

Draft Program for the ECEC conference on the 24th of September 2025, Helsinki

Date:	24 th September, 2025
Time:	8:30-17:00
Venue:	Hotel Scandic Grand Central Helsinki + online stream

Social inclusion and diversity in Nordic ECEC - research and practice

Finland holds the Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2025. The Presidency programme highlights cultural cooperation between the Nordic countries as well as cultural diversity, inclusiveness and equality. This conference is part of the programme. The focus of the conference is especially on integrating children with a foreign background to ECEC and supporting language development.

During the day research from the Nordic Countries on the theme of social inclusion and diversity will be presented. The aim is also to share good practices and to learn how can we implement research into practice.

Programme

- 8.30 Registration and morning coffee**
- 9.20 *Opening of the conference***
Tarja Kahiluoto, Senior Ministerial Adviser, Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland
- 9.30 *Welcoming words***
Anders Adlercreutz, Minister of Education, Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland
- 9.40 *From trial to policy: Finland's pre-primary education expansion experiment***
Matti Sarvimäki, Associate Professor, Aalto University, Finland
- 10.00 *Mandatory language assessment and targeted language interventions in Danish daycare- Opportunities and Challenges.***
Dorthe Bleses, Professor, Aarhus University, Denmark
- 10.20 *Multilingualism and play in teaching and language learning in ECEC***
Anne Kultti, Senior Lecturer, University of Gothenburg, Sweden
- 10.40 Break and refreshments**
- 11.10 *Multilingual preschool children and their families; Perspectives from research, policy and practice in Iceland***
Fríða Bjarney Jónsdóttir, Project manager, Iceland
- 11:30 *Social inequalities in language development and achievement: The compensatory potential of education***
Henrik Daae Zachrisson, Professor, University of Oslo, Norway
- 11.50 *Armchair discussion with the researchers***
Moderator, Eija Sevón, Associate Professor, Jyväskylä University
Common topics, core findings and messages
- 13.00 Lunch Break**



- 14.00** ***The EU support to social inclusion and diversity in ECEC***
Géraldine Libreau, Policy officer on ECEC - European Commission - DG Education,
Youth, Sport and Culture
- 14.15** ***Examples from practice***
Kristin Morken, Programme leader, Norway
Tine Nørholm Larsen, Educational Consultant, Denmark
- 14.45** **Break and refreshments**
- 15.15** ***Examples from practice, continues***
Halldóra Sigtryggsdóttir, Principal, Iceland
Lotta Andersson Damberg, Senior Advisor, Sweden
Soile Granholm, Early Childhood Education Specialist, Finland
- 16.00** ***The potential of ECEC in general and for newcomers in particular***
European policies and local possibilities
Michel Vandebroeck, Emeritus Professor, Ghent University, Belgium
- 17.00** ***Concluding words and end of the conference***

Presentation of Speakers

Anders Adlercreutz – Minister of Education, Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland



Minister Anders Adlercreutz heads the Ministry of Education and Culture. Minister is responsible for early childhood education and care, general education, vocational education and training and religious affairs. He is also responsible for matters related to Nordic cooperation at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

Adlercreutz's political career began when he was elected to the Kirkkonummi Municipal Council in 2012, and he served as Chair of the council in 2017–2023. He was first elected to Parliament in 2015. Adlercreutz has also served as Minister for European Affairs and Ownership Steering in 2023–2024.

Adlercreutz has been a member of several committees in Parliament. He was also a member of the Finnish Delegation to the Nordic Council for the 2022–2023 term. In 2024, Adlercreutz was elected President of the Swedish People's Party.

Before serving as a Member of Parliament, he worked as an architect and as a partner in an architecture firm for nearly 20 years.

Dorthe Bleses – Professor, Aarhus University, Denmark



Dorthe Bleses is professor at Aarhus University and part of the management at TrygFonden's Centre for Child Research. Her interdisciplinary work focuses on the trajectories of language and school readiness and associations with environmental factors and later outcomes, learning environments in ECE and home settings and the development and evaluation of ECE interventions. She developed the national language assessment tool used by most Danish municipalities. As PI for over 20 externally funded projects, she has extensive experience in large-scale RCTs, including the "We Learn Together". She also leads the scaling up of interventions and collaborates with national and international partners.

