broader research on professional agency can be fruitfully extended to the field of bilingual education, reminding us that teacher agency is not only an analytical construct but also a lived experience. It involves the daily struggles, commitments, and creative choices teachers make when working in settings where language is both a pedagogical goal and the medium of practice. Recognizing how this agency is exercised, constrained, and supported becomes especially important in contexts such as bilingual day care, where teachers' decisions directly shape children's opportunities to learn, to belong, and to feel at home in more than one language.

The present study is dedicated to the peculiarities of pedagogical activities in a bilingual preschool institution where Finnish and Russian languages are used, based on interviews with the staff of this institution. Parents and educators jointly support and develop bilingualism. Parents, many of whom are also bilingual, in kindergarten and at home are not always able to control and regulate their own speech (cf. Haque & Le Lièvre 2019; 2024). Meanwhile, children actively engage in dialogues in their language of interest, and when necessary, educators switch to the child's stronger language to establish contact and ensure comfortable information perception and later, they return to another language to facilitate gradual acquisition of the second language. Therefore, educators use various methods to create a stable base for language acquisition (Protassova & Silkin 2025).

Since kindergarten does not strictly require the exclusive use of either Finnish or Russian, teachers tend to make use of translingual method (cf. Balodis et al. 2024; Olğun-Baytaş et al. 2023; Palviainen et al. 2016). Different educators apply different approaches, considering experience, the child's language, and learning goals. Some

educators adhere to the principle of complete understanding even with complex formulation, while others believe that initial stages can include adaptation and intuitive situation understanding, and formal language acquisition will come later. Full immersion in Finnish, especially in the school preparation process, helps Russian-speaking children develop skills without constant dependence on translation (Protassova & Silkin 2024).

The research questions are: How do teachers, children, and parents co-construct bilingual learning in preschool contexts, and what roles and interactions shape this process? In what ways does the affective climate of bilingual preschools influence children's motivation, socio-emotional development, and teachers' professional commitment? How do educators balance different bilingual teaching strategies in response to children's individual needs and institutional goals? What barriers and opportunities shape collaboration between educators and parents in fostering bilingualism, and how can educators engage parents in low-commitment yet meaningful ways? How do teachers' native languages and cultural experiences function as resources for transmitting values and knowledge in bilingual preschool education? How do systemic factors—such as leadership, policy, and institutional support—affect teacher agency, collaboration, and the creation of an inclusive socio-emotional setting in bilingual preschools?

Theoretical Background

It is widely recognized that bilingual education contributes to the development of emotional intelligence, as children learn to understand and interpret social cues in more than one language (Axelrod 2014). This dual exposure fosters empathy and enhances communication skills, helping children navigate intercultural interactions with sensitivity. Bilingual environments not only promote linguistic competence but also nurture emotional awareness, enabling children to interpret feelings and intentions across linguistic boundaries. However, research suggests that while bilingual children often excel in recognizing emotions in diverse contexts, their emotional expression may develop more slowly compared to monolingual peers (Cha & Goldenberg 2015; MacLeod & Demers 2023; Bukhalenkova et al. 2022).

Educators frequently observe that bilingual settings cultivate tolerance and cultural understanding, preparing children for both academic and social success (Ertanir et al. 2021; Ren et al. 2016). Within such environments, emotional support and genuine care are crucial for positive outcomes. When evaluating the effectiveness of bilingual kindergartens, scholars stress the importance of considering not only language immersion and curriculum design but also the emotional climate of the learning space, teacher qualifications, and the school's ability to create a safe, inclusive, and engaging atmosphere (Benz 2017; Pinter 2011; Thompson 1999).

The bilingual context often poses challenges—limited resources, varying language proficiency levels, and complex communication with parents—but these challenges also reveal the institution's strength and adaptability (Fu & Weng 2023; Mazzanti & Cardozo-Gaibisso 2022). Successful educators remain aware of the latest research developments and actively engage in reflection and professional growth

(Beauchamp 2014; Suphasri & Chinokul 2021; De Ruyter & Koleargue 2010). Reflection allows teachers to connect emotional experience with pedagogical practice, reinforcing the moral and social dimensions of teaching.

