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Home language use with children, dialogue with multilingual parents and professional development in ECEC

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ABSTRACT

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) plays an important role in fostering the multilingual development of young children and their families. However, as practitioners often feel insecure or insufficiently skilled to support multilingual families, professional development (PD) is expected to strengthen qualitative interactions between staff and children, and their parents. Many studies have focused on the impact of PD, but few have been conducted in complex multilingual settings. For the present study, we gathered data on 351 early childhood professionals from 85 ECEC services in the Flemish Community of Belgium, a region characterized by a complex multilingual reality, but also by a monolingual discourse in educational policies. By conducting a multilevel regression analysis, we examined whether professional development on topics related to multilingualism is associated with supportive practices toward multilingual families. The findings show that professionals who indicate a higher level of dialogue with multilingual parents on multilingual upbringing also report being given professional support on topics related to multilingualism. Professionals with a multilingual background are more likely to integrate the children's home language into their practices. We found no association between PD and home language use. However, to fully understand how PD can play a role in complex multilingual contexts, more detailed research is needed.
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Introduction

As multilingualism is a societal reality in most regions across the world, a large number of children currently grow up in social contexts where more than one language is spoken (Extra & Yağmur, 2011). Professionals working in education also encounter a variety of home languages every day (Duarte & Kirsch, 2020). Given the wealth of evidence about the social, cognitive, and linguistic benefits of multilingualism (Agirdag, 2014; Barac, Bialystok, Castro, & Sanchez, 2014) and the importance of the first years of life for children's development, there is now scientific consensus that attention to early multilingualism is paramount and that Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has a crucial role to play in this regard (Lengyel, 2012). As ECEC is key in supporting inclusion, equity, and social mobility, the intercultural competencies of early childhood professionals are vital in creating stimulating environments to foster the language development of young emerging multilingual children, and in establishing partnerships with parents (Romijn, Slot, & Leseman, 2021; Salem, Braband, & Lengyel, 2020).

In early childhood contexts characterized by linguistic diversity, professionals need to support language acquisition in the official language(s) of the society, while being attentive to the children's home languages. This is considered important in welcoming families from migrant backgrounds (Kummerer, Lopez-Reyna, & Hughes, 2007) and in valuing each child's multiple identities (Cummins, 2001). Also, the incorporation of home languages can contribute to children's learning experiences and language development (Sierens & Van Avermaet, 2013). Moreover, in line with the approach to intercultural education outlined by Salem et al. (2020) , it is not only necessary to value the children's home languages, but also to contribute to the multilingual development of children in partnership with the parents. Although multilingual parents can be considered the experts on the cultural background of their home languages (Schwartz, 2018), research has shown that many non-native families do not feel self-assured in their approach to the multilingual upbringing of their children (e.g., Eisenchlas, Schalley, & Guillemin, 2013). Therefore, early childhood professionals play an important role in shaping multilingual education together with the parents.

Educational practices may, however, still often be based on a monolingual mindset (Ellis, Gogolin, & Clyne, 2010), implicitly favoring homogeneity and considering diversity and multilingual-

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ism as problems to overcome, rather than conditions for learning (Vandenbroeck, 2018). Research suggests that early childhood professionals may be insecure and have little expertise in approaching young children's multilingualism, in supporting parents in multilingual upbringing (Chan, 2011; Michel & Kuiken, 2014), and in working with non-native families (Ragnarsdóttir, 2021).

It is now well established that the professional development (PD) of practitioners can make a substantial contribution to fostering their competencies and self-efficacy, and thus to improving quality in ECEC (Egert, Fukkink, & Eckhardt, 2018; Fukkink & Lont, 2007; Markussen-Brown et al., 2017). The potential of PD in relation to multilingualism nevertheless remains largely understudied, compared with, for example, research in the field of language and literacy development (Kirsch & Aleksic, 2018). The present study explores links between the professional development of early childhood practitioners and the use of home languages with multilingual children, as well as the engagement of professionals in entering into a dialogue with multilingual parents about their children's multilingual upbringing.

Theoretical background

Home language use in ECEC

Scholars have focused on the experiences of young dual-language learners (DLL) in monolingual or bilingual contexts (see e.g., Raikes et al., 2019). Although it is not always clear which aspects of home language instruction account for the positive effects, it is now well established that the use of the home language in early childhood classrooms does not impede the learning of the dominant language. On the contrary, research documents favorable outcomes for the integrative use of the home language in ECEC. In her review of empirical evidence on instructional practices to support DLLs in ECEC, Banse (2019) concludes that: "Teacher use of DLLs' home languages may be key in literacy and math learning, as well as with regard to social-emotional development" (Banse, 2019, p. 9). Halle et al. (2014) also found that the use of the child's first language in ECEC is significantly and positively associated with closer relationships with teachers, as well as with other children. Moreover, combined exposure to and instruction in both a child's home language (L1) and the main language in society (L2) has also been found to benefit language outcomes of Spanish-English children in both languages in U.S. (Latino) early childhood contexts (e.g., Collins, 2014; Partika et al., 2021; Raikes et al., 2019). This is crucial in the light of counteracting language loss. Indeed, when young children are immersed in a new language in an educational setting, they risk losing their home language and this may, in turn, affect familial bonds and communication (Fillmore, 2000). As noted by De Houwer et al. (2018) , frequent and high-quality home language input to children is a vital enabler of home language maintenance. Furthermore, knowledge of children's home language can provide practitioners with an extra advantage in creating culturally and linguistically sensitive environments, which can in turn foster the early childhood experiences of non-native children (Espinosa & Magruder, 2014; Kummerer et al., 2007).

