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Teachers' language-, culture- and worldview-inclusive pedagogical competencies in Finnish early childhood education

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Abstract

The field of Finnish early childhood education (ECE) is becoming increasingly linguistically, culturally and worldview diverse, as the number of children and families from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds is rapidly increasing. Teachers need sufficient competencies and research-based foundations for implementing a language-, culture- and worldview-inclusive pedagogy. These areas of competencies are key factors in the future professional skills of teachers and should have a visible position as part of sustainable teacher education. This article examines what kind of expertise is required in the field of education for the development of language-, culture- and worldview-inclusive pedagogical practices in the future.

The research data have been collected in ECE units where linguistic, cultural and worldview diversity have been present for a long time, through interviews with early childhood education professionals, teachers and leaders. Based on the research findings, key aspects of teachers' competencies should include value and attitude work, shared conceptual understanding and reflection skills. Team commitment to work and good leadership by supervisors are key factors contributing to the successful teamwork and the quality of work being done as well as its development and evaluation. Flexibility and continuous adaptability in working with an inclusive pedagogy are essential, as are goal-oriented work and repeatability. The importance of collaboration with families is particularly central in the context of language-, culture- and worldview-inclusive pedagogical practices. Successful work supports the participation and learning of children from diverse backgrounds.

Keywords: language-, culture- and worldview-inclusive pedagogy, early childhood education, case study, interpersonal skills, intrapersonal skills, teachers' future competencies

Introduction

Teachers today are expected to develop skills that extend beyond subject knowledge and teaching methods (Niemi, Kangas and K ng s, 2024). In early childhood education (ECE), this includes the ability to interact with children and families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and with different worldviews (Bose-Rahman and Hydon, 2020). In Finland, ECE is widely recognised as a key phase in supporting children's development and well-being, and the role of the teaching staff is central to this work (Harju-Luukkainen, 2023). Finnish early childhood education teachers are highly educated professionals, whose expertise is grounded in a child-centred, play-based pedagogy and collaborative practices (Harju-Luukkainen, 2023; Kangas et al., 2019). As societies become more diverse, there is growing interest in how teaching staff can be supported in developing practices that respond to such diversity (Bergroth, Harju-Autti and Alisaari, 2024a; Bose-Rahman and Hydon, 2020; Fr nes, Pettersen, Radi i  and Buchholtz, 2020; Garvis and Kuusisto, 2021). It is estimated that ECE professionals will increasingly need greater cultural competencies and the interaction skills and social skills required for engaging with diverse individuals (Garvis and  degaard, 2018). One approach is to strengthen teachers' future skills, also referred to as 21st-century skills, which include interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies, collaboration, adaptability and cultural awareness (Niemi et al., 2024).

The growing number of children and families from diverse backgrounds in Finland, as well as in other countries in the North, reflects broader demographic changes. The shifts are evident in children's everyday experiences and in the educational dialogue with families. As a result, important questions have arisen about how well current teachers' competencies align with the needs of today's diverse learning environments. Research indicates that effectively responding to diversity requires teaching staff to strengthen their professional skills and critically reflect on their pedagogical approaches (Aerila et al., 2024; Bergroth et al., 2024a; Kuusisto and Garvis, 2020; Rissanen, Kuusisto, and McMullen, 2023).

In this study, we focus on the language-, culture- and worldview-inclusive pedagogical competencies of ECE teachers, with a special focus on their future-oriented skills. These competencies are particularly relevant in the Finnish context, where teaching staff are expected to work closely not only with children but also with their families and other professionals, fostering inclusive and collaborative learning environments (Harju-Luukkainen, 2023; Lastikka, Arvola, Kangas and Haanp  , 2025; Lavanti et al., 2026; Phillipson, Goff and Garvis, 2025).

The central research question addressed in the article is as follows:

What kind of competencies in the field of early childhood education are required for the development of language-, culture- and worldview-inclusive pedagogical practices in the future?

This study contributes to the ongoing discussion by examining how ECE teaching staff understand and develop competencies in relation to a pedagogy that is linguistically and culturally diverse and reflective of a more inclusive worldview. The findings aim to support teachers' future-oriented professional development and provide insights for strengthening teacher education in this area.

Literature review

In this study, the development of teachers' interpersonal and intrapersonal skills is highlighted as a crucial aspect of effective teaching. Interpersonal skills support the formation of constructive relationships not only with learners but also with colleagues, co-teachers, families and other educational stakeholders (Tyson and Tyson, 2020). These skills foster trust, effective communication and collaboration across various roles and contexts, all of which are essential for creating inclusive and supportive learning environments (Bardach, Klassen and Perry, 2022). Intrapersonal skills, such as emotional regulation and self-reflection, enable teachers to manage stress, adapt to evolving educational demands and continuously enhance their practices (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). As the teaching profession continues to evolve, the ability to navigate complex social dynamics while maintaining personal well-being is becoming increasingly important. Such skills are closely associated with teacher resilience and adaptability, which are essential qualities for meeting the challenges of future educational contexts (Gray, Wilcox and Nordstokke, 2017).

