Challenges in implementing a new pedagogical approach in a bilingual pre-school in Finland

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Finland is a bilingual country by legislation with parallel early childhood education and school systems with either Finnish or Swedish as the medium of instruction. In 2012, a Finnish-medium daycare initiated a project in which a bilingual teacher uses both Swedish and Finnish throughout the day, while engaged in regular activities with the monolingual Finnish-speaking children (aged 2-6). As the tradition of education in Finland relies heavily on the idea of language separation, the implementation of bilingual pedagogy challenged monolingual institutional (ILP) as well as family (FLP) language norms and expectations.

In this paper, we focus, on the one hand, on the bilingual teacher’s described language policy (her ideologies, practices and goals with the project), and on the other hand, attitudes and ideologies held by the Finnish-speaking parents as well as their expectations of the project. We thus have two spaces – the bilingual classroom and the Finnish-speaking homes – which both are central in these children’s lives. At the core is to examine how these spaces meet and to what extent ideologies, practices and expectations are in tune with each other.

The data consist of four interviews with the teacher (about 6 hours) and interviews with four families in their homes (about 5 hours). The results show that the ILP and FLP to a large extent are in tune with each other in that the families do not question the teacher’s bilingual ideologies and practices. Both the teacher and the families have a shared main goal with the project. However, by using concrete joint spaces as a point of departure, such as formalized parents’ meetings or the situation of dropping off the children in the morning, we also show in our analyses that there are misinterpretations and mismatches in the teacher’s and parents’ joint understanding of the bilingual project.

Keywords: family language policy, language ideologies, bilingual pedagogy.