In contrast to the consensus on the importance of L1 support, according to Kirsch (2021), very few studies on effective language supporting strategies and the positive effects of integrative home language use have been conducted in multilingual settings, where the linguistic diversity is more complex than the way in which bilingual contexts are often portrayed. Moreover, research on the youngest children in ECEC (0–3 years of age) remains scarce, as most studies have examined the outcomes for children from 4 to 5 years old and above. This is startling, considering that recent studies confirm that children can learn 2 or more languages perfectly well from a very young age (Ferjan Ramirez & Kuhl, 2017b, p. 39) and that growing up in multiple languages has many benefits for children's cognitive and social development. For example, multilingual children are often good at mentally demanding processes such as staying focused and ignoring distractions, switching attention, and retaining information (Barac et al., 2014). In addition, multilingual children practice empathy by constantly having to consider which language they will speak to whom. They learn to empathize with others and are well able to observe changes in the social context. Moreover, multilingual children have it easier to build good relationships with all their family members and to access multiple communities through their different languages (Agirdag, 2014). Exposure to frequent high-quality input from each language is crucial from an early age onwards (De Houwer, 2020), since infants' innate neural ability to distinguish phonetic units in all languages declines at 12 months of age and will be limited to the language or languages they hear frequently (Ferjan Ramirez & Kuhl, 2017a). In this regard, it should be noted that exposure to more than one language in the early years does not cause confusion in young children and that these children reach language milestones in a timeframe similar to that of children who learn only one language. Research also shows that children's total vocabulary across their different languages is usually comparable or higher tot that of their monolingual peers (Grosjean, 2010). Consequently, the role of ECEC professionals working with the youngest multilingual children is of utmost importance.

According to Gogolin (1997), however, teaching practices may be characterized by a "monolingual habitus" when teachers unconsciously view monolingualism as the norm, and multilingualism as a deviation from it. This orientation is marked by an unwitting disregard for hybrid language practices, rooted in a notion of cultural and linguistic homogeneity. Lengyel (2012) states that this also holds true for early childhood education. Kirsch and Aleksic (2018) therefore, argue that practitioners should be supported in this regard, so that they become familiar with dynamic conceptions of multilingualism, gain awareness of the monolingual habitus, and are able to reconsider their own beliefs regarding multilingualism.

Dialogue with multilingual parents

According to Salem et al. (2020) , promoting multilingual development requires not only valuing children's home languages, but also establishing cooperation with the parents. Research on the relationship between parents and professionals in ECEC has, for several decades, focused on the notions of partnership (Alasuutari, 2010), mutuality, reciprocity, and shared decision-making (Rouse & O'Brien, 2017). However, as the relationship between parents and professionals is characterized by power asymmetries (e.g., Spivak, 1988), it is necessary to acknowledge that it is not so much about creating an equal partnership as it is about the constant search for how to create moments of reciprocal dialogue in an unequal relationship (Van Laere, Van Houtte, & Vandenbroeck, 2018). Asymmetrical power in the relationship between parents and professionals emerges as a barrier to creating partnerships. This often appears as a perception of the professionals as experts, both by parents and by the professionals themselves (Norheim & Moser, 2020). From this point of view, professional knowledge is prioritized over parental knowledge about the children (Einarsdóttir & Jónsdóttir, 2019). Norheim and Moser (2020) show that this notion of professionals as experts is found across cultures.

However, given that ECEC professionals generally have low professional status and low societal appreciation, the "professional as expert" discourse may not be the only driver behind the asymmetrical relationship between parents and professionals. As Einarsdóttir and Jónsdóttir (2019) point out, there are indeed many

levels of power involved in the relationship between parents and professionals. Given that parents are often confronted with unequal financial, social and cultural resources, equality is hardly conceivable. Moreover, the subordinate position in which parents find themselves makes them more likely to adjust their own expectations to the implicit and explicit rules, norms and routines of childcare (Van Laere, Van Houtte, & Vandenbroeck, 2018).

Communication in itself is often a major difficulty for parents and for professionals in establishing a reciprocal dialogue. For example, Norheim and Moser (2020) found that while parents expressed a wish to build partnerships with educational professionals, they often experienced a lack of opportunities to communicate with them, most often due to a language barrier. A literature review by Aghallaj, Van Der Wildt, Vandenbroeck, & Agirdag (2020) shows that parents from language minorities encounter linguistic and cultural discontinuity, which may contribute to them feeling less welcome or accepted, and perceiving interactions with professionals as more challenging (Cheatham & Santos, 2011). In this regard, a readiness for communication (Salem et al., 2020, p. 3) and a willingness to enter into dialogue with immigrant parents (Adair & Tobin, 2008, p. 137) in ECEC is needed. Such a dialogue should focus on getting to know each other, sharing beliefs and exploring what is important to all parties, as well as with regard to the multilingual development of the children (Nemeth & Erdosi, 2012). By engaging in these conversations, professionals not only learn about a family's linguistic repertoire, goals, and expectations, but also have the opportunity to express their positive attitudes toward language and multilingualism (Mary & Young, 2017, p. 10).

Non-native parents do not always feel confident in their approach to the multilingual upbringing of their children (Eisenchlas et al., 2013), as they may be insecure and anxious about their parental role and troubled by linguistic issues, such as the possible inability to transfer their heritage language to their children (De Houwer, 2015; Sevinç & Dewaele, 2018). The review by Aghallaj, Van Der Wildt, Vandenbroeck, & Agirdag (2020) illustrates that while some non-native parents would like for their children to have a multilingual education, others prefer their children to be educated solely in the majority language, even though professionals are committed to promoting home language use in the service. Accordingly, the discussions with different parents about educational and linguistic practices may produce disagreements that, in addition to communications skills (Slot, Halba, & Romijn, 2017), call for ECEC professionals to have negotiation skills in order to construct meaningful practices and true partnerships with parents (Vandenbroeck, 2009).

