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Sanita Martena

Rēzekne Academy of Technologies, Latvia

Heiko F. Marten

Rēzekne Academy of Technologies, Latvia;
Leibniz Institute for the German Language, Germany

‘Difficulties when learning, easiness when fighting’: Why do families in Latvia choose (pre)schools with a language of instruction other than their L1?

Abstract:

Aims and objectives: Language debates in Latvia often focus on the role of Latvian as official and main societal language. Yet, Latvian society is highly multilingual, and families with home languages other than Latvian have to choose between different educational trajectories for their children. In this context, this paper discusses the results of two studies which addressed the question of why families with Russian as a home language choose (pre)schools with languages other than Russian as medium of instruction (MOI). The first study analyses family narratives which provide insight into attitudes and practices which lead to the decision to send children to Latvian-MOI institutions. The second study investigates language attitudes and practices by families in the international community of Riga German School.

Methodology: The paper discusses data gathered during two studies: for the first, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Russian-speaking families who choose Latvian-medium schools for their children. For the second study, a survey was carried out in the community of an international school in Riga, sided by ethnographic observations and interviews with teachers and the school leadership.

Data and analysis: Interviews and ethnographic observations were subjected to a discourse analysis with a focus on critical events and structures of life trajectory narratives. Survey data were processed following simple statistical analysis and qualitative content analysis.

Findings/conclusions: Our data reveal that families highly embrace multilingualism and see the development of individual plurilingualism as important for integration into Latvian society as well as for educational and professional opportunities in the multilingual societies of Latvia and Europe. At the same time, multilingualism and multiculturalism, including Russian, are seen as

Corresponding author: Heiko F. Marten, Institute for Regional Studies, Rēzekne Academy of Technologies, Atbrīvošanas aleja 115, LV-4601 Rēzekne, Latvia.
Emails: heiko.marten@rta.lv; marten@ids-mannheim.de

a value in itself. In addition, our studies reflect the bidirectionality of family language policies in interplay with practices in educational institutions: family decisions influence children's language acquisition at school, but the school also has an impact on the families' language practices at home. In sum, we argue that educational policies should therefore pay justice to the wishes of families in Latvia to incorporate different language aspects into individual educational trajectories.

Originality: Language policy is a frequent topic of investigation in the Baltic states. However, there has been a lack in research on family language policy and school choices. In this vein, our paper adds to the understanding of educational choices and language policy processes among Russian-speaking families and the international community in Latvia.

Keywords:

school choice - pre-school choice - language socialisation - family language policy - multilingualism - plurilingualism - bidirectionality - international school - Latvia

Introduction

Current pedagogical perspectives on language(s) in Europe relate to a variety of constellations in individuals, families, and society. They try to do justice to different practices, attitudes, and choices in language management, focusing on the idea that every language has a value, that borders between languages in practice are not always clear, and that people should be encouraged to use their entire language repertoires (Council of Europe, 2018). In the case of Latvia, multilingual, and plurilingual¹ perspectives have been an important part of the modernisation of school curricula, which has taken place since 2017 in the project Skola2030. Updated policies and recommendations (Skola2030 Mācību resursi, 2022) try to incorporate interrelations between languages and to develop students' language awareness and plurilingual competences.

An important aspect of understanding relations between language acquisition, practices, discourses, and educational policies is to bring together different strands of research on languages and education. Reyes and Moll (2008, p. 152) studied previous research on language socialisation and argue that it is highly beneficial to consider linguistic practices from both home and school when investigating language acquisition in multilingual contexts: 'together, they reveal important continuities, especially for language majority children, and competing discontinuities, especially for language minority children' (Reyes & Moll, 2008). Therefore, educational approaches should 'seek to establish a linguistic continuum from home to school' (Reyes & Moll, 2008). Recent research on multilingualism from different regions (e.g. De Houwer, 2021; Horner and Weber, 2017; Martin-Jones and Martin, 2017) has started to fill this gap. In this context, our paper sheds light on families in Latvia who are struggling to find a 'third way' between two poles of societal debates regarding languages. On the one hand, nation-centred discourses emphasise the role of Latvian as the only official language, including respect for Latvian as the (desired) language of interethnic communication in society. On the other hand, practices by most inhabitants of Latvia incorporate more than one language.

For analysing attitudes, practices, and policies by families in Latvia in relation to educational choices, we conducted two studies: (1) we collected narratives of Russian-dominant families about their language acquisition policies; (2) we conducted a survey among parents at an international school in Riga. Both studies link research on languages in families with understanding language practices and policies in education. In this light, the paper gives insight into how plurilingual families in Latvia find ways for individual linguistic success.

