

Research articles

Enabling multilingualism or disabling multilinguals? Interrogating linguistic discrimination in Swedish preschool policy

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Abstract

In this paper we conduct a poststructural discourse analysis inspired by Carol Bacchi's 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WRP) approach. We explore what kinds of problems are formulated in preschool educational policy on multilingualism, and what underlying assumptions underlie the dominant discourse on language proficiency in Sweden. Serving as a case to discuss how racism, ableism and childism intersect with linguicism, we examine the importance of shifting from a 'children's (special) needs' discourse to a 'children's (language) rights' discourse through a social justice education framework. We draw upon Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's understanding of childism, which refers to prejudice and discrimination against children based on beliefs about their inferiority to adults. The right to and rights in education are contingent upon linguistic rights, upon students learning to use their first language, whether that be minority, indigenous or sign language.

Keywords

Childism, racism, ableism, linguicism, human rights, education, raciolinguistics, preschool, WPR

Introduction

The norms transmitted through the practices and policies of the earliest stages of the school system impact what is valued in terms of language, race/ethnicity, and culture. Human Rights Education (HRE) is a suitable area to re-emphasize what society needs in terms of information, knowledge and innovation, as well as the different types of rights (social, civic) of parents and children (Quennerstedt, 2009), and what dilemmas arise in regard to who a person is able to become, in terms of the languages and modalities they are allowed to use in school (Murray, De Meulder & Le Maire, 2018; Snoddon & Murray, 2019) Spreading knowledge about views and implicit biases about difference, particularly about who belongs to a nation, requires a constant awareness of unexamined notions about language and language learning (Paul & Adams Lyngbäck, 2022). Connecting linguistic human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000) to the development of ideas sustaining equality, democracy and the freedom to develop and reach ones' potential is the first intellectual step in detecting the harm caused by monoculturalism and monolingualism in super-diverse societies (Vertovec, 2007). The second step is to address the underutilization of affirmative pedagogical practices regarding multilingualism in schools.

The value of dialogue and participatory joint reflections with students has been stressed in HRE literature (Bajaj, 2011; Tibbits and Katz, 2017) but, as Ann Quennerstedt notes, 'almost no attention has been paid to language aspects in the teaching of human rights' (2019). This is 'despite this common conviction of the value of communication' among HRE scholars (2019, p. 2). We extend Quennerstedt's argument on the value of vocabulary in HRE to the need for multilingual appreciation and teaching to ensure the educational rights of marginalized students. What we are addressing in this article is the avoidable harm caused by a monocultural educational system (Teshfahoney, 1999), in respect to how language approaches in preschools contribute to the overrepresentation of multilingual children and students in the segregated provision of special education (Adams Lyngbäck, Bunar & Paul, forthcoming) as well as underrepresentation in access to appropriate interventions and learning environments (Adams Lyngbäck & Andersson, forthcoming). When a child's linguistic repertoire is underutilized it not only creates challenges in learning the target language, it manifests a monolingual norm which undervalues the capabilities and cultures of multilingual children and their language communities. Relationships between school personnel and multilingual families are affected negatively when only one language, Swedish, is used in screening, evaluations, and referrals. This contributes to these children's learning difficulties such as dyslexia being ignored, or misdiagnosis of normal multilingual language development as delayed or deficient. Linguicism, linguistically argued racism, contributes to hiding racist discourses and produces racialized meaning-making, which calls us to consider the scholarly work produced in this area (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1989). This process originates in the links between racism and the ideals of the Enlightenment and western thought upon

which the monocultural educational system is grounded (Tsfahuney, 1999). Recent work on raciolinguistic perspectives (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa & Flores, 2017) concretizes theorizations from perspectives that examine privilege and social justice in education. Raciolinguistics examines how language constructs race and racialization. These ideas of race, in turn, influence language, language use, and language teaching and learning. Policy regarding the risk group of multilingual children not in preschool serves, in this article, as an illustrative example of the reproduction and reenactment of the categorization of marginalized groups. We read this critically as an example of overdetermination which precludes the formulation of problems, what solutions are proposed, and what forms educational policy.