Abstract

Mandatory language assessment and targeted language interventions in Danish Childcares. Opportunities and Challenges.

Research suggests that up to 25 percent of preschool-aged children may experience language delay, with a subset of those children having underlying Speech, Language, and Communication Needs (SLCN). Language delay is often linked to social factors, as children from less advantaged backgrounds show a higher prevalence of delayed language from as early as toddlerhood. These language delays are not merely developmental hurdles; they can have profound, long-term consequences for academic achievement, social inclusion, and mental health. Fortunately, considerable evidence from high-quality studies shows that interventions improving the quality of the language learning environment in Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs can have a significant effect on children's early language skills. Therefore, early identification and subsequent interventions are a societal priority.

To address early language difficulties, various language screening programs have been initiated in different countries, most often integrated into primary care, such as during routine well-child doctor's visits. Denmark, however, has taken a different approach by implementing a mandatory, teacher-administered language assessment program for three-year-olds who may need language intervention as part of the ECE program. This approach offers in principle a unique and optimal context for ensuring systematic assessment and a close link between assessment and follow-up intervention, as both are carried out by teachers within the ECE system. An optional researcher-developed assessment tool, *Language Acquisition 3-6 (Sprogvurdering 3-6)*, is provided to all municipalities and is widely used. No (evidence-based) interventions are provided for teachers to use as a follow-up language stimulation after the assessment for children identified with low language skills.

I will present findings based on large-scale data from the administration of the mandatory language assessment program, with the overall aim of identifying challenges and opportunities with the program. Recent research has raised concerns about whether ECE learning environments are of sufficient quality to effectively mitigate language delays. The presentation will therefore conclude by highlighting opportunities for improving the effectiveness of the assessment program, based on findings from recent randomized controlled trials of the ECE intervention, *We Learn Together (Vi lærer sammen)*.

Lotta Andersson Damberg – Senior Advisor, Sweden



I work as a Senior Advisor at the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), specializing in early childhood education and care. The title for my presentation will be *Open Preschool – A Place for Language and Integration*. During which I will talk about our work within the framework of the agreement with the government, share our experiences, and describe how we support municipalities and Open Preschools in their efforts to promote language learning and integration for children and families with a foreign background. I will also explain how Open Preschools can serve as a gateway to increase children's participation in regular preschool.

Soile Granholm – Early Childhood Education Specialist, Finland



I work as an Early Childhood Education Specialist at the City of Vantaa. I hold a master's degree in social sciences (Social Psychology) and a bachelor's degree in education (Early Childhood Education). On my desk I have Language, Cultural and World view matters. I am also dealing with segregation development and how to prevent it in Early Childhood Education in Vantaa. In this seminar I will present Vantaa City Early Childhood Education practicalities, methods and structures for supporting children with multilingual backgrounds. I will also shortly tell what kind of actions we have taken in Vantaa City to prevent segregation.

Fríða Bjarney Jónsdóttir – Project manager, Iceland



Fríða Bjarney Jónsdóttir is a preschool teacher specializing in linguistic and cultural diversity, inclusion and education of multilingual children. With extensive experience in Icelandic preschools, she has also contributed to research, taught both in-service and pre-service teachers, and participated in policy-making in the field. Currently, she serves as a coordinator at the Ministry of Education and Children where she leads a two-year project in collaboration with the City of Reykjavík and the Directorate of Education and School Services. The project focuses on the education of linguistically and culturally diverse children from preschools through upper secondary schools. Her doctoral thesis, titled "*Giving Wings to Voices: Preschool as an Inclusive Learning Space for Communication and Understanding*" explores teachers' practices with multilingual preschool children and their families.

Abstract

Multilingual preschool children and their families: Perspectives from research, policy and practice in Iceland.