Consequently, intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies emerge as critical components of the future skills required by teaching professionals. Intrapersonal competencies, such as self-awareness, emotional regulation and reflective practices, enable educators to engage deeply with their teaching philosophy and examine their personal biases. Moreover, interpersonal skills like empathy, communication, collaboration and conflict resolution, are paramount (Niemi et al., 2024; Tyson and Tyson, 2020). Interpersonal competencies also support the creation of collaborative, culturally responsive educational communities, which are essential for fostering inclusive and thriving learning environments (Gunn et al., 2020; Niemi et al., 2024; Tyson and Tyson, 2020). These competencies contribute to the development of inclusive and supportive learning environments where the diversity of all children and their families is valued and respected and where everyone is able to fully participate (Hattie, 2003; Niemi et al., 2024; O'Keefe, Hooper and Jakubiec, 2019). Language-, culture-, and worldview-inclusive pedagogical competencies are closely connected to competencies involving not only knowledge of different cultural contexts but also the ability to engage with diversity respectfully and reflectively. Studies have highlighted the importance of linguistic, cultural and worldview awareness in creating learning environments where all children feel seen and valued (Alisaari et al., 2023; Bergroth et al., 2024a; Keary, Zheng and Garviset, 2023; Kimanen, Alisaari and Kallioniemi, 2019; Lamminmäki-Vartia, Poulter and Kuusisto, 2020). The approaches require teaching staff to consider their own perspectives and communication practices and focus on intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. There is a lack of research about integrated frameworks that bring together the different competencies needed for a language-, culture- and worldview-inclusive pedagogy. Teachers may encounter fragmented professional development opportunities that address specific aspects of teaching, without encompassing the broader skills needed in diverse educational contexts.

Elements of a language-, culture- and worldview-inclusive pedagogy

Pedagogical competencies related to different languages, cultures and worldviews in education has been conceptualised through various frameworks and perspectives (see Alisaari et al., 2019; Gay, 2018; Layne and Dervin, 2016). For professionals working with children, it entails the ability to

implement high-quality pedagogy that includes planning for and adapting learning environments and teaching content as well as engaging in professional collaboration and interaction (Ranta et al., 2023).

Inclusive pedagogy refers to teaching approaches that respond to the diverse needs, backgrounds and learning conditions of all learners. It supports equitable access to education and fosters participation for everyone (Bergroth et al., 2024b). Within this framework, language awareness plays a key role. It involves understanding how language influences learning processes, social interactions and identity formation (Cummins, 2023). In early childhood education and care (ECEC), language awareness means intentionally recognising and valuing the presence and interaction of multiple languages in everyday situations (e.g. Bergroth et al., 2024b). A linguistically responsive teacher is equipped to use pedagogical methods that support language development and promote language awareness (see Alisaari and Heikkola, 2020; Bergroth et al., 2024b; Lucas and Villegas, 2013). Building on this skill, critical multilingual language awareness emphasises the teacher's role as a language activist and knowledge generator, advocating for linguistic equity and recognising the sociopolitical dimensions of language use in education (Cummins, 2023).

Interaction plays an important role in the overall competencies of ECE professionals, which can be examined from various perspectives, such as the static and dynamic aspects of competencies, individuality and community, and the basis of teacher competencies, such as their knowledge, values or attitudes (Early Childhood Education Training Development Forum, 2021). ECE professionals are expected to increasingly need linguistic and cultural competencies and the interactive and social skills required to engage with diverse individuals (Alisaari et al., 2023; Garvis and Ødegaard, 2018). In an ECE community, which includes children, families and all professionals involved in ECE, the focus should primarily be on the ability to notice, recognise and understand different perspectives, as well as to reflect on one's own values and attitudes in interaction with the work community (Bleach, 2014; Licardo and Leite, 2022). It requires approaches that strengthen competencies and research-based knowledge.

Previous studies highlight the importance of collaboration with families in developing language-, culture- and worldview-inclusive pedagogical competencies (e.g. Khalfaoui, García-Carrión and Villardón-Gallego, 2020; Lastikka et al., 2025; Lavanti et al., 2026; Norheim and Moser, 2020; Tobin, 2020). According to the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (FNAE, 2022) and the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education (FNAE, 2014), the goal of collaboration with families is to promote children's healthy and safe growth, development and learning. Effective collaboration in education requires commitment, trust, reciprocal interaction and mutual respect between professionals and children's guardians, with attention to the individual diversity of families (e.g. Lastikka et al., 2025; Lavanti et al., 2026; Phillipson et al., 2025; Purola, Harju-Luukkainen and Kangas 2021). New dimensions have also been identified in interactions with guardians. For example, speaking the same language as families is not merely a matter of translation, but also of a shared understanding of cultures, traditions and educational practices. Collaboration with other ECE professionals further strengthens the staff's collective awareness of linguistic, cultural and worldview

diversity (e.g. Gide, Wong, Press and Davis, 2022; Haanpää, 2023; Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2026; Lastikka et al., 2025; Tobin, 2020).