Karimi et al. (2025) highlight the significance of teacher emotions as a vital component of both personal and professional development in language education. Emotions shape teachers' self-perception, interactions, and agency, influencing how they support children's emotional and linguistic growth. A key insight from their work is that emotions—whether expressed through surface acting, deep acting, or genuine engagement—can serve as indicators of teachers' beliefs and goals, shaping classroom atmosphere and relationships. Porter et al. (2022) further demonstrate how teachers' professional agency is intertwined with strong emotions such as care, curiosity, cooperation, and challenge, all of which influence motivation and pedagogical decision-making. Similarly, Rodrigo-Ruiz (2016) shows that teacher emotions directly affect students' emotional competence, motivation, and social behavior, emphasizing that emotional regulation and the ability to discern appropriate emotional expression are essential skills for educators.

Levine Brown et al. (2022) examine how preschool teachers perform emotional labor in interactions with children, families, and colleagues, finding that both surface and deep emotional acting are integral to relationship-building and classroom harmony. Their findings highlight that emotional management is not merely performative but a core aspect of early childhood education that shapes relational intimacy and trust. Emotional dynamics are thus central to maintaining a supportive classroom environment.

Emotional and reflective practices intersect with cognitive and social dimensions of learning. Suphasri & Chinokul (2021) point out that reflective practice, supported by digital tools and collaboration, enhances teachers' ability to interpret and respond to children's emotions. In bilingual classrooms, this awareness extends to how children's feelings are mediated through two linguistic systems. Sampson & Yoshida (2020) demonstrate that learners' emotions evolve dynamically and relationally, shaped by contextual and interpersonal factors. Similarly, Leung (2019) shows that bilingual children use translanguaging not only to communicate but also to express feelings through visual and linguistic means—drawing, gestures, and hybrid language use become vehicles for emotional expression.

Research on teacher agency further underscores its crucial role in shaping emotional and linguistic environments (Cong-Lem 2024; Emans et al. 2025). Teacher agency is a socially embedded process expressed through collaboration, reflection, and identity work. In bilingual preschools, agency is exercised through relational care, curriculum design, and culturally responsive teaching practices that integrate emotion with language learning. Teachers often act as mediators between institutional demands, parental expectations, and the emotional well-being of children. This emotional and pedagogical flexibility supports the creation of a warm, trusting, and culturally sensitive atmosphere.

In addition to emotional and professional dimensions, bilingualism also influences cognitive outcomes. Studies have shown that bilingual children may

outperform monolingual peers in executive function tasks requiring problem-solving, switching attention, and multitasking—although findings are mixed (Bar & Shaul 2021; Celedón-Pattichis & Turner 2012; Krause et al. 2023). More consistently, bilingual exposure enriches cultural awareness and emotional openness, fostering sensitivity and adaptability in social interactions (Korecky-Kröll et al. 2024; Kwakkel et al. 2021; Lipner et al. 2021, 2024).

Recognizing emotions specific to each culture becomes more intuitive for children raised in multilingual, multicultural environments (Möller et al. 2022; Protassova 2021). For example, Finnish adults who attended bilingual preschools report that they are able to "read" Russian emotional expressions with ease, having grown up interpreting facial and vocal cues across two cultures. This early exposure helps them feel comfortable in diverse environments where multiple emotional and linguistic codes coexist naturally.

Finally, studies such as Sisson (2023) show how emotionally responsive pedagogy can transform the learning experience for children affected by migration. When teachers recognize children's emotions and cultural repertoires as valid sources of knowledge, they co-construct learning environments that are emotionally supportive, inclusive, and empowering. Thus, the emotional atmosphere in bilingual preschool education is not merely a background condition but a dynamic and constitutive element of children's development—linking emotional intelligence, intercultural understanding, and linguistic growth into a cohesive educational experience.