Reformulating the issue of special (language) needs into children's rights means that it is the dominant perspectives of monolingualism, as opposed to the deficit perspectives of non-Swedish use and non-Swedishness, which need to be addressed. This will expose the raciolinguistic ideologies that lie at the core of these deficit perspectives. A social justice education within human rights education for teachers, educators and school leaders contributes to answering how to educate and teach those they serve. This is done by firstly acknowledging the need to develop a multilingual awareness from a privilege studies perspective, and then by acknowledging the young child's innate human capacity to be multilingual. Learning will be instilled by strengthening this linguistic repertoire.

In the period leading up to the 2022 Swedish elections, the Liberal Party had suggested that child health services be responsible for screening the proficiency in Swedish of preschool children from socioeconomically disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The largely anti-multicultural intentions of the Tidö Agreement, reached after the national election between the ruling parties and the Swedish Democrats, are articulated in the objectives from the directives of the 'Migration and Integration Cooperation Project', as well as in the 'School Cooperation Project'. An issue which overlaps is mother tongue instruction in the school system, where the objective is to review 'mother tongue teaching with the aim that it should not negatively affect integration or the student's knowledge development in the Swedish language.' (*Tidöavtalet: Överenskommelse för Sverige* [The Tidö Agreement: Agreement for Sweden], 2022, p. 54).

Previous research on integration and education has been compiled in a Swedish Research Council report (Bunar, 2022), where it is reiterated that there is no lack of evidence on the benefits of how learning one's mother tongue supports overall language learning. Research on multilingualism in Swedish schools supports developing a new language with the help of mother tongue instruction and study support in one's first language (Nilsson & Bunar, 2016; Utbildningsdepartementet, 2019; Dávila & Bunar, 2020; Skolverket, 2019; Axelsson, 2019;

Rosén, Straszer & Wedin, 2019). In fact, research provides consistent evidence of the benefits of bilingual learning for the children and grandchildren of those who have migrated to a new country (Kenner et al., 2008). When students are encouraged and taught to draw on their full linguistic repertoire, they develop a metalinguistic awareness which, in turn, enables conceptual transfer, enriched understanding through translation, bicultural knowledge, and identity development as bilingual learners (Macrory, 2006; Kenner et al., 2008). When presented with the evidence that using a language one already knows does not inhibit the learning of additional languages (Cummins, 2018; Garcia, 2019; Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013; Rusk, 2016; St John; 2010), it then becomes a matter of understanding what is required to draw on the advantages of already knowing a language. This is especially important in contexts where groups of students experience 1) a home-school language switch required to learn school content in a second language, 2) come from families with low incomes and limited education backgrounds, and 3) experience marginalization in the form of social group discrimination such as racism (Cummins, 2018).

In the Swedish context, Avery (2017) has studied cooperation between personnel with a multilingual background vis-a-vis a Swedish ethnic background, while Reath Warren has studied multilingual study guidance (2016). From Swain (1985) to Juvonen & Källkvist (2021), there are descriptions and studies of pedagogy for translanguaging in classrooms. This research provides examples of how multilingualism, when perceived as a resource, leads to advantageous learning environments. In summary, research findings on first language use in becoming bilingual is seldom used in addressing, forming and organizing instruction. This creates a disadvantage for heritage speakers when they are taught without the resource of their language repertoire being drawn on.

Raciolinguistics is reflected in how non-majority language users are treated as lacking competence when it comes to monocultural language norms (Flores & Rosa, 2017). This leads to the disadvantaging of minority language users, who are disabled in school environments in a number of ways: low expectations; their assumed grammatical shortcomings are corrected; they are differentiated according to minority group categorization. An increase of language delay diagnoses in schools leads to making teachers feel they require expertise in special education needs (Haug, 2017). This is part of a system based on ableism, resulting in the exacerbation of unequal treatment and prejudice against children with perceived and/or unidentified difficulties in language learning. Ableism here refers to prejudice and discrimination against persons viewed as disabled or as deviating in any degree from ableist normativity. It is based on negative assumptions about a perceived lack of abilities and capacities. Not utilizing children's (or teachers') strongest languages to learn reifies a linguistic and cultural repression which contributes to the proliferation of avoidable learning difficulties and negative effects of perceived delays in development.