In Finnish ECE, professionals work in teams, so it is important to consider not only individual competencies but also the general competencies level of the entire team when examining specific pedagogical competencies (e.g. Ranta et al., 2023). Pedagogy is central in ECE, and good pedagogy strives for a greater understanding of how and where learning happens best and what teaching methods can be used to develop particular responses to individual needs and learning objectives (Kangas et al., 2021). Evaluating the development and implementation of a language-, culture- and worldview-pedagogy is the responsibility of the ECE teacher at the team level and the ECEC centre director at the unit level. The ECEC centre director's responsibility is to oversee inclusive practices (FNAE, 2022), where their own example and values play a significant role for ECEC teachers (Lastikka et al., 2025). In ECE, teachers' pedagogical leadership is particularly directed toward fostering high-quality pedagogical practices within child groups, guiding the planning and enactment of the ECE curriculum, supporting the continuous development of pedagogy and enhancing professional competencies (Bøe, Heikka, Kettukangas and Hognestad, 2022; Heikka, Kahila and Suhonen, 2022).

Study design

This study is part of a research project funded by the Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation (2022–2025). The research task of the project is to examine, via multiple methods, the implementing of measures for promoting inclusion, diversity, participation and support in early childhood and pre-primary education from the perspectives of play, interaction and an inclusive language-, culture- and worldview- learning environment. While the findings offer meaningful insights into the descriptive characteristics of such phenomena, broader generalisations should be avoided due to the context-specific nature of the data, the limited scope of the sample and the complexity of influencing factors, which may limit the transferability of the findings. This article examines what kinds of competencies are required in the field of ECE for the development of language-, culture- and worldview-inclusive pedagogical practices in the future.

Data and methods

The study is a qualitative case study conducted in 2 selected daycare centres with children, families and professionals from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, as well as staff working with a diverse linguistic and cultural as well as worldview-inclusive pedagogy. The study was carried out by interviewing professionals working as ECE teachers in focus group interviews (n=10) and interviews with the directors (also qualified ECE teacher professionals), which consisted of one focus group interview (n=4) and seven individual interviews (n=7). Participation in the interviews was voluntary. All invited participants took part in the focus group interview sessions.

ECE teacher's years of service ranged from one year to 20 years, and the work experience of the daycare directors ranged from 2.5 to 26 years. Several of the ECE teachers had prior experience as child caregivers and had pursued further education. Most of the participants had worked in the same

unit for several years. Some staff members had different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Data collection was conducted at the facilities of the research daycare centres.

Focus group interviews enable the diverse presentation of participants' perspectives and themes (Patton, 2015) and foster collaborative learning and knowledge creation (Wibeck, Dahlgren and Öberg, 2007). Each interview was structured around key themes relevant to the research, such as professionals' competencies in fostering inclusion, diversity, participation and play. The aim was to provide participants with an opportunity to describe and share their understandings of and experiences related to diverse languages, cultures and worldviews as a reflection of their overall pedagogical competencies, typical of qualitative research (see Wibeck et al., 2007).

At the outset, participants were informed about the interview's purpose and the procedure as well as the researcher's role (Marvasti and Tanner, 2020). The focus group interview proceeded in an open, conversational atmosphere, facilitated by open-ended questions and active listening, which encouraged interaction and theme modification based on group dynamics (e.g. Wortham, 2005). The researcher conducted the interviews while actively engaging in dialogue with the participants (see Marvasti and Tanner, 2020), enabling the expression of diverse and complementary viewpoints (Patton, 2015).

Each focus group and individual interview lasted approximately one hour. All interviews were recorded as audio and video files and subsequently transcribed as text. The focus group interviews resulted in two text files. The transcribed text from the focus group interview with ECE teachers totals 42 pages. The transcribed material from the focus group and individual interviews with ECE centre directors comprises 336 pages.

Analysis methods

The research data were evaluated using qualitative content analysis to create a clear, verbal description of the phenomenon under investigation (e.g. Patton, 2015). In the first phase of data analysis, the researchers read the data multiple times and coded emerging topics thematically based on the central research question. The topics were then organised around the study's central concepts, utilizing the theoretical framework's key concepts (Krippendorff, 2019).