In this presentation I will discuss how the rapid demographic changes in Iceland have influenced policy and practice within ECE in Iceland. Today nearly 19% of Iceland's population and almost third of all preschool children have immigrant background. Findings from research indicate the marginalization of multilingual children and families, deficit view and lack of academic and social success among children. Recent reforms, including the Education Policy, Prosperity Act and revised curriculum frameworks, aim to strengthen inclusion, early intervention, collaboration with families, and active multilingualism. International frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNESCO's education policies and Nordic language policy support Iceland's direction. Currently the Ministry of Education and Culture is implementing the MEMM project that responds to the urgent call of improving education for immigrant children at all levels of schooling. Furthermore I will briefly discuss findings from my PhD study where the aim was to gain a deeper understanding of how the preschool can serve as an inclusive and socially just learning space for multilingual children's language and emergent literacy development, where voices and identities are affirmed

Anne Kultti – Senior Lecturer, University of Gothenburg, Sweden



Anne Kultti is Associate Professor in Education at the University of Gothenburg. Her research concerns learning conditions in mainstream education from the perspective of minority language speaking children. The research is informed by a dynamic perspective on multilingualism and a sociocultural perspective on learning. Communication between teachers and children, between children as well as between teachers and parents, have been analyzed in different kinds of activities, for understanding language use, teaching, and learning. In an ongoing research project Kultti empirically investigates multilingual play-responsive teaching for promoting each child's agency in her learning processes in early childhood education setting characterized by multifaced language ecology

Abstract

Multilingualism and play in teaching and language learning in early childhood education and care

Everyday life of many children in early childhood education in Sweden is multilingual. Their experiences of education that acknowledge and support their use of the languages differ. The present talk concerns how diversity of linguistic experiences of minority language speaking children (cf. individual multilingualism) can be included in education through teaching from early age (cf. societal multilingualism) to facilitate children's participation and language learning. Grounded in the research field of multilingual education and a teaching approach: play-responsive teaching, opportunities and challenges for language learning in contemporary early childhood education research and practice are touched upon.

Tine Nørholm Larsen – Educational Consultant, Denmark



Tine Nørholm Larsen works in the cross-sector alliance *MedVind i Østerbyen*, where 50 local actors from the public, civic, and private sectors collaborate to ensure that all children and young people in a local area of Esbjerg Municipality can find their way through education and into employment. Tine Nørholm Larsen has worked in the secretariat for 5 years and has a background in the field of education within the municipal system.

Géraldine Libreau – Policy officer on ECEC - European Commission - DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture



Géraldine Libreau is the policy officer for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in the Directorate general Education, Youth, Sport and Culture of the European Commission. In the context of the European Education Area, she currently coordinates an expert group, bringing together ministerial representatives from 34 European countries and stakeholders' representatives, as well as UNESCO and UNICEF. The group has already published a *Toolkit for inclusive ECEC*, and *Guidelines to recruit, train and motivate well-qualified ECEC staff*, as well as thematic reports on the monitoring and evaluation of quality in ECEC. The group now focuses on the role of leadership in ECEC. Before that, Géraldine graduated in European and international public law and dedicated her career to management and evaluation of European policies, programmes and projects in the field of youth and senior volunteering, e-learning, vocational education and training and adult education. She also created EPALE, the e-Platform for Adult Learning in Europe.

Kristin Morken – Programme leader, Norway



Political scientist with a masters degree in Comparative Politics from the University of Bergen. Programme leader of the The Early Childhood Programme the last eight years. Different positions over 23 years in the Municipality of Oslo and Ministry of Local Government, among this as Deputy Director General in the ministry

Matti Sarvimäki – Associate Professor, Aalto University, Finland



Matti Sarvimäki is Associate Professor of Economics at Aalto University and the Helsinki GSE, Co-Principal Investigator (co-PI) of the Education for the Future Flagship Center, and part-time Associate Research Professor at the VATT Institute for Economic Research. He is a labor economist whose research focuses on education, migration, and social mobility, sometimes in multidisciplinary collaborations.

Matti received his PhD from the Helsinki School of Economics in 2009. He has worked as a postdoctoral researcher at the London School of Economics and been a visiting scholar at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and University College London

Eija Sevón – Associate Professor, Jyväskylä University

Halldóra Sigtryggsdóttir – Principal, Iceland



My name is Halldóra Sigtryggsdóttir, born 28 August 1975. I graduated with a B.Ed. degree in 2002, and since then, I've been working as a teacher in both preschool and primary school – mostly in Iceland, but also in Sweden between 2002-2005. In Sweden, I worked in a preschool class and later as an Icelandic teacher. For the past six years, I have worked as the principal in Ösp, a preschool in Reykjavík. It's a multicultural school – around 90% of the children are multilingual, and for most of them, the preschool is their main Icelandic language environment. Over the years, I've also been involved in developing educational policies. In 2013-2014, I took part in writing Reykjavík City's literacy policy for kindergartens. In 2019-2021, I participated in writing the Skills Framework for Multilingual Children in Preschools in Iceland, a project led by the Directorate of Education and School Services. My M.Ed. thesis (2024) focused on how we can support children in developing their Icelandic vocabulary through spontaneous play in a multicultural preschool setting – reflecting my interest in language development and inclusive education.