A multilingual focus in teaching requires a different organization, division of tasks, and forms of collaboration (St John, 2022). Cooperation with multilingual personnel is, in Swedish national reports, represented as difficult (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2019). Multilingual classroom assistance where more than one teacher is involved is seen as creating organizational challenges, since traditions associated with what teaching is and how it is done are not easily overcome (Dávila & Bunar, 2020). Another challenge relevant to this investigation is that teachers and preschool teachers are seen as consumers of knowledge and not holders or producers (Kenner et al., 2008). As holders and producers, it follows that multilingualism and knowledge experiences from other cultural contexts are vital for preschool teachers' collective learning.

The debate on the lack of training, quality, and competence of native speakers, as well as teacher education shortcomings in relation to Swedish preschools, can be summarized as a debate about preserving culture for social cohesion. What is left unexamined are the assumptions that monoculturalism and monolingualism are positive qualities which Swedish society should enhance.

Feminist methodology: prejudice and privilege studies

Feminist methodology is, according to Higgins, 'concerned with the activist implications of research [...] and is interdisciplinary in nature' (Higgins, 2023, p. 70). In this article, prejudice studies and privilege studies intersect through the two fields of research in which the authors have been engaged. Adami has researched intersectionality and children's rights (2023), adding the layer of childism when exploring intersecting systems of oppression of children as a heterogeneous group (Adami & Dineen, 2021). Drawing on prejudice studies and the work of Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (2012), Adami has developed the concept of childism as age-based prejudice and discrimination that target individuals from birth until they are regarded as owning characteristics, abilities and capacities associated with the adult norm (c.f. Adami, forthcoming; Adami & Dineen, 2021; Adami, 2023). By using the concept of childism, which connects to earlier prejudice studies in racism, sexism, and ableism, we can address the unreflected biases and negative attitudes that hinder the realization of children's rights and freedoms. This is distinct from how John Wall uses childism as a term which correlates to feminism, in exploring a children's revolution for children's rights. Although aligned with similar ambitions as those of Wall, to enable increased child-agency and empowerment, the use of childism in this article is a critical use with reference to sexism whereby prejudice and discrimination against children needs to be addressed to question adult privilege and ignorance. Children who are perceived as lacking certain abilities are faced with adult normativity and ableist normativity in societal institutions such as preschools and schools. The critical perspectives of intersectionality and childism intersect in this paper with privilege

studies that Adams Lyngbäck has researched in examining the experiences of parents with children who are deaf and the language choices which result from the communication orientations made available to them (2016). The Deaf Studies and Disability Studies approach in Adams Lyngbäck's work combines studies of privilege in ableism, audism, and linguisticism from black feminist theoretical perspectives. The ability to hear, as well as membership of the dominant language group, are examined to reveal how normalization is reproduced while power relations and ways of reasoning which depart from what is considered normal or natural to those group members in power are concealed (Kauppinen & Jokinen, 2014). Audism is the term used to describe negative attitudes toward people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or use sign language. It is a form of discrimination and prejudice that results from the unwillingness to accommodate people who do not use hearing and/or spoken language (Humphries, 1977; Lane, 1999; Bauman, 2004). The oppression of minoritized groups, in terms of language and deafness, is an aspect of parents' experiences. This realization makes possible the development of 'disability literacy', an epistemic source of social knowledge required in allyship emanating from the experience of how others exist in the world. This knowledge about spaces of differentness is crucial in order to engage in a robust pattern of allyship, not only for one's own child or relative but for the subordinated and oppressed group to which their child belongs (Adams Lyngbäck, 2016).

By addressing prejudice, we make privilege explicit by examining assumptions about what is desirable in terms of being multilingual and learning languages in the education system. We intend in the following analysis to explore what kinds of problems are formulated in educational policy on multilingualism, and what underlying assumptions are taken for granted in the dominant discourse on language proficiency in Sweden.