In the final stage of thematisation, categorisation, and abstraction, we focused on interpersonal and intrapersonal skills based on UNESCO's list of transversal competencies (UNESCO, 2015). The domains were chosen because they resonate most strongly with the socio-constructivist perspective (e.g. Gergen, 2011) that underpins our study of language-, culture- and worldview-inclusive pedagogical competencies in ECE. Additionally, focusing on interpersonal and intrapersonal skills also aligns with the collaborative, reflective and collegial practices required of educators working within socio-constructivist pedagogical frameworks. Therefore, interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies (UNESCO, 2015) provide the most relevant lens for examining inclusive pedagogy in an ECE context.

The earlier themes were categorised, particularly in relation to the subdomains of professional competencies, and then compared to previous research findings. In the final phase of the analysis, the researchers reviewed the results that emerged from the analytical process together and compiled their joint conclusions and main points of discussion, refining the perspective based particularly on the

conceptual future skills of professionals in seeking to employ more diverse language-, culture- and worldview-inclusive pedagogical practices. The different phases of the analysis are described in Table 1, where examples from the data are also presented during the categorisation phase.

Table 1. Phases of data analysis

Data familiarisation and coding		
Thematic analysis		
Data categorisation (example)		
Data excerpt	Codes	Categories
You can ask and wonder about things. Of course, you ask politely, like, ‘excuse me, but may I ask—we’ve been wondering about this...’ Usually, families are quite willing to help increase understanding. (Director 4)	Self-awareness skills	Intrapersonal
	Reflection skills	
	Communication skills	Interpersonal
	Collaboration skills	
	Leadership skills	Intra- and interpersonal
Maybe it’s about expressing within the team what one would like to do and what their personal goal for the year would be, or what they would like to learn, so that they can also recognise in themselves the values behind their actions, both professionally and perhaps also more broadly in their personal conduct. And then maybe that also is reflected in their interactions with the families. (Director 5)	Self-awareness skills	Intrapersonal
	Reflection skills	
	Communication skills	Interpersonal
	Teamwork skills	Intra- and interpersonal

Ethics

The study has received favourable feedback from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Turku. The research has strictly followed the guidelines set by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity [TENK] (2023) throughout all stages of the research process. Research consent was obtained from the participants, and they were informed about the study. All identifying information was removed from the data. Participants were kept informed about the study and its progress, and they had the right to participate, decline or withdraw from the study at any time. The rights of the research participants, including their freedom of expression, emotions or social interactions, were not impacted in any way during the study. A separate data management plan was created for the study, and an assessment of the impact of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) on the study data was conducted according to the guidelines of the University of Turku (University of Turku, 2024).

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study, which explore the competencies that ECE professionals consider important in their work. We divided the competencies into three interconnected areas: intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills and skills that combine both dimensions.

Intrapersonal skills

This section presents the findings of the study, focusing on the intrapersonal skills of ECE professionals. They include self-awareness, perseverance, and flexibility and adaptability: skills that are essential for fostering inclusive, reflective and value-driven pedagogical practices. The findings are based on interviews with early childhood education teachers and daycare centre directors, offering insights into how such competencies are enacted in everyday professional contexts.

Self-awareness emerged as a foundational element of intrapersonal competencies, deeply rooted in value-based decision-making and shared professional understanding. Both ECE teachers and daycare centre directors emphasised the importance of engaging in reflective dialogue within the work community. They viewed the discussions as essential for aligning personal values with pedagogical practices and for fostering a shared professional ethos. One director articulated this connection clearly:

Values are, in my opinion, the main factor that commits one to work; if values do not align with the work, it is difficult to remain in the position. (Director 4)

Teachers described self-awareness as a continuous process of reflection, both individually and collectively, often metaphorically referred to as 'using a hand mirror'. This type of reflective stance enables them to critically examine their own practices and those of their teams, contributing to the development of shared expertise and a cohesive pedagogical culture. As one teacher noted:

I think we have talked about all these themes so much that we share a common value and mindset on important points. (Focus Group Interview I, ECE Teacher)

The findings also highlighted the role of leadership in supporting reflective practices. Directors emphasised the need for structural support, such as time and space for dialogue, to enable meaningful reflection and professional growth. They emphasised trust, equitable responsibility-sharing and active participation as key to cultivating a sustainable and inclusive organisational culture.

Perseverance was evident in how professionals reportedly approach everyday challenges. Rather than viewing difficulties as setbacks, participants described them as opportunities for growth and success. A positive, solution-oriented mindset is essential, particularly for navigating the complexities of diverse ECE environments. As one teacher reflected:

Each of us, at least to some extent, enjoys challenges, because they can lead to the greatest successes. (Focus Group Interview I, ECE Teacher)

The professionals emphasised that perseverance is closely linked to clarity in terms of their roles, professional competencies and collective problem-solving skills. They do not view challenges as individual burdens but as shared experiences that can be addressed collaboratively. Directors also

acknowledged the strain caused by limited resources, but they highlighted their own commitment to step into practical roles when needed, demonstrating a commitment to maintaining high-quality care and education.

