

# A Case Study on Vocational Teachers' Perceptions on Their Linguistically and Culturally Responsive Teaching

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**Abstract**—In Finland the transformation from homogenous culture into multicultural one as a result of heavy immigration has been rapid in the recent decades. As multilingualism and multiculturalism are growing features in our society, teachers in all educational levels need to be competent for encounters with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Consequently, also the number of multicultural and multilingual vocational school students has increased which has not been taken into consideration in teacher education enough. To bridge this gap between teachers' competences and the requirements of the contemporary school world, Finnish Ministry of Culture and Education established the DivEd-project. The aim of the project is to prepare all teachers to work in the linguistically and culturally diverse world they live in, to develop and increase culturally sustaining and linguistically responsive pedagogy in Finland, increase awareness among Teacher Educators working with preservice teachers and to increase awareness and provide specific strategies to in-service teachers. The partners in the nationwide project are 6 universities and 2 universities of applied sciences. In this research, the linguistically and culturally sustainable teaching practices developed within the DivEd-project are tested in practice. This research aims to explore vocational teachers' perceptions of these multilingualism and multilingual educational practices. The participants of this study are vocational teachers in of different fields. The data were collected by individual, face-to-face interviews. The data analysis was conducted through content analysis. The findings indicate that the vocational teachers experience that they lack knowledge on linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogy. Moreover, they regard themselves in some extent incompetent in incorporating multilingually and multiculturally sustainable pedagogy in everyday teaching work. Therefore, they feel they need more training pertaining multicultural and multilingual knowledge, competences and suitable pedagogical methods for teaching students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

**Keywords**—Multicultural, multilingual, teacher competences, vocational school.

## I. INTRODUCTION

CULTURAL and lingual sensitivity and related teaching practices should be an integral part of vocational teachers' competences in the contemporary multicultural educational context. Multilingualism and multiculturalism are growing features in Finland and for this need DivEd-project [1] was created. It is funded by the Finnish Ministry of Culture and Education, and its duration is three years. The project is nationwide, and the actors are six universities and two universities of applied sciences. These universities and

universities of applied sciences provide either initial teacher training or professional teacher training programmes. The overarching aim of the DivEd-project is to prepare and train teachers to better respond to the needs of working in the linguistically and culturally diverse settings; in accordance the project aimed to find methods to train teacher educators and teachers so that their competences regarding linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogy matches the contemporary working life requirements. Furthermore, the project aims to develop and increase culturally sustaining and linguistically responsive pedagogy in Finland, and to increase awareness among teacher educators working with preservice teachers and to increase awareness and provide specific strategies for in-service teachers.

The DivEd-project organizes seminars and training events for teacher educators, and it established a group of Community Ambassadors who visit schools in their corresponding municipalities. Their objective is to conduct needs analyses and accordingly provide professional development for teachers. As a part of the project a set of teaching practices was created for teachers at all levels, from basic education to vocational schools and higher education.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This case study belongs to teachers' professional development research. Teaching is a profession which develops throughout teacher's career; hence teacher's professional development can be considered as a lifelong effort. This entails teachers to continuously update their pedagogical understanding and skills according to the changing world. In this research the change is the increased number of students whose mother tongue is other than Finnish. In their teacher training the in-service vocational teachers in questions were not trained to encounter immigrant students, nor were they trained to use linguistically and culturally sustainable teaching methods; the concept was created after their training. The vocational teachers were not offered training or courses to cover the aforementioned topics.

Finland is a bilingual country where education is offered in the both national languages Finnish and Swedish, but separately e.g., in general, an educational institution offers education either in Finnish or in Swedish; the division continues throughout the education from basic education to vocational

institutes and universities and universities of applied sciences.

This study uses linguistically and culturally sustainable teaching practices as a framework. These teaching practices comprise two aspects, hence both terms need to be defined. First part, linguistically sustainable teaching means that teachers comprehend the interconnection between language, culture and identity and they value linguistic diversity in their teaching. [2], [3]. Culturally sustainable teaching in turn refers to the idea that teachers' pedagogy should empower students holistically by utilizing cultural referents to impart competences, knowledge and attitudes [4]. Additionally, culturally responsive teaching enhances students to intertwine their cultural knowhow to their emerging academic knowledge [5] and it supports and develops students' home cultures to be part of the school context [6]. This frame emphasizes the idea that educational settings are environments where students should experience sense of belonging, and they should feel themselves accepted and respected as individuals regardless of their background.