We have chosen one policy text for the analysis: *Förskola för alla barn - för bättre språkutveckling i svenska* [Preschool for all children - for better language development in Swedish] (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2020). This is a government investigation into language development in Swedish, hereafter referred to as PFAC. This policy is part of a broader development of national and numerous local policies. These are 1) *Kartläggning i förskoleklassen* [Evaluation in preschool] by the Swedish National Education Agency [SNEA], and 2) *Rapport Språkuppsdrag 2021: Samlad rapport för budgetuppsdrag om språkutvecklande arbetssätt och screening* [Report Language Assignment 2021: Consolidated report for budget assignment about working methods and screening of language development]. These policies have similar problematizations.

In our methodological framework, the approach to policy analysis developed by Carol Bacchi, called *What's the Problem Represented to Be?* (WPR) is used, together with intersectional analyses. The basic premise is that all policies contain a constructed representation of the

problem that the policy tries to seek solutions for. Instead of a ‘problem-solving’ approach, Bacchi’s tool is a ‘questioning the problem’ approach (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi, 2017; Manning, 2019). The implicit representations of problems regarding certain minoritized groups’ development of the Swedish language require critical scrutiny. The WPR approach is explicitly normative, and this means it has the goal of intervening to challenge harmful effects that the official problematizations produce (Bacchi, 2009).

The WPR approach is firmly grounded in constructivist epistemology and steered by a theoretical framework in which ‘reality’ is seen as socially constructed and the knowledge which results from the analysis is created through critical inquiry. As such, there exists no pre-set problem in society that government policies have identified and seek to solve. Instead, problems are produced ‘as particular sorts of problems’ (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016) for which certain ideologically-driven visions and solutions fit. With the ‘What’s the Problem Represented to Be?’ approach, we ask questions about what kind of ideologically driven ideas about society the representation of a problem—as *something* and not something else—responds to. In our reading of PFAC, we connect the policy proposals to problematizations that seek to overshadow other underlying problems of power and language.

How is preschool multilingualism problematized?

In the PFAC report, reference is made to the Swedish National Education Agency, stating that,

According to the analysis of the Swedish National Education Agency, unemployment and being newly arrived in Sweden are the factors most highly associated with not having one’s children enrolled in preschool (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2020, p. 110). A major focus regarding the directives of the investigation, and thereof several of its suggestions, is that newly arrived children are in need of better language development in Swedish. (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2020, p. 95)

The main problem represented is that children are not being enrolled in preschool, especially if their parents are newly arrived and have low socioeconomic status. The knowledge basis for the ideas about reasons why children do not participate in preschool are not based on interviews with the parents themselves or others who work or serve this group, but on surveys and statistics on the frequency of enrolling children in preschool. The SOU report references the Swedish Central Bureau of Statistics, stating that ‘among 3-5-year-olds with Swedish background, 95 percent were enrolled in preschool fall 2019. Among 3–5-year-olds with foreign backgrounds the equivalent share was 90 percent’ (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2020, p. 103). Statistics say nothing about the underlying reasons, hence the reasons outlined in the PFAC are simply tentative and speculative explanations. It is stated in the document that investigations show that certain groups are overrepresented among children who are not

enrolled in either preschool or in any pedagogical care. These children more often have a foreign background and their guardians have a limited education and are less likely to be fully employed. After having stated this, the PFAC text notes that there are children not participating in preschool or pedagogical care who have a Swedish background and highly educated guardians who are fully employed. Therefore, the government investigation concludes that there may be many reasons why guardians do not have their children in preschool or pedagogical care; it is not just a question of their foreign background, employment and educational background, or socio-economic status (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2020, p. 109). Repeating and stating these three underlying reasons in connected policy documents for why some children do not attend preschool, however, reinforces these assumptions and does not cast doubt that there might be other issues connected to the preschool arena. The following conclusion is not acknowledged, formulated or suggested.