Flexibility and adaptability were identified as critical competencies in responding to the dynamic nature of ECE. Teachers described the need to continuously evaluate and adjust pedagogical practices to meet the diverse and evolving needs of children, which includes being responsive to individual circumstances while remaining aligned with national curricula, as one teacher explained:

Even though you have plans, you still need to be able to truly immerse yourself and be flexible. We have routines, but we can still adapt them as needed. (Focus Group Interview II, ECE Teacher)

Directors echoed this sentiment, noting that flexibility extends beyond pedagogical practices to include interpersonal dynamics and work arrangements. They also reflected on how cultural backgrounds might influence staff members' readiness to express concerns or challenge decisions, emphasising the importance of culturally sensitive leadership.

Interpersonal skills

ECE teachers and directors emphasised their roles as professionals aware of linguistic, cultural and worldview diversity, which they view as essential for fostering inclusive interaction and supporting participation. They emphasised successful interaction as the foundation of all ECE activities, especially in diverse settings. The professionals highlighted the importance of building mutual communication, dialogue and trust, particularly at the beginning of the child's care relationship. One teacher described how even the youngest children are addressed with respect:

The way we speak with children, even the very young ones who don't yet have their own speech, is something we take for granted. I remember once a father was surprised and asked, 'Wait, are you really talking to our two-year-old like that?' He had a moment of realisation—how interaction begins here, how we talk with children even if they can't yet speak. That really stuck with me. (Focus Group Interview I, ECE Teacher)

In situations where reciprocal communication is not yet possible, such as with pre-verbal children or when a shared language is absent, professionals rely on body language, facial expressions, gestures and active presence to establish a connection. They mentioned especially the importance of compassion, empathy and sensitivity. Diverse communication methods are especially important during the early stages of care. Professionals described learning key words in children's home languages, such as 'mother', 'food' or 'home', to enhance the child's sense of security. In line with language-inclusive pedagogy, children are encouraged to use their mother tongue in play and daily routines. To support communication with families, professionals use such tools as picture aids, mobile apps, voice messages and translation applications. Professionals also support children's interaction skills through shared play. One teacher described a strategy of gradually stepping back to encourage peer interaction:

In my group, I have a few little ones who aren't yet very interested in peer relationships. They mostly come to play with me. So, I play with them, and when I notice they're starting to interact

with each other, I slowly fade into the background—hoping they'll start building those friendships. (Focus Group Interview I, ECE Teacher)

Collaboration was described by ECE professionals as a core element of a pedagogy that is inclusive of language, culture and worldview. It encompasses collaboration with both children and their families, highlighting the importance of individualised encounters, trust-building and mutual understanding. ECE teachers view these interpersonal competencies as essential future skills, which enable them to successfully navigate their way through increasingly diverse educational environments with empathy and adaptability.

At the heart of collaboration with children is the goal of making each child feel 'heard and seen'. The professionals emphasised that recognising and valuing the child's linguistic and cultural background and their particular worldview are essential for supporting children's development and learning. They emphasised the ability to engage with children's diverse identities as a future-oriented pedagogical skill, one requiring emotional intelligence and cultural sensitivity, which becomes evident through pedagogical collaboration. They further described interacting with children as being grounded in observation, listening and sensitive engagement. Teachers highlighted the importance of timely and appropriate support, particularly in language development, and the ability to transform this understanding into everyday pedagogical actions. As one teacher put it, "Children's learning begins with good interaction".

The professionals also emphasised the importance of play as a context for collaboration. Through play, professionals practice pedagogical sensitivity and encourage children's curiosity and expressiveness. They described the conversations with children as open and exploratory, which allow different perspectives and cultural practices to emerge naturally, as described in the following quote:

You can have really interesting conversations when there are several children in the same group, each with a different view on things. I try to approach it from a scientific perspective and stay politically neutral. I might say, 'Some people believe it happens this way, and others believe it happens that way'. Thus, everyone can reflect on and share what they think at home. (Focus Group Interview I, ECE Teacher)

The professionals described language awareness as part of their intrapersonal competencies, reflected in a positive and responsible attitude toward children's multilingualism. Teachers described how even small acts, such as learning a few words in a child's home language, can significantly enhance the child's sense of belonging and participation. This kind of linguistic responsiveness is considered a key future skill in supporting inclusive learning environments.