Professional development

Creating stimulating early childhood environments that simultaneously address the multilingual development of young children and establish partnerships with parents, requires ECEC practitioners to have intercultural competencies (Romijn et al., 2021; Salem et al., 2020). In many countries, ECEC professionals increasingly work with families with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Norheim & Moser, 2020), they therefore need thorough knowledge of the social and cultural reality of these families, and are expected to pay specific attention to those having migrant, minority, or vulnerable backgrounds (Silva, Bajzáth, Lemkow-Tovias, & Wastijn, 2020). Research suggests that professionals may feel uncertain and may have little expertise in working in linguistically diverse ECEC contexts (Chan, 2011; Michel & Kuiken, 2014), but that they may also overestimate their own knowledge base (Cunningham, Zibulsky, & Callahan, 2009). Engaging ECEC practitioners in processes of professional development (PD) can make a substantial contribution to improving quality in ECEC (Egert et al., 2018; Fukkink & Lont, 2007; Markussen-Brown et al., 2017). Indeed, there is now a general consensus about the relationship between PD and the enhancement of process quality, defined as meaningful interactions between adults and children, and between parents and professionals (OECD, 2021).

Professional development encompasses a broad spectrum of learning opportunities for ECEC professionals, ranging from initial pre-service training leading to formal degrees and qualifications, to many forms of in-service training activities for professionals already in the job (Egert et al., 2018; Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009). The latter types of training are often referred to as "continuous or continuing professional development" (CPD). Research has identified specific points of attention in order for CPD to be successful, including that it should be well integrated into individual centers' practices, in order to meet the actual needs of the professionals involved (Peleman et al., 2018). CPD aimed at improving pedagogical quality is best realized by giving staff the opportunity to learn in groups, where they can reflect on their own practice and where a pedagogical coach or supervisor supports this process. Brunsek et al. (2020) concur, and found that internal PD (such as coaching) is more effective than external PD (such as following a course or workshop), as a coach provides opportunities to reflect on the participants' practice through individualized attention and feedback in a collaborative way. This was also found to be crucial in the meta-analyses of Egert et al. (2018) and by Markussen-Brown et al. (2017). Internal PD enhances reflection, which is particularly important with regard to working with families and children from vulnerable backgrounds (De Gioia, 2015; Peeters & Vandenbroeck, 2011; Peeters & Sharmahd, 2014).

Furthermore, studies on CPD also highlight that programs combining internal and external PD through a mixture of workshops, courses, and on-site support may be very effective in terms of quality improvement (Egert et al., 2018; Markussen-Brown et al., 2017; Sheridan et al., 2009). Indeed, Slot, Romijn, and Wyslowska (2017) also found that the most successful CPD interventions rely on more than one strategy. By employing a wide range of training modalities and learning opportunities, the different learning styles of individual participants can be addressed, offering the potential to increase the effect of an intervention. These findings indicate that focusing solely on external PD may not yield the greatest impact on ECEC practice.

Lastly, it is crucial that CPD programs are evidence-informed and well-embedded in a curricular framework. In the European review on effective CPD in ECEC commissioned by Eurofound (2015) , CPD initiatives based on the active engagement of practitioners and on peer exchanges within a shared scientific framework proved to be the most effective.

It needs to be noted, however, that research on CPD with a focus on multilingualism in early childhood is still scarce (Kirsch & Aleksic, 2018).

Research questions

The current study aims to explore the links between the (in-service) professional development of ECEC practitioners with a focus on multilingualism, and 2 important aspects in creating a positive, welcoming, and stimulating ECEC environment for multilingual families. First, home language use in interaction with multilingual children, and second, engaging in a dialogue with multilingual parents. By focusing on the youngest children in ECEC (0–3 years old), this study attempts to shed light on the factors that support the development of emerging multilingual children and their families.

The first research question explores the relationship between professional support (on topics related to multilingualism) and home language use in interactions with multilingual children. We

hypothesize that professionals who have been given support on topics related to multilingualism are more likely to use children's home languages during interactive moments. A second, additional hypothesis is that this relationship is weaker for professionals who have only received external support (by attending external courses, training, or workshops) compared with those who have received a combination of internal and external support.

The second research question looks at the relationship between professional support (on topics related to multilingualism) and engaging in a dialogue with multilingual parents about multilingual upbringing. We hypothesize that professionals who have been given support on topics related to multilingualism are more likely to enter into communication with multilingual parents in this regard. A second, additional hypothesis is that this relationship is weaker for professionals who have only received external support (by attending external courses, training, or workshops) compared with those who have received a combination of internal and external support.

Research context

Flanders (the Dutch-speaking community of Belgium) is an interesting context for the study of these issues. While Dutch is the official language, in 30% of the births in 2020, the language between mother and child was not Dutch, and 30% of the children born in Flanders in 2020 had a mother of non-Belgian origin (Opgroeien, 2021a). In large cities such as Antwerp and Brussels, more than half of the 0–5-year-olds have home languages that are not Dutch. The other most widely used languages in family contexts are French, Arabic, Turkish, Romanian, English, Polish, and Berber (Opgroeien, 2021a). Despite the multilingual reality of Flanders, the childcare sector consists mainly of Dutch-speaking providers and staff, and policy measures to support a foreign home language are virtually absent. More than half of the children (54%) regularly attend licensed and publicly funded childcare from birth to the age of 3(Opgroeien, 2021a). All regulated facilities must meet the same structural quality characteristics, which are centrally monitored. The adult to child ratio is set at 1 adult per 8 children, but there are no regulations regarding group size or age range of the children in a group. Childcare services are free to choose how they arrange the groups. Process quality varies from one facility to another. In 2016, a large-scale baseline study on the quality of childcare in Flanders was carried out as part of the MeMoQ (Measuring and Monitoring Quality) project commissioned by the governmental agency for childcare, "Child and Family" (Hulpia et al., 2016). The study showed that scores for emotional support on the CLASS-Infant instrument (Hamre, Karen, Paro, Pianta, & LoCasale-Crouch, 2014) and the CLASS-Toddler instrument (La Paro, Hamre, & Pianta, 2012) were moderate to good. By contrast, educational support was moderate to low. Both emotional and educational support (in particular the dimensions related to language support) were significantly lower in groups with more children than average, when their home language was different to the official one in the ECEC-service (Hulpia et al., 2016).