Materials and Methods

The study adopts an ethnographic approach, drawing on observation, interpretation, semi-structured interviews, discourse and thematic analysis (Mukherji & Albon 2010). The research gathered insights from 18 staff members in a Finnish-Russian bilingual preschool in spring 2023, identifying key teaching beliefs and strategies and analysis of daily interactions among the staff members, parents, and children. The methodology of conducting separate interviews with each participant, allowing for open dialogue and thematic analysis, is integral to addressing the research questions about adults' recognition of children's language use, the emergence of language constellations in various contexts, and staff's understanding of their role in a multilingual world. By organizing subgroups based on goals, language, age, and abilities, and coordinating through weekly planning and pedagogical meetings, educators exercise teacher agency, which is crucial in managing the complexities of bilingual preschool education. By continuously participating in professional development, educators can enhance their understanding of the educational process, incorporating results from individual and collective reflection obtained during interviews. This approach enables a nuanced exploration of how adults perceive and adapt to the dynamic linguistic environment, reflecting their agency in fostering effective bilingual practices. Through these methodological strategies, the research aims to illuminate the interconnectedness of teacher agency and the broader objectives

of bilingual education in preschool settings. The excerpts from the interviews are given in italics.

Results

Professional Agency

The profession presents both challenges and rewards. While educators derive joy and fulfillment from working with children, they face difficulties related to team interactions, bureaucratic demands, complex relationships with parents, and physical exertion. A supportive workplace atmosphere and collaboration with like-minded colleagues are crucial for successful and comfortable work. Despite the benefits, educators face challenges, such as communication issues with colleagues and parents, who often hold high expectations and concerns for their children. Additional obstacles include limited resources, staff shortages, and administrative burdens, which can complicate planning and daily activities. Nonetheless, educators value the positive atmosphere, the support from their colleagues, and the chance to improvise, seeing their work as a meaningful contribution to the children's development. The results show that educators emphasize the importance of teaching in the native language and utilizing their own cultural heritage to effectively convey knowledge and values. They see this work as a form of creative self-expression and find joy in interactions with children from whom they receive positive feedback and support. Educators focus on communication and interaction, supporting mutual understanding. Emotional connections with educators and parents play a significant role in forming children's interest in studying and using languages. The importance of conducting all events in both Russian and Finnish for children and parents is repeatedly emphasized.

Nevertheless, educators face a number of difficulties, among which communication challenges with colleagues and parents stand out. Work requires tolerance skills, the ability to listen and accept diverse opinions, and the ability to negotiate in conditions of disagreements. In communication with parents, tense moments sometimes arise due to their high expectations and anxieties about children. Educators also note that children's anxiety is often transmitted from adults, complicating work with them. Among physical and administrative challenges faced by educators are lack of resources and staff, and limited time for planning. These factors sometimes complicate the organization of classes and events. Older educators find it physically difficult to cope with the load, and the lack of substitute workers further expands their responsibilities.

(Ex. 1) Active communication with children naturally immerses them in the language environment. Emotional contact encourages the use of all languages:

EO: *I consider myself a native speaker of Russian, and my main task is to provide Finnish children with a positive image of a person who embodies Russian culture, while supporting the native language of Russian-speaking children. I achieve this through daily interactions and implementing educational plans using various methods. These plans are based on our framework, which aligns with municipal and state preschool education plans.*

The educator EO's orientation highlights an important dual role: on the one hand, she positions herself as a bearer of Russian linguistic and cultural identity, and on the other, she assumes responsibility for aligning her pedagogical practice with institutional frameworks. This articulation illustrates how professional agency in bilingual settings is simultaneously grounded in personal identity and institutional expectations. Equally significant is the emotional dimension of her self-description. By framing her task as providing children with a positive image of a person who embodies Russian culture, she underscores the affective side of teaching. Identity work here is not only about transmitting linguistic knowledge but also about shaping attitudes, feelings of belonging, and intercultural openness. The daily interactions she mentions serve as both pedagogical tools and relational practices that foster trust and warmth, making the learning of language and culture a lived, meaningful experience for the children. Thus, the statement captures a balance between formalized planning and the deeply human aspect of bilingual education: the educator's professional actions are inseparable from her emotional presence and the image she conveys through her personhood:

(Ex. 2) Various methods are employed to enhance language skills, including reading aloud, watching cartoons, engaging in physical activities, and involving parents in the language development process. Immersion in Finnish tasks, without reliance on translation, promotes better language perception:

FN: *I love children; they give me positive energy. I assist my colleagues, focusing on children's well-being and comfort. Education should be multifaceted, using crafts, physical education, and various methods.*

The educator FN's reflection foregrounds the affective foundations of her professional practice. By stating "I love children; they give me positive energy," she situates emotional reciprocity at the center of her work. This highlights the relational character of teacher agency, where professional motivation and resilience are sustained not only by institutional demands but also by the joy and vitality that emerge from interactions with children. Her emphasis on supporting colleagues and prioritizing children's well-being and comfort illustrates a holistic orientation that extends beyond instructional goals to encompass the socio-emotional environment of early education. This commitment reflects a broader understanding of education as care, where pedagogical responsibility is interwoven with empathy and collaboration. Her call for multifaceted education—incorporating crafts, physical activity, and varied methods—underscores the importance of engaging children through diverse modes of learning. Here, pedagogical creativity aligns with an emotional commitment to nurturing the whole child. Together, these elements demonstrate how professional agency in early childhood education is enacted not only through planned curricula but also through the emotional energy, collegial solidarity, and imaginative practices that teachers bring to their daily work.

(Ex. 3) The educator SK's statement reflects a holistic vision of bilingual development, where linguistic skills are cultivated alongside cultural enrichment and affective engagement:

SK: *Overall development includes supporting interest in both Finnish and Russian, reading in the native language, teaching language distinction, and encouraging quick language switching. We enrich everyday language necessary for school, using music, poetry, and rhymes.*

By emphasizing support for both Finnish and Russian, SK highlights the dual responsibility of fostering continuity in the child's heritage language while also preparing them for participation in the majority language environment. This dual orientation situates bilingualism not as a problem to be managed, but as a resource to be cultivated. Her focus on teaching language distinction and encouraging quick language switching demonstrates awareness of the cognitive and communicative strategies that bilingual children must develop. These practices are framed not only as technical competencies but also as essential tools for building confidence in managing multilingual spaces. Equally significant is the affective dimension: the use of music, poetry, and rhymes reveals how emotional resonance and aesthetic experience enrich everyday language learning. These creative methods do more than expand vocabulary; they nurture joy, rhythm, and a sense of belonging, making linguistic development deeply connected to children's lived experiences. In this way, SK's perspective shows how professional agency in bilingual education intertwines systematic language support with emotionally engaging practices, ensuring that the process of becoming bilingual is not only cognitively effective but also personally meaningful.

(Ex. 4) EG's statement underscores the importance of shared cultural practices—such as celebrations, performances, and media consumption—as powerful vehicles for bilingual development:

EG: *Regular celebrations and shows can be performed in one language or the other, alternating between the two, or incorporating both languages during the performance. Watching programs together where there is dancing or singing can also be beneficial.*

By noting that events can be conducted in one language, alternated between the two, or blended within a single performance, she highlights the flexible and dynamic ways in which bilingualism can be fostered in communal settings. Such practices normalize multilingual expression, framing it as part of everyday life rather than as a compartmentalized activity. The reference to watching programs together with dancing or singing points to the affective and social dimensions of language learning. These activities create joy, foster group cohesion, and provide opportunities for embodied participation, where children experience language through movement, rhythm, and shared enjoyment. In this way, the emotional resonance of music and performance amplifies the pedagogical impact, making linguistic development inseparable from positive affect and collective experience. EG's perspective illustrates how professional agency in bilingual education extends beyond classroom instruction to the orchestration of cultural and communal experiences. By integrating celebration, art, and entertainment into language learning, educators not only support linguistic competence but also cultivate a sense of belonging and pride in both languages:

(Ex. 5) DI's reflection emphasizes the central role of inclusivity in bilingual education:

DI: *Since our kindergarten is bilingual, communication should be clear for both Finnish and Russian speakers, ensuring Russians do not feel forgotten and Finns do not feel pressured to understand everything. Translating during events is ideal, ensuring comfort for both sides. Music, dances, scenes, and theatrical performances should be more prevalent in kindergarten celebrations. Tea parties with parents, inviting them to the group, allow for conversations and help parents get to know each other better, understanding family dynamics and children's behavior.*

By noting the importance of making communication accessible to both Finnish and Russian speakers, DI highlights the ethical dimension of bilingual practice: ensuring that no group feels marginalized or overburdened. The call for translation during events is particularly significant, as it frames bilingualism not only as a pedagogical issue but also as a matter of emotional comfort and social belonging. Her emphasis on music, dances, scenes, and theatrical performances situates celebrations as key sites where linguistic and cultural identities are enacted. These practices provide affective resonance, allowing children to experience bilingualism as joyful, physically rich, and creative. They also function as collective rituals that strengthen group cohesion and affirm cultural diversity. DI's mention of tea parties with parents expands the scope of professional agency beyond the classroom to family and community engagement. Such practices acknowledge that children's bilingual development is embedded within family dynamics, and that teachers play a mediating role in fostering mutual understanding between families. These informal gatherings not only facilitate dialogue but also humanize the educational process, strengthening trust and emotional bonds between educators and parents. DI's perspective illustrates how bilingual education can be grounded in principles of inclusivity, cultural expression, and community connection, where professional practices are inseparable from relational and emotional care.

Some educators focus on the gradual integration of Russian, using songs and small performances to make the learning process enjoyable and accessible. This approach reflects an understanding of how music and creative activities can break down language barriers, making the process of acquiring a second language less intimidating and more engaging for children.

(Ex. 6) SK's reflection demonstrates a strong sense of professional responsibility and intentionality, emphasizing that all activities must be grounded in clear pedagogical reasoning. This aligns with research on teacher agency as a process of thoughtful planning and justification of practice:

SK: *We work in all areas, planning activities to develop important skills. Everything done should be justified: why, what for, and how. I prepare extensively, using online resources, especially for language and math lessons. Mathematics is taught primarily in Finnish due to the lack of Finnish-speaking educators, ensuring children first learn in their native language before introducing Russian.*

SK's extensive preparation, particularly the use of online resources, illustrates both dedication and adaptability in responding to the demands of bilingual education. At the same time, the choice to prioritize Finnish in mathematics teaching—while ensuring children consolidate their native language first—reveals the tensions teachers

face in balancing linguistic and curricular goals. This decision-making reflects not only practical constraints (e.g., the shortage of Finnish-speaking educators) but also an affective commitment to safeguarding children's linguistic identities while supporting their academic development. The commentary highlights the relational atmosphere underpinning SK's work: careful planning and adaptation serve not just cognitive outcomes but also the emotional climate of learning, helping children feel secure and valued as bilingual learners.

(Ex. 7) IO's method involves a clear schedule of daily activities, with specific days dedicated to reading, crafts, singing, and physical education:

IO: *We have a schedule for daily activities, reading on Mondays, crafts on Tuesdays, singing on Wednesdays, and physical education on Thursdays. Activities are divided by language groups, focusing on strengthening the weaker language.*

By dividing activities into language groups and focusing on strengthening the weaker language, IO ensures that both Finnish and Russian are given equal attention. This structured approach reflects the importance of planning and consistency in bilingual education, allowing children to develop their skills in both languages systematically.