Collaboration with families was described as requiring individualised attention, sensitive listening and sustained trust-building. The professionals' ability to build trust through culturally sensitive dialogue, adapt communication across different languages and engage respectfully with diverse family practices illustrates how interpersonal skills, such as empathy, active listening and cultural responsiveness, are not only central to an inclusive pedagogy but also reflect the future competencies needed in increasingly diverse ECE settings. Professionals, as demonstrated by the quotation below, emphasised that each

family has unique needs, expectations and cultural practices, which must be acknowledged and respected:

Discussions about a child's support needs used to be really long and difficult with families. That has changed a lot. Of course, there are still some challenges at the beginning, but I feel that now, in both of our units, families trust us completely. Almost everything we bring up leads to shared discussion and understanding quite quickly. (Director 4)

The professionals noted that their confidence and competencies in working with families has grown over time, making everyday collaboration easier—although it still often requires more time due to the use of multiple languages, as illustrated by the teacher's observations in the following quote:

I think our own skills have improved over the years—our confidence and courage have increased. It feels like we can handle daily matters with families quite well now. But it definitely takes more time when we use several languages in everyday communication. (Focus Group Interview I, ECE Teacher)

The staff members' significant linguistic and cultural expertise was seen as a major asset. The professionals also described how shared cultural or religious backgrounds between staff and families helped to create meaningful connections. For example, staff members representing other worldview than the majority had led special sessions for children, which were positively received. Professionals who share linguistic or cultural backgrounds with families often play a key role in facilitating communication and building trust.

It really helps in our daily work when we have [X]-speaking children and also [X]-speaking adults on staff. I always encourage families to use their own language. (Focus Group Interview II, ECE Teacher)

The professionals emphasised the need for more frequent meetings with families and the need to respond more to culturally sensitive encounters during the early stages of ECE. They noted that even when families understand Finnish, hearing their native language in meetings can be reassuring and foster trust. Directors also encourage staff to use their interpersonal skills and be open and courageous when addressing sensitive topics related to cultural and worldview diversity. They believe that respectful curiosity and mutual appreciation are key to building strong relationships with families.

You can ask and wonder about things. Of course, you ask politely, like, 'Excuse me, but may I ask — we've been wondering about this...' Usually, families are quite willing to help increase understanding. (Director 4)

Teamwork and leadership

Participants described teamwork and leadership-related competencies as involving a combination of intra- and interpersonal skills that develop both through reflection and interaction with others. In ECE, teachers do not view these competencies as fixed traits of individuals but as qualities that take shape in everyday situations and through shared responsibilities. Participants emphasised that working together, taking the initiative and responding to the needs of children and colleagues requires both the ability to reflect on one's own actions and to communicate and collaborate effectively.

Participants described teamwork as the cornerstone of professional competencies in ECE. They emphasised that successful collaboration requires not only individual skills but also a shared understanding and commitment at the team level. In the context of a language-, culture- and worldview-inclusive pedagogy, they noted that teamwork is essential for ensuring consistent, high-quality practices across the work community. Collaboration involves shared values, pedagogical goals and practical cooperation in daily routines. The professionals described their work communities as being built through active dialogue and mutual understanding. They emphasised the importance of knowing each other's working methods and objectives, which helps foster smooth collaboration and professional trust. The ability to engage in reflective dialogue, navigate diverse perspectives and co-construct pedagogical practices is a future-oriented skill that supports sustainable professional development.

I see the strength of our centre in the fact that we have an established working culture. Our staff has remained stable for a long time, and we have seamless cooperation, which is reflected in the quality of our work and our internal communication. (Focus Group Interview I, ECE Teacher)

The participants emphasised low staff turnover as a sign of strong commitment to the shared mission of ECE. Professionals described their teams as close-knit and supportive, where challenges are perceived as collective rather than individual burdens. They value opportunities to develop shared practices and expressed a strong commitment to improving their work together. The metaphor in the following quote captures the sense of belonging and cohesion within the team, which the professionals described as particularly important in diverse work environments. They emphasised that team learning and shared reflection are key to developing inclusive pedagogical practices and strengthening professional agency.

I think we all fit into the same break room—both literally and metaphorically. (Focus Group Interview I, ECE Teacher)

Leadership is often understood as an integral part of pedagogical work and teamwork, rather than as something separate or confined to formal roles. In this way, the competencies related to teamwork and leadership emerged as practical, evolving and context dependent. The participants framed pedagogical leadership as a future-oriented skill in itself: requiring emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity and the ability to inspire and sustain collaborative learning cultures. The directors also noted that changes in ECE culture are easier to implement when the directors themselves model inclusive practices. Leadership is not separate from the team but is an integral part of its functioning. Directors described themselves as members of the work community, even if their roles differed from those of teachers or parents. They emphasised that their leadership is grounded in shared values and mutual respect. They view their role as creating a psychologically safe environment where every staff member feels included and empowered to contribute.