Methodology

Sample and data collection

The data used here originate from a survey in 85 childcare services in Flanders, carried out as part of the "Pro-M" project (2018–2022). This inter-university research project studied multilingualism in the early years, with a specific focus on the relationship between early childhood professionals and multilingual parents. Between October 2018 and March 2019, a total of 161 center-based childcare services were contacted, of which 85 (52.8%) agreed to participate. Services were selected by means of a stratified two-stage sampling method. First, 19 municipalities in Flanders and Brussels were selected, because they have a high proportion of mothers who do not speak the dominant language (Dutch) to their child. Second, childcare services were randomly selected in each of the 19 municipalities. These selected services were then contacted by phone to inform them about the study and invite them to participate. The service leaders or directors were subsequently sent an information letter via email, which they could use to inform the childcare workers about the study. The email also included a response form for the childcare services to confirm or decline their participation in the study. All the childcare workers from the 85 services that consented were then invited to take part in the survey via a URL that allowed them to complete the questionnaire on any computer, tablet or smartphone with an internet connection. A paper version of the questionnaire was provided for childcare workers with limited access to the Internet. This resulted in a final sample of 351 professionals (69 of whom also have a coordinating role) completing the survey, representing 56% of the 628 practitioners working in these services.

Survey design

The electronic survey was developed in close collaboration between the researchers from the 4 universities within the "PRO-M" project, using the Qualtrics XM software. It consisted of 7 overarching sections: (1) Language Policy (72 items questioning practices and beliefs toward children, parents and colleagues); 2) Beliefs about Language and Language Development (15 items); (3) Relationship with Parents in General (14 items); (4) Beliefs about Multilingualism and Diversity (22 items); (5) Collaboration with the Public Library (10 items); (6) Professional Support (12 items); (7) Personal Information (9 items). The survey was administered in Dutch and pilot tested in a convenience sample of 7 professionals to test its flow, ease of administration, clarity and validity. The survey was revised according to the feedback. Data were exported from the Qualtrics software and then imported and analyzed using the IBM SPSS Statistics software version 27.

Given the comprehensiveness of the survey and in line with the concrete research objectives, the following sections were used for the present study: (1) Language Policy (linguistic practices toward children and parents); (6) Professional Support; (7) Personal Information. Hereafter, we describe how the different variables were constructed and prepared for analysis.

Measurements

Dependent variable 1

The first dependent variable is "use of home language with children." A 5-item scale was constructed, consisting of the following items: (1) I greet/welcome multilingual children in their home language; (2) I read books to the children in languages other than Dutch; (3) When I read out loud, I deliberately use a few words from the different home languages of the multilingual children; (4) When I am alone with a multilingual child, I deliberately use a few words from the child's home language; (5) During a group activity, I deliberately use a few words from the different home languages of the multilingual children. These items stem from the survey section on linguistic practices toward children and were answered on a 5-point Likert scale: "never," "hardly ever," "sometimes," "often," and "always."

Item correlation substitution was performed for missing values (Huisman, 2000). Missing values for an item were replaced by the value of the item correlating most highly with that item. This reduced missing values from 7% missing for at least one of the orig-

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for dependent and independent variables: frequencies (%), means, and standard deviations.

Variables	Mean (SD) or %	N
Professional level		
Use of home language with children	1.85 (0.65)	330
Dialogue with parents on multilingual upbringing	0.56 (0.31)	315
Self-assessed professional support (ref. cat.: No support)		
Internal support only	15.3%	261
External support only	31.8%	261
Combination of internal and external support	30.7%	261
Multilingual background (ref. cat.: Monolingual)	25.8%	271
Level of qualification (ref. cat.: Higher than ISCED 4)		
Lower than ISCED 4	29.5%	264
ISCED 4	44.7%	264
Years of working experience (range: 1–42)	11.64 (9.08)	256
Service level		
Proportion of multilingual families	0.34 (0.24)	72
Proportion of multilingual staff	0.31 (0.28)	76

inal items, to 6% (=21) of the items that were used for scale construction.

Principal component analysis revealed that the items loaded on a single factor. This factor explained 53.4 % of the variance and there was a clear decrease in eigenvalues between the first (i.e., 2.67) and second retained factor (i.e., 0.76). All factor loadings were between 0.60 and 0.80 and the Cronbach's alpha was .77. On average, professionals scored 1.85 on a scale from 1 to 5, with a standard deviation of 0.65 (see Table 1). Higher values on this scale indicate a more active commitment by professionals to integrate and deliberately use the children's home languages during interactive moments. The overall score on this scale is in the lower region, despite the relatively high proportion of multilingual families in the services in the sample (see below).

Dependent variable 2

The second dependent variable is "dialogue with parents on multilingual upbringing." This 6-item scale consists of the following items: (1) I ask multilingual parents to give me some words in the child's home language; (2) I inform parents about the language policy of the center; (3) Multilingual parents ask me for advice about multilingual upbringing, (4) I spontaneously give multilingual parents advice about language and multilingual upbringing, and suggest best practice; (5) I give multilingual parents family-oriented advice on language and multilingual upbringing; (6) I find it important to give advice to multilingual parents on multilingual upbringing. These items stem from the survey section on linguistic practices toward parents and were answered "no" (0) or "yes" (1).

Item correlation substitution was performed for missing values (Huisman, 2000). Missing values for an item were replaced by the value of the item correlating most highly with that item. This reduced missing values from 18% missing for at least one of the original items to 10% (N = 36) of the items that were used for scale construction.

