Stay-at-home mothers learning Finnish – challenging policies and pedagogical practices

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Over the past decade, Finland has changed from a country of net emigration into a country of net immigration. At the same time, critical voices against migration, integration, and multiculturalism have become louder, and the discussion in the (social) media has been problem-oriented. Furthermore, opinions on the outcomes of integration training courses for adult migrants have become more critical. It has been questioned, whether the language proficiency of migrants achieved in the integration training courses (B1) really meets the requirements of the labour market and everyday life in the host society. In addition, some migrant groups have been identified as ”problematic and challenging” in terms of social inclusion, employment, and education.

This paper focuses on one ”problematic and challenging” group, stay-at-home mothers, and is based on an ethnographic study in a Finnish language course organised by the Capable parent project in the Helsinki metropolitan area. The data have been collected through means of participatory observation, interviews, and photographing. The most noticeable difference compared to any conventional integration training course is that mothers and children are together all the time, and activities are planned and carried out in a child-oriented manner. In the group, teaching does not go from top down and the intention is not to transfer information directly from teachers to the students, but instead by shared activities. In fact, it is not immediately obvious who has the ownership of teaching or learning, or the right or a duty to decide on the learning process. Besides learning Finnish, the aim of the course is to empower stay-at-home mothers in building up ties with persons with a similar life situation. This paper will bring out the participants’ voice about their language learning processes, and discuss integration policies and language education for adult migrants in Finland in general.

Keywords: language education, integration, Stay-at-home mothers.