Educators adopt different philosophies regarding language teaching, some advocating for starting communication in the child's native language before transitioning to the target language, while others support foreign language learning even with less-than-native proficiency. The consensus is that understanding the essence of communication is paramount, with details refined subsequently. The bilingual environment of the kindergarten fosters gradual and harmonious language mastery, supporting both familial and societal languages, thereby enhancing language skills and strengthening social ties within an emotionally and culturally enriched setting. The educators' reflections collectively illustrate the multifaceted nature of professional agency in bilingual early childhood education. While each voice emphasizes different priorities, taken together they reveal how pedagogical action is inseparable from cultural positioning, emotional investment, and community engagement. By extending bilingual practices into celebrations and parent gatherings, educators highlight the community dimension of professional agency. Teachers do more than deliver curricula: they embody culture, cultivate joy, sustain emotional connections, and mediate between families, institutions, and communities. Their practices demonstrate that bilingual education is never purely technical; it is deeply human, requiring the weaving together of professional skill, emotional presence, and cultural sensitivity.

Working with Families

Regarding the development of bilingualism, the primary objective is to create conditions conducive to the native language's growth, enriching children's knowledge and speech. Tea parties with parents serve as relational bridges, deepening mutual understanding of children's lives and strengthening the educator–parent partnership. Across these accounts, professional agency in bilingual early education emerges as a complex interplay of identity, care, creativity, cultural expression, and inclusivity. Collaboration with immigrant parents, particularly those from Russian-speaking

backgrounds, is crucial, emphasizing the importance of Finnish in the child's life and advocating for balanced bilingualism.

(Ex. 8, 9) Both BA and JK highlight significant challenges in achieving ideal collaboration.

BA notes that many parents seem disengaged, focusing only on basic logistical concerns (e.g., whether their child ate or drank) and avoiding deeper involvement in their child's educational or linguistic development due to their busy work lives. This lack of engagement undermines the collaborative efforts needed to support bilingualism. Additionally, BA points to broader difficulties in team dynamics among educators, which may further complicate communication and coordination with families:

BA: *Working with parents has become difficult. Parents have lost interest in collaborative efforts, focusing only on mundane inquiries such as whether their child ate or drank. They have very basic expectations from the kindergarten, preferring not to be disturbed since everyone is working. Working with children remains easy, but integrating into a team and finding like-minded colleagues is challenging, especially when opinions about the group differ. It's frustrating when established adult groups are split, leading to a new environment where both children and adults miss each other. In an ideal team, differing opinions are discussed, such as whether to bring live branches, and people should compromise instead of adhering to a single viewpoint. I have principles I cannot compromise on, such as not allowing the construction of weapons or military games, although sports shooting at targets might be acceptable.*

JK adds another layer to these challenges, describing parents as anxious and overly concerned about their children's development, often influenced by external factors such as the global situation. This anxiety can create tension in parent-teacher relationships, making it harder to foster a positive and cooperative atmosphere. While JK acknowledges the importance of reassuring parents and addressing their concerns, the emotional toll of managing these interactions can strain the educator's ability to focus on bilingualism initiatives:

JK: *The hardest part of the job is dealing with parents. Children are wonderful, positive, and smart, but anxious parents sometimes make me wonder if I should suggest psychological help either for them or myself due to their high anxiety levels. The global situation affects everyone, leading to concerns about children's sleep, speech, and friendships, which can be transferred to the children. It's challenging to reassure parents about normal child development and explain that experiences like sitting in a puddle are part of growth.*

The contradiction arises from the gap between the idealized vision of parental collaboration and the practical difficulties educators face in engaging parents. While the goal is to involve parents in fostering bilingualism through joint activities, clubs, and natural play situations, the reality is that many parents are either disengaged (as BA describes) or overly anxious and difficult to work with (as JK describes). These challenges hinder the ability to create the supportive, collaborative environment needed for balanced bilingualism. Family preferences significantly influence language development, with educational institutions serving to support these choices. Effective

bilingualism development involves creating natural play situations, utilizing visual aids, and encouraging parental involvement in clubs and joint activities.