Based on previous research, the DivEd-project selected seven themes to support linguistically and culturally responsive teaching. The themes cover the following:

- 1) identity and cultural competence
  - teacher identifies, evaluates and enhances learner's previous skills and strengths and uses them as learning resources
  - teacher supports learner's identity building
  - teacher enhances learner's intercultural skills
- 2) teaching strategies
  - teacher offers learners opportunities to read, write and speak in all lessons
  - teacher offers opportunities for collaboration and interaction between all learners
  - teacher encourages the learners to collaborate and interact with all teachers
  - teacher enhances learner's understanding by visualizing, supporting and guiding.
- 3) differentiation in assessment
  - teacher enables learners to demonstrate their skills and competences in various ways
  - teacher takes learners' language skill level into account in assessment
  - teacher allows learners to use dictionary
- 4) multilingualism
  - teacher encourages learners to use all languages the master
- 5) linguistic requirements
  - teacher recognizes learner's limited language competences and how they affect learner's understanding
  - teacher pays attention in the used language (vocabulary and structure) in all teaching
- 6) collaboration between home and school
  - teacher can connect the learner's social-cultural background and mother tongue with teaching
  - teacher supports the home – school collaboration by taking parents, families and community as a part of schoolwork
- 7) educational justice
  - teacher identifies and objects to discriminatory practices

such as racism, homophobic, genre discrimination

- teacher supports learners' self-image as language users, communicators and writers in all educational contexts
- teacher encourages and supports learners to use the skills and competences they have learnt in school to solve their everyday problems

This study aims to address the following research question: How do vocational teachers perceive their competences regarding cultural and linguistic sustainable teaching practices developed in the DivEd-project?

### III. METHODS

The participants of this study were ten vocational teachers in various fields. The age varied from 36 to 54, four were male and six female teachers. The data were collected via open-ended interviews. The interview questions comprised eight questions regarding the linguistically and culturally sustainable teaching practices developed within the DivEd-project. The participants could elaborate their answers, and the interviewer asked additional questions if needed. The interviews were conducted individually in face-to-face situation. The language of the interviews was Finnish. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim afterwards. The open-ended questions were carefully planned following the DivEd-project teaching practices. The interviewer aimed to create a relaxed, tolerant atmosphere, where the interviewee could ask more details about the project or explain more about their pedagogical approach and teaching practices. It is important to create mutual trust between the interviewer and interview when discussing sensitive matters such as the topic of this research. Moreover, some teachers feel uncomfortable discussing their teaching in relation to immigrant students. The allocated time for each interview was one hour.

The qualitative data include the transcriptions of the participants' replies to the open-ended questions. The analysis was conducted via content analysis method [7] with the help of Atlas.ti software. The data were read several times to gain an overview of the vocational teachers' perception on their teaching practices in terms of culturally and linguistically sustainable aspects. Thereafter, regarding the research question, all meaningful phrases and words were marked and coded with the Atlas.ti software.

### IV. RESULTS

In the following, the results are presented one by one, according to the seven themes of culturally and linguistically responsive practices.

#### *A. Identity and Cultural Competence*

According to the vocational teachers, they comprehend the importance of understanding first their own culture and identity before they can support their students in their identity building. In accordance, the teachers acknowledge their need to specify and contextualize the aspects that are integral in Finnish culture, its norms, values and behaviors which they find self-evident. Further, the vocational teachers estimated, that they understand the necessity of tolerant and neutral attitude towards students'

cultural background. On the other hand, they perceived not having enough knowledge of the methods to support students' identity building in terms of gender, religion, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, abilities and socioeconomic background. On contrary, the teachers' role to foster students' intercultural skills, that is, students' ability to understand people with different backgrounds was considered minimal. The teachers stated that they did not regard intercultural skill teaching as a part of their work even with students with diverse backgrounds.

#### *B. Teaching Strategies*

Regarding the teachers' strategies in terms of interaction and collaboration as well as integrating all language competences – listening, reading, writing and speaking – into teaching, the vocational teachers stated that they were aware of the demands, but they regarded that not all language aspects were easy to implement in practice. They experienced that listening skills are the most used language skill in their classroom teaching, that is, the students listen to the teacher, but they interact neither with their teacher nor with their peers. However, the teachers acknowledge the need for more reading practicing, as well as interaction and collaboration between the students. They also stated that the students tend to form groups according to their nationalities and mother tongue which led to failed integration of the cultural backgrounds. In addition, the interaction with the teachers was also scares according to the teachers.

#### *C. Differentiation in Assessment*

The vocational teachers stated that the students can demonstrate their competences in various ways and their language skills have no effect on grading. In addition, the students can use dictionaries when needed. The teachers regarded that they assess their students considering the students own abilities and language skills, in addition the teachers stated that they are willing to adjust the assessment methods according to student's individual needs and language skills. None of the teachers indicated that they assess the learner according to their ability to speak Finnish, but they admitted that learner's limited language skills might have a subtle effect on the assessment. They also suggested that an interpreter might be valuable in an assessment process if the learner's language skills are inadequate.

#### *D. Multilingualism*

The vocational teachers affirm that they encourage their students to use all the languages they master as a method to deepen their own learning and understanding of the subject matter. They stated that their students can use freely their mother tongue or another language in group work and interaction with other students. In addition, the teachers considered themselves tolerant and respectful when it comes to students' own mother tongue usage in assignments or collaboration, but they also encourage the students to use Finnish in classroom discussions and in learning assignments.

The teachers stated that they find it is teachers' task to encourage the learners also to use Finnish as much as possible as mastering Finnish in their professional field improves

employability. Therefore, vocational teachers prefer not to use any other language than Finnish in their teaching. On the other hand, if they used English there might be students who would not understand.