Principal component analysis revealed that the items loaded on a single factor. This factor explained 40.3 % of the variance and there was a clear decrease in eigenvalues between the first (i.e., 2.42) and second retained factor (i.e., 0.92). All factor loadings were between 0.45 and 0.73 and the Cronbach's alpha was .69. On average, professionals scored 0.56 on a scale from 0 to 1, with a standard deviation of 0.31 (see Table 1). Higher values on this scale indicate a more active commitment by ECEC professionals to engage in a dialogue with multilingual parents about language and multilingual upbringing.

Service-level variables

Two measurements were used at the level of the ECEC service: "proportion of multilingual families" and "proportion of multilingual staff." These two variables were derived from two specific questions in the survey that asked "What percentage of the children speak something other than just Dutch at home?" and "What percentage of the staff speak something other than just Dutch at home?" For both statements, responses ranged from 0 to 100%. The average proportion of multilingual families in the participating services was 34% compared with an average of 31.3% of multilingual staff (see Table 1).

Professional-level variables

Four variables are included at the level of the ECEC professionals: "type of professional support received," "multilingual background," "level of qualification," and "years of experience." All four variables were self-reported.

The "type of professional support received" is a categorical variable, indicating the type of professional in-service training that the respondents had been given. In the survey section on Professional Support, respondents were first asked: "On what topics have you already received support?". A menu of ten topics was presented in which respondents could tick the specific topics on which they had already received support. For each topic, the respondents then had to indicate what kind of support was concerned: "internal" support (guidance or coaching during working hours or guided reflection/supervision during child-free times), or "external" (participation in external training, a course, or a learning network).

Conceptually, we considered 5 of the 10 topics relevant to working in linguistically diverse ECEC contexts and thus to our research questions: "multilingualism", "diversity", "working with parents", "language development", and "reading aloud". By applying a Chi-Square test for independence, we were able to determine that there was also a statistically significant relationship between each of the 5 topics ($P < 0.001$). We then checked the standardized residuals (z-scores) to analyze associations on the level of the specific kind of support for each of the 5 topics. We used 3 categories: "no support", "internal support", "external support" and found statistically significant z-scores for each of the categories indicating an association between the 5 topics on the level of the kind of support. Consequently, our data allowed us to create a cluster of the 5 topics and use that cluster for further analysis on the level of type of support. This resulted in the inclusion of 3 dummy variables in the model: (1) "only internal support," (2) "only external support," (3) "a combination of internal and external support." These dummy variables were compared with the reference category: "no

support." The sample consisted of 58 professionals who received no support on any of the 5 topics, 40 who received only internal support on at least 1 of the 5 topics, 83 who received only external support on at least 1 of the 5 topics, and 80 who received a combination of internal and external support on at least 2 of the 5 topics.

The "multilingual background" of the professionals was obtained from the question "Were you raised as multilingual?" Respondents could answer with "no" (0) or "yes" (1), and 70 respondents in the sample indicated a multilingual background. In order to construct a variable for qualification level, professionals were asked to give their highest level of education. These answers were then scaled according to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). The basic training for childcare workers in Flanders is an ISCED 4 level; however, childcare services can also hire staff below that level. We therefore converted answers into 3 categories: "Lower than ISCED 4" (78 respondents), "ISCED 4" (118 respondents), and "Higher than ISCED 4" (68 respondents). Lower than ISCED 4 and ISCED 4 were included in the model, as well as the professionals' number of years of experience (M = 11.64, SD = 9.08). Since 96.3% of the participating professionals stated "female" as their gender, this was not included as a variable in the analysis.

Research design

Two parallel multilevel regression designs with a random intercept were set up for the analysis of the 2 dependent variables separately. This means that the dependent variables were analyzed separately, but the construction of the models was carried out in the same way, with the same independent and control variables added in an identical order. A multilevel design is appropriate for the present study, given that the sample consists of ECEC professionals who are "nested" in services. By applying multilevel analysis, a relationship can be sought between variables across all groups, while taking into account the dependencies between individuals within the groups (Verboon & Peels, 2014).

For each of the dependent variables, the unconditional model was first estimated to determine the amount of variance in the use of home language with the children, and the dialogue with parents on multilingual upbringing, situated at the level of the ECEC service. The dummy variables on received support were then added (Model 1), to identify the possible effects of professional support and to find out which type of support has the strongest association with the dependent variables. Next, the indicator for multilingual background was entered (Model 2), to test whether these effects still hold or are mediated by practitioners being multilingual. In Model 3, the service level variables on the proportion of multilingual staff and multilingual families were included, followed by the inclusion of the 2 dummy variables on qualification level and the remaining variable on years of work experience in Model 4.

Results

RQ 1: CPD and use of home language with children

For dependent variable 1 "use of home language with children," the unconditional multilevel analysis (professionals nested within ECEC services, "Model 0") indicates that 28.4% of the variance in the use of home language with children was between services ($p < 0.001$). This confirms the appropriateness of using a multilevel model for our analysis (Snijders & Bosker, 2011).

As illustrated in Table 2, the first hypothesis (professionals who received support on topics related to multilingualism are more likely to use children's home languages during interactive moments) has to be rejected, and the second hypothesis (the relationship is weaker for professionals who received only external support) thus becomes irrelevant.

By contrast, the variable "multilingual background" (Model 2) is positively and significantly associated with the use of home language ($b = 0.267$, $p < 0.01$). Professionals who were raised as multilingual are more likely to report using the children's home language during individual and group situations with multilingual children. The influence of having a multilingual background remains equally strong and significant ($b = 0.268$, $p < 0.01$) when the service-level variables related to the proportion of multilingual families and the proportion of multilingual staff (Model 3) are added. The significant association between multilingual background and the use of home language also persists in Model 4, when the level of qualification and the number of years of working experience are controlled for, albeit less strongly ($b = 0.232$, $p < 0.05$).