(Ex. 10, 11) UT primarily uses Russian in their interactions with children, supported by games and toys to make the learning process interactive and engaging:

UT: *I primarily use Russian, with support from games and toys. Working with a large number of children, we adhere to plans and inform parents.*

UT also emphasizes the importance of adhering to plans and keeping parents informed, reinforcing the idea that collaboration and communication with families are essential for successful bilingual education.

TY highlights the importance of engaging children through play, books, music, and other interactive activities:

TY: *To develop bilingualism, play, engage, read books, and music lessons are very helpful. Good relationships with parents are crucial, as they inquire and show interest, creating mutual love and contact.*

TY also stresses the significance of building good relationships with parents, suggesting that parental involvement and interest create a positive feedback loop that enhances children's bilingual development. This aligns with the broader theme of collaboration between educators and families as a cornerstone of bilingual education.

Bilingual education is inherently tied to the principles of inclusive education, as it seeks to accommodate diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Teachers' strategies, such as using play, visual aids, and group activities, ensure that all children, regardless of their language proficiency, can participate and succeed. The division of responsibilities between Finnish-speaking and Russian-speaking staff further promotes inclusivity by addressing the needs of children from different linguistic backgrounds. Inclusive education also involves engaging parents, as TY and UT emphasize, to create a supportive and collaborative environment that values diversity and promotes equity.

The shift from traditional, structured preschool education (as seen in countries like Russia or Ukraine) to Finland's play-based, child-centered approach represents a broader trend in educational change. This transformation reflects a growing recognition of the importance of holistic development and the role of play in fostering language acquisition. Teachers adapt to this new philosophy, embody the process of educational change, as they reconcile their previous experiences with the demands of a new system. This change also reflects a paradigm shift in early childhood education, where the focus is on creating inclusive, flexible, and culturally responsive learning environments.

A recurring theme is the importance of parental involvement. Educators explicitly mention the need for good relationships with parents and keeping them informed. This aligns with the broader goal of creating a cohesive support system where educators and parents work together to foster bilingualism. When parents show interest and engage with the process, it reinforces the efforts made in the classroom and helps children see both languages as valuable and relevant in their lives. The statements collectively highlight how a cohesive team of educators, structured and flexible approaches, and collaboration with parents create the foundation for effective bilingual education. By dividing responsibilities based on language proficiency, introducing languages gradually, and using engaging activities like play, music, and storytelling, educators

can create an environment where children naturally develop skills in both languages. At the same time, maintaining open communication and strong relationships with parents ensures that these efforts are supported and reinforced outside the classroom.

Educational leadership is critical in fostering a cohesive team of educators and facilitating collaboration among Finnish-speaking and Russian-speaking staff. Leaders play a key role in promoting shared goals, providing professional development, and supporting teachers in implementing bilingual education strategies. For instance, the structured schedule and division of activities by language groups suggest the presence of strong leadership that ensures consistency and alignment with educational objectives. Effective leadership also fosters a culture of collaboration, where differing opinions are discussed and resolved to create a harmonious and productive team environment. This method not only supports cognitive and linguistic development but also nurtures creativity, social skills, and emotional well-being.

The observations also connect to broader theoretical frameworks, such as teacher-child-family-community interaction, teachers' culture, and inclusive education. For instance, observing how educators engage with children and families reveals the importance of building strong relationships to support language development. Across all these approaches, the common thread is the need for flexibility and gradual integration of the second language. Whether through play, music, structured schedules, or creative performances, educators adapt their methods based on the children's language proficiency levels, ensuring that learning remains accessible and enjoyable. The division of responsibilities between Finnish-speaking and Russian-speaking staff further supports this flexibility, allowing each educator to contribute their linguistic strengths to the team effort. Teachers perceive this work as an opportunity for creative self-expression, sincerely enjoy interacting with children, receiving positive feedback and support from them.