#### *E. Linguistic Requirements*

When teaching students with various mother tongues and limited command in Finnish, the vocational teachers state that they recognize the lingual challenges their students face. In accordance, the teachers' conscious choices in terms of vocabulary and sentence structures aim to produce clear and simplified sentences. In addition, they highlight the importance of supportive visual aid such as pictures and graphs in clarifying the message and explaining the content in several different ways. Further, the teachers manifested that they pay attention to their speaking pace and they repeat their explanations or instructions several times. The teachers also ask their students questions in order to ensure their understanding, and they also welcomed clarifying questions from their students.

Even if the teachers aim to use simple vocabulary and structure in their teaching, they notice that not all learners can follow the teaching and they do not ask for clarification. The students rather ask their peers of the same cultural and lingual background. That might interfere teaching, because the teacher does not know whether the students are talking about the subject matter or they are only socializing.

#### *F. Collaboration between Home and School*

The vocational teachers reported that as their students are adults, they considered the collaboration between home and school as irrelevant. The teachers regard their students to be responsible for themselves. On the other hand, the teachers emphasize that they take into account the students' background including cultural, social and lingual aspects, and collaborate with the students' home if necessary.

The teachers admitted that they do not see the collaboration or the connection between school and home important when their students are adults. They also saw the involvement with the community less important and considered it non-existent in their school. On the other hand, the teacher notices how in some cultures family members have strong connections and the parents have a great effect on their child's life even if the child is already over 18.

#### *G. Educational Justice*

Regarding discriminating attitude and behavior, such as racism, homo-phobic behavior or gender discrimination, the vocational teachers stated that they must be alert of these factors. They reported that in several cases they have had to react to unwanted behavior. The teachers reported that they are not aware of subtle discriminating behavior, or discrimination which happens outside of school time, or e.g., in social media. The teachers said that they have noticed their students' group according to their nationalities and mother tongue and do not have interaction with other nationalities, or the interaction is rather negative including bullying. The different national groups exclude learners from other cultures. In addition, the teachers acknowledge their shortcomings in terms of preventive

discussions in their classroom. The teachers regarded themselves not having enough knowledge about modern genres, or how to address their students. Many teachers admitted using terms boy/girl when talking to their students and also generalizing their students according to their genre. One teacher explained how he had accidentally called a girl as a boy which led to a serious incident.

#### V.CONCLUSIONS

This research aimed to address the topical theme of vocational teachers' competence in terms of culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy in their own practices in the Finnish vocational education context. This qualitative study investigated vocational teachers' insights on the culturally and linguistically sustainable teaching practices which were developed within the Finnish Ministry of Culture and Education funded DivEd-project.

The findings of this research reveal that the vocational teachers consider themselves in some extent having knowledge and competences in terms of culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices. The teachers acknowledge the importance of all the topics that cover identity and cultural competence, teaching strategies, differentiation in assessment, multilingualism, linguistic requirements, collaboration between home and school and lastly educational justice. For them the terms and concepts are clear, but they consider their knowledge is rather superficial. They manifest not having enough practical knowhow to implement culturally and linguistically sustainable pedagogy actively in their teaching. Similarly, they reported not having means to proactively influence their students in terms of respecting and understanding other students and people from various backgrounds. Furthermore, the teachers regard themselves lacking competences to prevent cultural clashes in their classes, even though they feel confident to solve the problems ad hoc.

In general, vocational teachers have positive attitude towards multilingualism and multiculturalism in their educational context, but they feel they have lack of training regarding the topics and more competences and suitable pedagogical methods for teaching students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds

In the current state, it is highly recommendable that in-service teachers would be organized several kinds of training in order to be able to improve their teaching practices to better match the today's requirements and diverse learners. The teachers need more knowledge of their own culture, religion tradition and habits. Teachers need profound information on Finnish cultural phenomena that are self-evident to them. In addition, they need more awareness on the habits that are religion related because in Finnish educational settings many celebrations have a religious undertone. For example, autumn term in many schools traditionally ends with going to the Church with the whole school and after that is Christmas party at school with hymns and prayers. Similarly, a tradition is to end the spring term with a hymn celebrates summer and the awakening of the nature.

On profound knowledge on their own culture the teachers

could built their intercultural competences with the help of courses or training. It would be beneficial to offer a training entity on the cultures that are represented by immigrants in Finland. That kind of training would promote teachers' understanding and enhance their skills to understand their students and their behavior better. Teachers also need more knowledge on other religions and how they affect their learners' behavior at school.

With deeper knowledge on different cultural behaviors the teachers would be better equipped to prevent cultural clashes among their students with diverse background. Moreover, the teachers would gain tools and practices to support their students to become more tolerant and accepting towards other groups.

Besides cultural knowledge, the teachers need training regarding lingual awareness. They would benefit, if an expert would monitor their teaching and provide constructive feedback and guidance how to make their teaching clearer and more understandable to students with limited Finnish language skills. In addition, the school and the students would benefit, if novel ways to involve the parents and community to school work would be found.

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