I want everyone's strengths to be seen and used. Everyone should be able to participate in the work community as they are, with their own strengths. And I want to lead them to do the same with the children, so that every child, with their own personality and needs, can participate equally. (Director)

Directors further described inclusive leadership as essential for recognising and leveraging the range of diversity within the staff and the broader ECE community. They thus encourage open dialogue, curiosity, reflection and respectful questioning, particularly on sensitive topics related to cultural and worldview diversity.

Discussion

The study highlights intrapersonal competencies—especially self-awareness and reflective capacity—as foundational to an inclusive pedagogy. These skills are shaped by personal values and strengthened through collective professional dialogue, aligning with earlier research on value-based professionalism. This finding supports earlier insights that highlight reflective practice as a central component of professional growth (Bleach, 2014; Licardo and Leite, 2022). Within the pedagogical community, shared value deliberations were not peripheral but purposefully facilitated by leadership structures, which emphasise the institutional commitment to value-based professionalism.

Professionals' adaptability and persistence emerged not only as personal traits but also as pedagogical tools essential for sustaining inclusive environments. In navigating various challenges, they noted that mutual support, acceptance and a shared sense of belonging—cultivated through both formal and informal interactions—are key resources in diverse work settings, which is especially relevant in contexts where fluctuating resources threaten the stability and continuity of quality ECE (Jones et al., 2020; Schaack et al., 2022; Thorpe et al., 2020). Leaders' readiness to engage directly in group activities exemplifies inclusive pedagogical responsibility and highlights the interdependence of leadership and care. These findings align with broader conceptions of future-oriented teacher competencies, where adaptability, collaboration and emotional resilience are central (Niemi et al., 2024; Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Interpersonal competencies—particularly inclusive and culturally responsive interaction—was consistently identified as foundational to ECE practice. Professionals emphasised that engaging with linguistic, cultural and worldview diversity requires dialogical openness and attentive listening, especially when shared verbal language is absent. As previous research suggests, early educators must be equipped to use nonverbal communication as a primary pedagogical mode in multilingual settings (Bardach et al., 2022; Garvis and Ødegaard, 2018). In those moments, empathy and embodied attentiveness are central. Small gestures, such as learning key words in the children's home languages, enhance children's sense of security and belonging, highlighting the relational power of linguistic sensitivity. These practices are particularly meaningful during the initial stages of ECEC (White et al., 2022). Furthermore, the findings underscore the indispensable role of sustained, trust-based cooperation with families, a component previously recognised as the cornerstone of an inclusive pedagogy (Khalfaoui et al., 2020; Tobin, 2020). Trust does not arise automatically from cultural competencies; rather, it requires time, intentional presence and cultural sensitivity. Interaction with families should extend beyond language barriers and entails being attuned to each family's unique expectations and needs, echoing current literature on pedagogical responsiveness that moves beyond translation into culturally meaningful dialogue (Lavanti et al., 2026).

The pedagogical orientation of ECE professionals was expressed through an ethics of attentiveness to each child's voice, experiences and cultural-linguistic identity. This attentiveness reflects intrapersonal competencies, particularly self-awareness and value-based judgment, as professionals continuously evaluate their own pedagogical stance in relation to children's needs (Niemi et al., 2024). Their ability to scaffold participation through observation and sensitive interaction demonstrates reflective capacity grounded in ethical responsibility. A particularly distinctive aspect of the findings was their emphasis on play and curiosity as pedagogical resources. Professionals identified playful interaction as a medium through which shared meanings are negotiated and cultural knowledge exchanged, reinforcing the view that play is not only developmental but also relational and socio-culturally situated (Kangas et al., 2023). In this context, linguistic awareness emerged as a form of intrapersonal competencies, visible in the professionals' pedagogical choices and in the structuring of linguistically inclusive environments. The practices reflect a commitment to participatory pedagogy, where children's everyday interactions are understood as co-constructed spaces for learning and identity development (Kuusisto and Garvis, 2020; Rissanen et al., 2023).

What emerges most distinctly from the data is that teamwork and leadership serve not merely as organisational frameworks but as integrative practices where intrapersonal and interpersonal skills converge. Contrary to conceptualisations that treat these skill sets separately, the findings of this study suggest that teamwork in early childhood education functions as a relational and reflexive space where self-awareness, value negotiation, empathy and collaborative dialogue are continuously enacted and cultivated. This finding echoes earlier calls for pedagogical models that transcend individual competencies and emphasise collective efficacy (Ranta et al., 2023). Our findings also confirm that collective reflection and collaborative planning are vital for supporting an inclusive pedagogy, affirming earlier research that highlights the importance of community-level engagement in pedagogical development (Bergroth et al., 2024a; Weckström, Lastikka and Havu-Nuutinen, 2022). Professionals described a multilingual and culturally diverse staff as a strength within the work community. Their contributions enhance communication with families, deepen cultural understanding and enrich pedagogical practices. In line with previous research (Lastikka et al., 2025; Haanpää, 2023), our study participants did not perceive such diversity within staff composition as a challenge but rather as a pedagogical resource—provided that inclusive leadership practices enable its full integration into everyday work-related tasks.