Overall, the investigation's conclusion is that there are many reasons for why guardians do not leave their children at preschool or other pedagogical care. The reasons cannot be limited to foreign background, employment or economic status, but can also be about values and other preferences. (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2020, p. 15)

As a result of the conclusions in the PFAC, an initiative to study the reasons given by guardians for caring for children in the home instead of preschool was taken by a researcher in Child and Youth Studies at Stockholm University. This recent research report concerning what motivates guardians in Sweden to choose to stay home with their children (Lenz Taguchi, 2022) revealed the main areas of concern regarding the care of very young children. In addition to guardians' uncertainty about the quality of care in Swedish preschools, which was primarily connected to understandings about insufficient resources, there was the desire to ensure that the family unit was strengthened. Not surprisingly, both multilingual families and Swedish families aim to provide a rich cultural and linguistic environment in the home to ensure family bonding. This focus is quite different from that which is found in respect to the problems emphasized in the SOU and resulting policy on the quality of preschools and the learning of Swedish. The parents' concerns about deficiencies in the preschool environment, particularly in regard to monolingual use of personnel, is a perspective not addressed in the policy.

Regarding the lack of qualified teachers in preschool, the SOU report (PFAC) only mentions the problem of not having enough educated teachers; it says nothing about the need for multilingual teachers who can easily communicate by using a broad range of semiotic resources. This presumes and imbues a monolingual prescription of 'more Swedish to learn Swedish'. Hence the problem of teachers identifying as monolingual and their need of

multilingual competence is not acknowledged, addressed or formulated. Under the section on teacher education for foreign teachers, it is only an efficient knowledge of the Swedish language that is addressed; the value of teachers' mother languages or the use of their full linguistic repertoires are not mentioned (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2020, p. 108).

What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?

By concentrating solely on improving Swedish language use through a 'Swedish only' approach, there is an implication that monoculturalism and the strengthening of 'Swedishness' as a dominant form of knowledge and interpretation contribute to a more democratic and socially just educational system. The relationship between monolingualism, linguisticism, linguistically-argued racism and raciolinguistic perspectives can be traced back to colonialism and can be further analysed by employing theoretical frameworks from black feminism and intersectional analyses. Presenting the myth of the benefit of monolingualism (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008, p. 242)—i.e., that monolingualism is better for society—puts language ideology at the centre of a privilege perspective. Where the dominant language group is the perceiving subject (Rosa & Flores, 2017), all other languages and multilingual usage will be found lacking. Monolingualism, as a symptom of a western-imposed, capitalistic competitive culture, works against social justice and democracy by subjugating knowledges (Harding, 1998) and demonstrating epistemic injustice through dominant ideas about the monoculture. The broader issue of implying that mother tongue instruction is negative for integration into Swedish society has direct negative implications for access to education, through hindering the use of bilingual pedagogy and multilingual pedagogical frameworks of how languages are depicted in policy (Paulsrud et al., 2017; Rosén et al., 2019). This can only be understood if the structural overdetermination of the problem of language learning is seen from, in this instance, the perspective of a white, Swedish subject (c.f. Paul & Adams Lyngbäck, 2022).

In the PFAC analysis, there are implicit assumptions that multilingual children lack an appropriate home and preschool environment, and this is why they do not develop their Swedish. To focus preschool activities on language development (i.e., on learning Swedish, since this is the only formulated problem related to not attending preschool), implies only targeting their development in Swedish, as it is understood as a language-learning problem. Further formulations directed at those who are multilingual implies that urgent efforts must be directed at limiting the negative effects of being multilingual in a monolingual school system. A counter-problematization posed from this analysis, which utilizes a raciolinguistic perspective, is that the *dominant and privileged view* of what is considered competence in the child is the problem. When they arrive in preschool and the linguistic repertoire of multilingual