Discussion and Conclusions

The current study shows that teacher agency in preschool bilingual education involves understanding the roles and interactions between teachers, children, and parents, focusing on how each party influences language learning. Cooperation between educators and parents plays a crucial role in maintaining bilingualism. The study punctuates the importance of educators' native language and cultural experience, which serves as the foundation for imparting knowledge and values to children. The results also indicate that adults perceive their work as a form of creative self-expression and find inspiration in interacting with children. This explains the significance of the emotional climate and the affective environment in which teaching and learning take place, shaping not only language outcomes but also teachers' motivation and children's socio-emotional development.

Teachers face challenges while working in bilingual spaces and must balance different language teaching strategies, such as the "one teacher–one language" approach and translanguaging, to effectively support children's language acquisition. This coincides with the findings of Schwartz (2018) and colleagues, which illuminate the importance of creating language-conducive contexts and employing flexible

language practices, accentuating the need for professional development to align teachers' beliefs with their practices. In these aspects, the findings of our research align with global experiences. Flexible language strategies are employed, taking into account the individual characteristics of children and the goals set by the educational team. The socio-emotional setting of the preschool plays a key role here: the relational atmosphere between teachers and children fosters trust, curiosity, and motivation, even though not every child achieves equally high levels of proficiency.

The emotional bond between adults and children contributes to the formation of stable motivation to learn both languages. This affective climate—marked by warmth, encouragement, and playfulness—supports children's resilience in navigating the demands of bilingualism. At the same time, teachers must manage difficulties in communication with parents and colleagues, lack of resources, high workload, and physical exhaustion. Educators nevertheless emphasize the significance of their mission and value the creative freedom, team support, and positive moments of interaction with children. These experiences strengthen their professional motivation and commitment to the profession (cf. Zosh et al. 2022).

Educators in bilingual preschool institutions also stress the special significance of working in their native language and the richness of their cultural experience, which help effectively transmit knowledge and values to children. Yet, they acknowledge that intuition and experience cannot fully replace systematic knowledge of bilingual development. A broader societal literacy about language could help bridge this gap. For example, introducing linguistics as a separate school subject might provide the general population with more accurate knowledge about language acquisition, similarities and differences between languages, and the relationship between language and culture (cf. Dahlberg & Moss 2008). Such knowledge is essential for fostering an informed and inclusive emotional tone in discussions about bilingualism at the societal level.

Despite the difficulties, educators value the positive affective environment of their workplace, the support of colleagues, and inspiring moments of cooperation with children. They also highlight the importance of creative freedom and improvisation, which thrive in an atmosphere of mutual understanding within the team. Educators believe that their work requires sincere commitment and strive to make it as beneficial and positive as possible for children.

At the same time, the study underscores the challenges of collaboration with parents. While educators view parent–teacher cooperation as central to fostering bilingualism, they also describe barriers, such as limited parental availability, competing priorities, and occasional disengagement. Addressing these challenges requires sensitivity to parents' circumstances and the use of creative, low-commitment strategies—such as bilingual take-home activities, digital resources, or short workshops. By responding compassionately to parental concerns about children's sleep, speech, or friendships, educators can strengthen trust and create a more supportive relational atmosphere.

There is thus a subtle tension between the ideal of fostering bilingualism through close collaboration with parents and the reality of strained interactions. The affective

climate of these relationships is central: when positive, it enables parents to see themselves as partners in their children's bilingual development; when negative or absent, it undermines shared responsibility for language maintenance. Collaboration with parents, particularly those from immigrant Russian-speaking backgrounds, is vital for nurturing children's native language while promoting Finnish for balanced bilingualism.

Finally, the development of bilingualism in early childhood education is a multifaceted process that intersects with key theoretical frameworks, including teacher–child–family–community interaction, teachers' cultural and professional agency, language education policy, and inclusive education. By fostering collaboration, leveraging cultural and linguistic strengths, and implementing innovative strategies, educators create an affective environment where children can thrive linguistically, socially, and emotionally. At the same time, these efforts are shaped by broader systemic factors such as leadership, policy, and institutional support. Together, these elements contribute to a coherent framework for understanding and advancing bilingual education in diverse and dynamic contexts.

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