What emerges most distinctly from the data is that teamwork and leadership in early childhood education are not merely organisational structures but integrative pedagogical practices. Importantly, the participants did not conceive leadership in hierarchical terms but as a shared, participatory practice embedded in the everyday dynamics of ECE settings. Directors model reflective dialogue, value-based decision-making and emotional openness—thus performing both intrapersonal work (e.g. clarifying values, managing emotions) and interpersonal work (e.g. facilitating inclusive discussions, responding to conflict). In doing so, they provide pedagogical and ethical scaffolding for professionals to align their practices with inclusive goals (Heikka et al., 2022; Bøe et al., 2022). In this respect, teamwork and leadership are not additional layers of competencies but the primary arenas in which future-oriented

professional skills—such as ethical reflection, emotional responsiveness and cultural dialogue—are synthesised, embodied and transmitted.

Finally, this study reaffirms the perspective that linguistic, cultural and worldview diversity in ECE is not a barrier to be overcome but a site of professional growth (see Bleach, 2014; Licardo and Leite, 2022) and pedagogical innovation. Our findings suggest that such diversity calls for a shift in how educational institutions conceptualise and cultivate professional expertise—not as a static collection of individual competencies but as a dynamic, co-constructed and relationally distributed mode of professionalism (Ranta et al., 2023; Weckström et al., 2022). In this view, transversal competencies, particularly the interplay of intra- and interpersonal skills (see UNESCO, 2015), manifests most fully in the collaborative practices of teamwork and leadership (Bøe et al., 2022; Heikka et al., 2022), where values, emotions and reflective insights are shared, negotiated and enacted in everyday pedagogical decisions (Niemi et al., 2024; Garvis and Kuusisto, 2021). As society continues to diversify, teacher education must increasingly prepare professionals to lead inclusively—not only through cultural knowledge but also through ethical sensitivity, emotional intelligence and dialogic competencies that enable collective pedagogical agency within diverse educational communities.

Conclusion

This article has examined ECE professionals' pedagogical competencies related to languages, cultures and worldviews as transversal skills. The competencies are organised into three domains: intrapersonal, interpersonal and collective (teamwork and leadership). Intrapersonal skills include self-awareness, perseverance and adaptability; interpersonal skills encompass interaction and collaboration with children and families; and collective competencies highlight the importance of shared pedagogical responsibility. The three domains are further illustrated through two metaphors—a reflective hand mirror and the same break room for all—which are used to deepen the understanding of how the competencies are enacted in everyday pedagogical practice.

Using a reflective hand mirror

Intrapersonal competencies, comprising self-awareness, reflection and value-based judgment, emerges as a core element of professional practice in ECE. The metaphor of a reflective hand mirror illustrates how continuous self-evaluation is embedded in daily routines and pedagogical decisions. The practices depend on structurally supported reflection, which requires time, shared space and collective dialogue. Flexibility, empathy and responsiveness are not static traits but relationally enacted forms of professionalism, shaped through the interplay between individual orientation and shared pedagogical responsibility. Rather than merely reacting to challenges, professionals make context-sensitive judgments that allow them to remain attuned to children's needs and navigate the shifting conditions of pedagogical work.

Same break room for all

The metaphor of a shared break room for all (a break room is a shared workplace space intended for work staff to rest, interact informally and recover during non-working periods as well as eat and drink) illustrates that collaborative learning and collective reflection play a crucial role in advancing inclusive

pedagogical approaches and enhancing professional agency at a team level. Relationality defines the conditions under which inclusive pedagogy becomes possible. A child's experience of being heard and seen, particularly in linguistically and culturally diverse settings, is grounded in everyday attentive gestures, such as learning and using home-language words and being attuned to nonverbal cues. These acts of recognition are neither incidental nor supplementary; rather, they reflect a deeply embedded pedagogical stance. The cultural and linguistic competencies of a multilingual workforce are not viewed as add-ons, but as integral to the pedagogical ecology of the community. Trust-building with families requires presence, continuity and culturally responsive engagement.

Linguistic, cultural and worldview-inclusive pedagogical competencies are not reducible to applied techniques. Rather, they arise from an ethically grounded and relationally situated professionalism in which reflective awareness, sensitivity and dialogic action shape how diversity is encountered and enacted in practice. Inclusion is not a fixed goal but a continuous process of becoming within shared pedagogical practice.

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