This last model explains 13.7% of the total variance in use of the home language. For random intercept models, the proportional reduction in total variance is considered a viable measurement to determine the overall R^2 (LaHuis, Hartman, Hakoyama, & Clark, 2014).

RQ 2: CPD and dialogue with parents on multilingual upbringing

For dependent variable 2, "dialogue with parents on multilingual upbringing," the unconditional multilevel analysis indicates that 15% of the variance is between services ($p < 0.001$), confirming the necessity for multilevel modelling.

Table 3 shows that our third hypothesis is confirmed: professionals who report having received support on topics related to multilingualism are more likely to enter into communication with multilingual parents on multilingual upbringing compared with professionals who have not received support. In Model 1, the 3 types of support are positively and significantly associated with dialogue with parents on multilingual upbringing (Model 1). The strongest association is found with the combination of internal and external support ($b = 0.237$, $p < 0.001$). Professionals who indicated that they were given only internal support or only external support are more likely to engage in dialogue with multilingual parents than professionals who did not receive any support, but the associations are slightly weaker than when the support given comprised a combination of internal and external. A coefficient of 0.169 ($p < 0.01$) is found for only internal support and 0.161 ($p < 0.01$) for only external support. These associations persist when the variable "multilingual background" is added (Model 2). Being raised as a multilingual does not show any significant association with engaging in dialogue with parents about multilingual parenting, and it does not influence the associations with the received support. These associations remain positive and significant (for internal support only: $b = 0.157$, $p < 0.01$; for external support only: $b = 0.159$, $p < 0.01$; for the combination of internal and external support: $b = 0.232$, $p < 0.001$).The service-level variables related to the proportion of multilingual families and the proportion of multilingual staff added in Model 3 have no significant association with the dependent variable, and they do not substantially change the associations that were already apparent in the previous models. When adding the 2 dummy variables on qualification level in Model 4, a negative association for qualification level = ISCED 4 ($b = -0.095$, $p < 0.01$) is revealed. This means that compared with professionals who have a qualification level higher than ISCED 4, professionals qualified at ISCED 4 are less likely to engage in dialogue with parents on multilingual upbringing. The association is, however, relatively weak.

Model 4 also shows that the number of years of experience is significantly associated with dialogue with parents ($b = 0.005$, $p < 0.01$), but this is negligible considering the low value of the coefficient: for each additional year of experience, the extent of dialogue

Table 2
Association between received support and the use of home language with multilingual children.

	Model 0	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
ICC	0.284				
Intercept	1.902***	1.837***	1.734***	1.724***	1.677***
Professional level					
Self-assessed professional support (ref. cat.: No support)					
Internal support only		-0.106	-0.106	-0.204	-0.211
External support only		0.060	0.100	0.088	0.065
Combination of internal and external support		0.133	0.168	0.126	0.113
Multilingual background			0.267**	0.268**	0.232*
Qualification level lower than ISCED 4					-0.012
Qualification level = ISCED 4					0.093
Years of working experience					0.003
Service level					
Proportion of multilingual families				-0.001	-0.001
Proportion of multilingual staff				0.003	0.002

Dependent variable: The use of home language with multilingual children
°p ≤ 0.1
*p ≤ 0.05
** p ≤ 0.01
*** p ≤ 0.001

Table 3
Association between received support and dialogue with parents on multilingual upbringing.

	Model 0	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
ICC	0.150				
Intercept	0.564***	0.404***	0.397***	0.377***	0.420***
Professional level					
Self-assessed professional support (ref. cat.: No support)					
Internal support only		0.169**	0.157**	0.133*	0.112°
External support only		0.161**	0.159**	0.149*	0.101°
Combination of internal and external support		0.237***	0.232***	0.204***	0.150**
Multilingual background			0.053	0.045	0.077
Qualification level lower than ISCED 4					-0.077
Qualification level = ISCED 4					-0.095°
Years of working experience					0.005*
Service level					
Proportion of multilingual families				0.001	0.001
Proportion of multilingual staff				0.000	-0.000

Dependent variable: Dialogue with multilingual parents on multilingual upbringing
°p ≤ 0.1
* p ≤ 0.05
** p ≤ 0.01
*** p ≤ 0.001

with parents increases by 0.005 on the scale. This last model explains 14.1% of the total variance in dialogue with parents on multilingual upbringing.

To check our fourth hypothesis (the relationship is weaker for professionals who have only been given external support), a Fisher's least significant difference (LSD) post-hoc test (Williams & Abdi, 2010) was performed in order to make a pairwise comparison between the different types of support. The results of the test show that despite the finding that all categories differ significantly from the reference category, there are no significant differences between the categories of "internal support only," "external support only," and "a combination of internal and external support." As this post-hoc test did not reveal relevant findings, the fourth hypothesis is not supported.

Discussion

The present study has explored links between the professional development of early childhood practitioners and 2 crucial aspects in dealing with families from multilingual backgrounds: home language use and the engagement in entering into dialogue with multilingual parents. By making use of a multilevel regression model, we analyzed whether professionals who are given support on topics related to multilingualism are more likely to use multilingual children's home language in interactions with them, compared with professionals who have not been given such support. Similarly, we analyzed whether professionals who received support on topics related to multilingualism are more likely to enter into a dialogue with multilingual parents concerning the children's multilingual upbringing, compared with professionals who have not received such support.

Home language use

We found no significant association between support being given on topics related to multilingualism, and the use of the home language in interactions with multilingual children. By contrast, having a multilingual background was found to be significantly associated with home language use, suggesting that ECEC professionals who are themselves raised as multilingual are more likely to report using the children's home languages in interaction with multilingual children compared with professionals who do have not had a similar upbringing. This finding is not surprising, as it may be expected that being capable of expressing oneself in more than one language would facilitate the use of different languages in a professional context. This is consistent with findings from Flores and Smith (2009), who inferred that the ability to

speak a minority language induces more positive attitudes toward children from language-minority backgrounds.