children is viewed negatively (by not acknowledging in any way the advantages of multilingualism) this is the real imminent threat to succeeding in a learning environment. This understanding further transfers the deficit view to both the group's 'non-white Swedish' personnel as well as to the residents of areas where culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse populations predominate. The lack of multilingual awareness and responsivity in general terms reproduces and reenacts the binary categories of 'Swedish' as white and monolingual and 'non-Swedish' as non-white and multilingual (c.f. Hübinette & Lundström, 2014). If we view the problem from a dominant and privileged viewpoint, a raciolinguistic perspective emerges, with the underlying assumption that the earlier children can be reached to counter the negative effects of being in their homes, with families, in their neighbourhoods and communities, the better. This is why preschools, preschool teachers, teacher training, and immigrant mothers are seen as a problem, not only in the matter of preschool children's knowledge of Swedish and of not succeeding in the school system, but in the matter of overall integration (c.f. Paul & Adams Lyngbäck, 2022). The privileged group's dominant view creates the problem and locates the formulation of an answer where the children are to be reached by white Swedish speakers to increase the use of Swedish.

A further underlying assumption is found in the interpretation of the need to pinpoint competence in Swedish in the recruitment and training of personnel. Recruitment procedures have to ensure that all personnel have sufficient knowledge of Swedish to enable participation in teaching, to be able to interpret and follow the curriculum, and to document the development and learning of children. A question then can be raised about the people who train preschool teachers, their level of Swedish proficiency, and how this quality will lead to preschool personnel being able to communicate with guardians, which is emphasized as a job requirement. These assumptions are part of a categorization process stemming from a raciolinguistic perspective that those who are not immediately identified as being Swedish must undergo particular procedures to ensure their language skills.

'Preschool for All Children' reasons that the national recruitment guidelines that judge the linguistic competence of the personnel could provide support for preschools. In order to address the perceived problem of how to improve the language environment it advocates 'testing the non-Swedish'. This scheme includes a multi-tiered process: testing the language of individuals who want to work with children; examining their (lack of) education; reviewing the teachers' training programs. The focus is put on efforts which have historically been used in monolingual assimilation measures. This puts the spotlight of concern on preschools in residential areas where there is a large number of immigrant personnel, thus equating the problem with multilingual and multicultural presence.

PFAC additionally states that special efforts to develop competence have to be directed where

the need is greatest. Both the national guidelines and the city-wide routines in staff recruitment are meant to support preschools. The problem—that some preschool children are not developing Swedish at the same rate and in the same way as Swedish native speakers or immigrant native speakers of Swedish—assumes that successful second language development follows monolingual language development. Linking ‘language skills’ to ‘Swedish skills’ means there is a focus on the personnel having certain native-like qualities and competences, being Swedish speakers, and speaking Swedish like Swedes. The standard of ‘high quality’ means the Swedish of native speakers.

What is left unproblematic in this problematization and can the problem be conceptualized differently?

Without an interrogation of the structural inequality regarding language use that is prevalent in raciolinguistic perspectives (Rosa & Flores, 2017), the disproportionality between schools in regard to special education support measures may have consequences; some groups may be overrepresented when it comes to intellectual disability, while being underrepresented in other categories (Adams et al., forthcoming). For example, children with multilingual backgrounds, from disadvantaged socio-economic groups, as well as deaf or hard-of-hearing children from these categories, are more likely to be overlooked when testing for language difficulties, and thus underrepresented in the identification of *specific language impairment* (SLI) (Nayeb et al., 2021). From these observations and subsequent research findings, it is clear that identifying language disorders, as distinct from language difficulties linked to input and access, requires screening in more than one language. From a practical vantage point this would be in a child’s strongest language and the target language. In a recent Swedish study (Nayeb et al., 2021), 29% of multilingual children in deprived neighbourhoods met the criteria for SLI, compared to approximately 7 to 10% in the general population. This finding was included in the investigative report about language development of preschool children in Stockholm (Rapport Språkuppdrag, 2021), but there is no further mention of specific implementation.