Abstract

“Now we are always active, listening and talking to the children” – Play, a way to improve children's Icelandic vocabulary in a multicultural preschool

The number of children with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds has increased considerably in Icelandic preschools. The findings of research on the topic indicate that the children are in possession of diverse linguistic resources which have not been sufficiently accounted for in preschools' daily operations with the inclusion of multilingual children in mind (Aneta Figlarska o.fl., 2017; Anna Magnea Hreinsdóttir og Hanna Ragnarsdóttir, 2019; Sara Margrét Ólafsdóttir og Jóhanna Einarsdóttir, 2017). Therefore, it is important that preschool directors, teachers, and other employees gain increased knowledge, confidence, and skills in order to meet the needs of all children and engage them in play and daily preschool activities.

This research project is carried out within the framework of collaborative action research, taking place in a multicultural preschool in Reykjavík capital area, where other language than Icelandic is the home language of a little less than 90% of the children. The goal of the project is to increase the confidence of preschool staff to enter the spontaneous play of multilingual children and make use of the learning opportunities it has to offer for strengthening the Icelandic vocabulary of the children, their communication skills, and metalinguistic awareness. Research participants were five preschool employees, and indirect participants were children in two of the oldest cohorts of the school. Data was collected through field observation, participant observation, focus group interviews, and research diaries.

The project's main findings show that an increased understanding of spontaneous play improves the employees' confidence in entering and supporting the children's play. Changes made to study material and learning spaces led to increased flow in the play and the

empowerment of the children. Directors served as role models for other employees, knowing their strengths, providing relevant information, and identifying situations in the children's play where further support was needed.

In preschools with children of diverse backgrounds, directors, teachers, and other preschool employees need to develop sensitivity and working methods that promote the democratic participation of all children while at the same time giving space to children previous experiences. Staff participation in the spontaneous play of children with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds increases meaningful communication between children, enriches their vocabulary, and secures equal participation in preschool activities.

Michel Vandebroek – Emeritus Professor, Ghent University, Belgium



For the first 20 odd years of his career, Michel Vandebroek worked at the Center for Innovation in Early Childhood Education in Gent, Belgium, where he organized continuous professional development for teams on pedagogy and issues of equity, accessibility and respect for diversity. He then joined the university and became professor at Ghent University. His research was mainly on quality of early childhood education in contexts of diversity. He retired in September 2024 and now works part time as a policy adviser for the social democratic minister, competent for childcare in Flanders. He also works as a senior consultant for several international organizations, including the Council of Europe, the European Commission and OECD.

Henrik Daae Zachrisson – Professor, University of Oslo, Norway



I am a psychologist and professor at the Center for Research on Equality in Education (CREATE) and the Department of Special Needs Education at the University of Oslo. My research primarily focuses on consequences of poverty and social inequality for children's development and learning, and on the potential of ECEC to reduce social gaps in learning and development. My research has been funded by the European Research Council (ERC Consolidator Grant: Socioeconomic gaps in language development and school achievement: Mechanisms of inequality and opportunity--EQOP) and multiple grants from the Research Council of Norway. I was member of the Government appointed expert group on child poverty.

Abstract

Social inequalities in language development and achievement: The compensatory potential of education.

I start by showing that there have been increasing gaps in school achievement between children from high- and low-income families in Norway over the last decades, and that these socio-economic gaps are evident from about age 2. At the same time, Norway is among few countries offering publicly funded ECEC for toddlers. This expanded throughout the 2000's, from covering 30% to more than 80% of 1-2 year olds. Among the drivers of this policy was the hope that early access to ECEC would provide more children with a better start in life and

contribute to reducing social inequalities in achievement and life chances. I review a number of quasi-experimental studies showing that the hopes were (mostly) justified. Finally, I show evidence that some schools are able to mitigate socioeconomic inequalities in achievement. I conclude that while inequalities seem to be rising, education has the potential to provide more children and adolescents with richer opportunities.