One possible explanation for the absence of a strong link between CPD and home language use could be related to the fact that the specific content of the support provided may not automatically lead to a clear change in a person's abilities. For example, although professionals who have received training on topics related to multilingualism may be more aware of the importance of home language and have adopted a more positive attitude toward multilingualism, they may not necessarily have acquired the skills and self-confidence to actually integrate children's home languages into their practice.

Indeed, causal relationships between CPD and changes in practice are not straightforward. Further, several factors apart from specific training may be involved. The CoRe study on competence requirements in ECEC (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, & Peeters, 2012) shows that ensuring quality requires a "whole-school" approach, within which the policy, leadership, and day-to-day practices of an ECEC service must be aligned to achieve sustainable change. In such a competent system, the various levels work together to enable quality development, as it is not the sole responsibility of an individual practitioner to change the practices. In addition, Romijn et al. (2021) found that the wider context in which CPD takes place (consisting of local and national policies, organizational structures and resources, evaluation, access, and outreach) can explain the lack of impact of an intervention. This is often due to insufficient differentiation regarding the needs of participants in CPD, the non-involvement of key actors within an organization (such as service leaders), or because of prevailing monolingual discourses in the ECEC service (the "monolingual habitus"). These aspects may greatly hamper the transfer between what has been learned and what is being practiced, and thus negatively affect the impact of an intervention.

In Flanders, the policy for children from 3 to 6 years old is strongly focused on a narrow definition of learning in terms of knowledge acquisition, with a predominant use of Dutch language. This leads to the "schoolification" of the 0–3 sector that is then supposed to make children "ready" for school, with a particular focus on their Dutch language skills (Vandenbroeck & Van Laere, 2019). This context, together with a monolingual habitus, may counteract the impact of CPD on the attitudes and behavior of ECEC professionals.

In contrast to our results, Castro et al. (2017) provide evidence that professionals can be trained to use children's home languages to a greater extent. Further, the detailed case studies of de Oliveira et al. (2016) in the U.S. and Mary and Young (2017) in France profoundly illustrate that monolingual teachers can develop skills that enable them to incorporate children's home languages in ECEC practice. In the study by Mary and Young (2017), this is illustrated with "translanguaging" as a pedagogical strategy. Thus, being unable to speak any of the home languages present or not being multilingual does not mean that a person cannot use others' home languages to a greater extent, provided they are properly supported in doing so. Castro et al. (2017) also argue that teachers who are fluent in the home languages of young dual-language learners may still require support to intentionally use these home languages more often. This is especially true in complex multilingual contexts where many different home languages are present among the families, as is the case in Flanders. Bilingual or multilingual staff cannot possibly know all of the children's home languages, and it is often the case that they are more frequently confronted with and challenged by languages that they have not mastered well (Knudsen, Donau, Mifsud, Papadopoulos, & Dockrell, 2021). The results of the study by Kirsch and Aleksic (2018) show that participating in a CPD course on the development of multilingual education can actually lead to increased promotion of children's home languages in daily practice.

Dialogue with multilingual parents on multilingual upbringing

Our study shows that professionals who indicate a higher level of dialogue with multilingual parents also report being given support on topics related to multilingualism. Interestingly, all 3 modalities of being given support (internal support only, external support only, and the combination of the 2) were found to be significantly associated with greater dialogue with multilingual parents. The post-hoc test, however, could not identify which of the 3 types of received support had the strongest association, preventing us from confirming the hypothesis that only having external support yields a lesser impact.

With regard to the relationship with multilingual parents, Van Oss, Struys, Van Avermaet, and Vantieghem (2021) found that professionals who were given some forms of multilingual training were more likely to offer parents advice on multilingual upbringing than those who did not receive any such training. Although their study was conducted in the context of infant welfare clinics and their analysis did not distinguish by the delivery mode of the training, it is noteworthy that the results closely parallel those of our study.

The finding that receiving professional support concerning multilingualism is related to increased dialogue with multilingual parents is relevant in the light of other research indicating that early childhood professionals are often insecure about their relationships with multilingual parents (e.g., Chan, 2011; Michel & Kuiken, 2014). This insecurity hinders practitioners from establishing communications with multilingual parents and being open to dialogue. Thus, one possible explanation for our findings could be that as a result of a CPD intervention on multilingualism and related topics, professionals feel more confident in dealing with multilingual parents and therefore engage in dialogue more often or more quickly. Support for this interpretation can be found in a previous review on the impact of effective CPD initiatives in ECEC (Peleman et al., 2018) that points to an increased feeling of confidence being one of the main overarching benefits of CPD for practitioners.

Another possible explanation for the positive association between CPD and increased dialogue with multilingual parents may be that a change in the communication with parents is easier for professionals, as the relationship with parents is associated more with the personal sphere, whereas communication with the children is associated more with the professional sphere. For most early childhood professionals, communication with parents is not considered as a primary part of their work, and therefore changing this may not necessarily require a fundamental alteration of their professional attitudes or of the pedagogical policy concerning ECEC provision. Consequently, the transfer between insights gained during training (e.g., about the importance of communication) and changes in daily practice may be achieved more easily than would be the case for the deliberate use of children's home language as a pedagogical strategy.

This does not imply in any sense, however, that the engagement of the team and the organization should be omitted in shaping CPD on the relationship with parents. As Slot et al. (2017) show, the commitment of the team as a whole, combined with a shared focus on attitudes toward involving parents, are crucial in order to ensure the increased inclusiveness of the ECEC service toward parents. This is in line with the aforementioned concept of the "competent system" (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, & Peeters, 2012).