The problemization may be examined from a prejudice studies perspective that seeks to unearth how the policy—through the discourses of ableism, racism, and childism—may be prejudiced against children who have another language than Swedish as their mother tongue. This category includes those who use sign languages that are often learned, supported, and nurtured in environments outside the home, since most deaf and hard-of-hearing children have hearing parents. Even though speaking and signing other languages than Swedish is not considered to be a disability as such, a prejudiced discourse about language proficiency and development is underpinned by racist, ableist, audist, and childist attitudes and beliefs. The problematization of the PFAC policy, which reflects the current political landscape, is taken for

granted: it is parents with foreign backgrounds who keep their children from attending preschool who prevent them from learning Swedish and diminish their possibilities of being integrated and becoming part of a cohesive society.

Intersectional perspectives on the obstacles to children's right to education link these to overlapping discriminatory and prejudiced discourses that hinder the realization of their rights to and in education. Children constitute a heterogeneous group, and a child can thus suffer from racist, childist, and ableist infused discourses. Childist behaviour comes in the form of paternalistic adult interventions that cause children psychological and physical harm. To test children's language proficiency against a language norm where other language skills are not acknowledged or utilized contributes to the perception that they lack ability.

How can we better understand the ways in which racism and childism, as well as ableism and childism, overlap in education? To begin with, we can re-visit the distinction between child and adult language acquisition—what is easiest in child language learning is not approached by using strategies which are easiest for an adult. Together with multilingual awareness and an intersectional lens, the effect of the national policy of testing children with an immigrant background according to a monolingual norm can be seen as prejudice against children based on ethnicity, ability, language, and age. This prejudice is made visible in rationalizations for early interventions to address a diversity where children are seen as possessing deficit abilities, knowledges and skills linked to desired adult, abled and white norms.

Not letting children learn with the help of their strongest language constitutes a disadvantage that deprives the child of an opportunity to develop—this is a main tenet of linguisticism. To problematize language delay in children who cannot speak Swedish but who have knowledge of other linguistic systems is a particular form of racial linguistic discrimination resulting from the intersection of racism, childism and ableism.

An example of indirect discrimination against children with a foreign background is the practice of assigning those who have one or two parents born in another country to classes where they are taught 'Swedish as a Second Language' (*Svenska som andraspråk*) instead of 'Swedish'. The indirect discrimination comes as a result of societal views about having a grade in 'Swedish as Second Language', which is not implicitly considered to be as competitive as the equivalent grade in 'Swedish'. Determining who needs appropriate Swedish instruction (c.f. Flores & Rosa, 2015) is also an illustration of benevolent racism. This measure is well-meant and extra resources are provided support for it, but it has long-term negative and discriminatory effects since students with final grades in Swedish as a Second Language will not have the same opportunities in the next level of education as those students with final grades in Swedish. The issue of having a separate Swedish language subject for multilingual

students has been a repeatedly debated and researched issue, one connected to interdisciplinary fields of study on the issues of systemic inequalities in the Swedish education system and social conceptions of race, ethnicity, culture, and language (Deng & Luke, 2008; Economou, 2013; Palm, 2023).

Studies in ableism, linguicism and childism help us recognize that it is not deviations from the 'norm' which constitute a problem in schools per se but rather the prejudice connected to such deviations held by teachers, peers, and society at large. We rather need to focus our attention on the discriminatory structures and discourses which produce categories which diametrically oppose rights and needs in education provision. A rights discourse that addresses ableist and adultist normativity moves from seeing the issue as one of 'special education' (i.e., support after having been deprived of a conducive language-learning environment) towards a view of the child's right to his/her language. An obvious example of this is how deaf and hard-of-hearing children face injustice because they are categorized as 'in need of support' to hear. In Sweden, this prevents them from accessing a sign language learning environment (c.f. Adams Lyngbäck, forthcoming). This contributes to a cultural devaluation of signing, even though the Swedish preschool curriculum states they have a right to develop a knowledge of Swedish Sign Language (c.f. Hall, 2017; Skolverket, 2019).

From Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) we learn that linguistic human rights (LHR) are often included in formulations of human rights, but their practical implementation is seldom addressed. Individual and collective language rights are inherent rights that every individual has in order to be able to live a dignified life. In theory, linguistic human rights are so inalienable that no state or person may violate them (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1994; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Thoutenhoofd & Adams Lyngbäck, 2023). HRE scholar Vanessa Hughes found in her study from 2021—on the tensions between policy, language provision, and international standards on human rights in the UK—that English as Additional Language learners 'find themselves between contradictory policy areas' (2021, p. 72), with discriminatory effects for students with foreign backgrounds. In this article, we have likewise problematized policy tensions from a social justice perspective on linguistic rights. Swedish preschool policy risks discrimination on children's right to education when limitations are placed on their linguistic rights. This occurs when other languages than Swedish are not tested or valued as language skills in policy implementation.

What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem' and what changes are thus needed in education for social justice?

The overrepresentation of children from minority groups in special education classes (for children with learning disabilities) is a result of the language policy adopted towards these students. (Adams Lyngbäck, Bunar & Paul, forthcoming). Preschools should focus on providing

support and communicating with all families to exploit the assets which individual children and families have achieved as multilingual learners. Creating environments where small children are seen as ‘knowers’ and recognizing how their teachers adopt multilingual identities themselves is a pathway that can be pursued through the development of awareness, allyship and activism. Showing that the language used in the home is valuable and that it is necessary to support it in the classroom as well as the community is a first step (Macrory, 2006), one which is well in line with decades of findings on multilingual teaching and learning.

The necessary actions involve a disruption of ableism, racism, and the monolingual norm through recognizing one’s own adult position, either as linguistically privileged or as a multilingual member of the dominant group. This requires risking status and losing power when standing up for the linguistic rights of children. Collaboration needs to be initiated by those who are in a position to protect and sustain coalitions. However, it is important to emphasize that the way we develop the theory and practice of translanguaging has to work from the bottom up (Canagarajah, 2011), and particularly through those who have lived experience of affirmative multilingual environments. The language repertoire of individuals and pedagogies which utilize strategies based on translanguaging are necessary for achieving social justice in language and education.

Developments in disability literacy (Adams Lyngbäck, 2016), white racial literacy (DiAngelo, 2017) and multilingual allyship (Gail Prasad personal communication, 2023, February 23) are all implicated in moving away from a privilege perspective. Ableism, racism, and linguisticism are the structures interrogated in this perspective, in order to develop allyship in adults. The sustained work of re-evaluating language ideologies, from examining the privileged positions one benefits from, is the starting point for operating in solidarity with minoritized groups. Drawing on these sources of knowledge, where those in positions of power have developed social literacies, can start the chain reaction required to change deficit perspectives which disable multilingual lives.

An affirmative perspective of child equity contrasts with a deficit perspective where children’s perceived lack of abilities and knowledges are tested (Adami, 2023). This involves treating children fairly, according to their needs. This perspective may include equal or different treatment, according to what would be considered equivalent in terms of children’s rights; it is necessary to avoid reifying childist stereotypes and adultist norms. What is called for is a pedagogy based on a disruption of adult, abled, white notions of knowledge that silence children’s diverse abilities and knowledges. This requires confronting prejudices concerning children’s ‘capacity’, ‘abilities’, ‘language and communication’, and moving toward more child-equitable terms that address their rights, by creating more accessible environments (especially in school) that critically question adult and ableist normativity.

Conclusion

If we are to change education in regard to which language and semiotic repertoires are acknowledged and utilized, we must look further away from the marketized values of producing a labour force and acknowledge the political struggle of multilingualism. The questions we ask about the problematization lead to new questions, which revolve around a feminist theoretical perspective on structural oppression. The structures which we reveal can only be changed through action. A basic tenet of social justice literacy and allyship is that we utilize epistemic vulnerability, the quality of being able to acknowledge that one does not know, and this is required if we are to learn from the experiences of members of groups to which we do not belong. The problematization we raise is that it is important to shift the individualized 'children's needs' discourse towards an epistemic vulnerability stance to formulate new ways to understand children's rights. This ethical shift is located in a social justice educational framework based on co-existence, inter-dependency and redistribution.

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