The finding that the multilingual background of the early childhood professionals is not associated with an increased engagement

in terms of entering into dialogue with multilingual parents is also consistent with those of Van Oss et al. (2021), who found that the multilingual background of professionals from infant welfare clinics was not a significant factor regarding the advice offered to multilingual parents. These observations are somewhat surprising, given the many studies indicating that shared (linguistic) experiences can foster stronger relationships (e.g., De Gioia, 2009; Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2014).

Indeed, if professionals are raised as multilingual, this does not necessarily entail that they share a linguistic and cultural background with the parents. The review by Aghallaj, Van Der Wildt, Vandenbroeck, and Agirdag (2020) shows that minority-language parents and ECEC professionals rarely share similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds, frequently resulting in professionals having less interest and listening to parents less. The results of our study show that well-supported early childhood professionals tend to be more likely to engage in dialogue with multilingual parents, regardless of these professionals' own linguistic background. This suggests that CPD can be a mediating or facilitating factor in establishing mutual communications between ECEC professionals and parents, even if they do not share the same language and/or cultural background.

Lastly, our analysis concerning the dialogue with multilingual parents also reveals that professionals qualified at ISCED 4 (which is the legally required minimum in Flanders) are less likely to engage in dialogue with parents on multilingual upbringing compared with professionals who hold a higher level of qualification. This result may be explained by the fact that professionals who have attained higher levels of education (e.g., a bachelor's degree) are more likely to take on a coordinating role in the ECEC service. In Flanders, leaders of services with more than 18 child places are required to hold at least a bachelor's degree (Opgroeien, 2021b). In their role as coordinators, these professionals are often the first point of contact for parents, for example at intake meetings, during conversations about the contract, during evaluation times, etc. Although they may not have as much contact with parents on a day-to-day basis, throughout the entire childcare period there are several set times or (formal) occasions when they engage in conversation with parents. Additionally, it might also be the case that those who are more highly qualified (with or without a coordinating role) are more likely to be specifically assigned to handle or take over certain tasks that transcend daily practice or that occur in more complex situations, such as with refugee families of families that need special care.

Nevertheless, even when controlling for levels of qualification, the perceived support that has been given still matters with regard to engaging in dialogue with multilingual parents.

Limitations and future directions

Although our study responds to the need for research on CPD with a focus on multilingualism in ECEC (Kirsch & Aleksic, 2018), it nevertheless has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The first limitation regarding CPD is that while we know how the professionals in our sample were given support about topics related to multilingualism (internally, externally, or both), we lack information about the specific content of the CPD, its context, and its duration. For example, we do not know whether "home language use" was specifically targeted as a subject matter in the CPD, and we have no insights into whether the CPD focused on skills, knowledge, attitudes, or on a combination of these. We are also missing details of reflection about and enactment of the received support. These are highlighted in the review by Romijn et al. (2021) as two important aspects in determining the effectiveness of CPD. In addition, we have little information about the context of the ECEC services in our sample, making it difficult to make statements about how the transfer into practice was (or was not) supported by the management of the services. As a result, it cannot be unambiguously explained why received support in our study is associated with engaging in dialogue with multilingual parents, but not with using the home language with multilingual children. More small-scale intervention studies would be necessary in order to fully understand how CPD concerning multilingualism may foster positive educational practices toward multilingual children and their parents. In particular, our findings could be supported and enriched by studies on the specific content of training designed to stimulate the purposive use of home language by both monolingual and multilingual professionals working in linguistically diverse ECEC contexts. This also applies to further research on the specific factors that allow an ECEC service with a predominantly monolingual discourse to evolve into more openness to multilingualism, and on how service leaders can build a supportive climate for this development. In contexts with increasing multilingualism, this seems to be all the more important. For example, Schalley et al. (2015) show that in Australia, increasing multilingualism is accompanied by assimilationist policies and monolingual discourses in society.

Another limitation of our study is related to the fact that the received support was a self-reported measurement and should therefore be considered as perceived support. Accordingly, caution is needed in interpreting the associations, as "practices" should be understood as "reported practices." We can nevertheless assume the participants answered truthfully, and we believe that any effect of social desirability was minimal, given the relatively low mean scores on both scales. Further studies could, however, include family ratings of professionals' multilingual support or observations of concrete practices to develop a more comprehensive picture of the effects of CPD interventions on multilingual practices.

Lastly, our study focuses on only one side of the CPD spectrum, specifically that of in-service training and support. However, as Norheim and Moser (2020) point out, little is also known about how teacher education programs and curricula prepare prospective early childhood professionals for working with families from different cultures. Therefore, further research could usefully explore the role of pre-service training and the ways in which in-service and pre-service can become more strongly connected and together contribute to the development of quality ECEC practice for multilingual families.

Despite these limitations, our study is unique in that it combines (reported) practices in dealing with multilingual children and with multilingual parents in a relatively large sample, and in a context of complex multilingualism and high attendance of formal, regulated childcare. As underlined by Salem et al. (2020), valuing the home languages of children should always be in concert with cooperation with their parents when creating quality, inclusive, and accessible ECEC for multilingual families. In this sense, we advocate that further research on supporting multilingual families in ECEC should aim for the inclusion of both perspectives (that of the children and that of the parents).

Conclusion

This study shows that in an ECEC context primarily oriented toward monolingualism, professionals who have been given support and those who were themselves raised as multilingual, exhibit a more positive approach to multilingual families. The former by being found to engage more in dialogue with multilingual parents, the latter by being found to use the families' home languages more often when interacting with multilingual children. These are important findings, given ECEC's key role in contributing to a more inclusive and equal society with equal opportunities for all families. Our research shows that if ECEC is to fulfill that role, it pays

to provide professional support for early childhood practitioners on the topic of multilingualism, and to offer it in such a way that it combines internal and external CPD modalities.

Disclosures

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Appendices

Table

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