The paper is based on the following research questions: (1) What are the reasons for families in Latvia to choose a (pre)school with another language than their L1 as the medium of instruction (MOI)? More specifically: Why do Russian-L1 families choose a Latvian-MOI (pre)school or an international school? (2) What is the link between linguistic practices at home and at school in this? Through these foci, the paper hopes to contribute to developing more awareness for the importance of the link between family language policies, children's language education, plurilingual practices at home, and multilingual education at school in Latvia and beyond.

In the following, we will first provide the theoretical background, before briefly outlining linguistic and educational contexts of contemporary Latvia. Then, we will present major results of the two case studies, before discussing the results and possible implications.

Theoretical framework

Plurilingualism takes various forms; many families are bi- or multilingual because of a personal history of migration. In many countries including Latvia, however, several languages have existed side by side for many centuries in society and in many families.

The interrelation between language traditions in family life and choices depending on societal factors has been explored, for instance, in the expanding field of family language policy (FLP) studies. FLP has been defined as 'explicit and overt as well as implicit and covert language planning by family members in relation to language choice and literacy practices within home domains and among family members' (Curdt-Christiansen, 2018, p. 420). Curdt-Christiansen's approach is based on Spolsky's (2004, 2021) theory of language policy with its three components – attitudes or beliefs, practices, and (active) management. Decisions in the home environment (e.g. which languages are used, based on which values), traditions and (linguistic and other) backgrounds of parents, grandparents, other family members and close people have an important impact on decisions also taken towards educational choices. In addition to relating to Spolsky, Curdt-Christiansen also considers language socialisation theory as a valuable perspective for understanding how families make their language choices: Through language, people interact with the outside world, and decisions on language are influenced by the larger sociocultural environment contexts in which the family lives. This interaction may have sociolinguistic, sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical aspects, and it 'takes place through the mediational means of language in the process of language socialisation' (Curdt-Christiansen, 2018, p. 3). Language mediates interaction and processes of socialisation; language learning is a tool for socialisation and for success in society.

In the complex sociolinguistic situations in many countries, there is usually a social hierarchy between languages. Some varieties have higher status and social value than others. In Latvia, this particularly refers to Latvian as sole state language. A language with an official status 'used in public life, government, and education tends to be the one with the most prestige and is henceforth called the societal language (Soc-L)' (De Houwer, 2021, p. 2). Such status questions highly determine the sociolinguistic environment, and local language hierarchies considerably influence language management and practices in families. Consequently, there is also a high impact on the language repertoires of children, and on the plurilingual development at home and at school. In a multilingual environment, plurilingual speakers can get access to more diverse social groups. This is how also many parents see the role of languages in education.

De Houwer (2021) further argues that 'by age 11, many bilingual children have high levels of proficiency in their societal language, even if they started learning it after age 6' (p. 55). Decisions taken by parents to which (pre)school to send the children play an important role in children's bilingual experiences. The sociopolitical context has a high impact on this, and there may be situations where choices are limited (in smaller towns, for instance, bilingual schools often simply do

not exist). Studying FLP, therefore, often focuses on language planning both for intergenerational transmission of family languages, and on choices made for developing plurilingual repertoires based on societal and individual needs. In this vein, Curdt-Christiansen (2018, p. 436) observes that ‘FLP research has moved beyond the notion that FLP is a private family matter to a broader sociopolitical concern that emphasises sociocultural values and power relationships among speakers’ and ‘given increased attention to language ideology and the sociopolitical contexts in which families are situated’. In this sociocultural understanding, language and literacy choices are viewed as socially constructed, culturally mediated practices.

This understanding of language choices based on social practices has important implications on how language competences develop. Practices and language management decisions of caregivers (parents, other family members, other community members) serve as instructions to children with regard to what to say and how to speak (Reyes & Moll, 2008, p. 148). This can also be related to the choice of languages, including social and regional varieties, for example, which varieties to learn and use, and in which situation to use which code, depending on sociocultural and political contexts.

This interrelation between family and societal multilingual practices is reflected in contemporary research on language education. In particular, children for whom the main societal language is not a home language display plurilingual repertoires, which in educational settings are often not recognised as valuable resources (cf., e.g. Montanari & Panagiotopoulou, 2019). Frequently, teachers perceive students’ use of other languages as a threat to developing the societal language. In this sense, a balance has to be found: students’ individual language repertoires should be enhanced, and particularly language(s) already available to the children should be supported. Yet, high proficiency in the societal language is necessary for successful participation in society. In addition, bridging existing repertoires with further languages (e.g. languages acquired formally or with other roles in society) may enhance cross-connections between existing languages and increase children’s cognitive development. In this way, the students’ language repertoires are broadened without negative consequences (Council of Europe, 2022). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) takes up this interplay between individuals, family and society as well as between languages when arguing that ‘seeing learners as plurilingual, pluricultural beings means allowing them to use all their linguistic resources when necessary, encouraging them to see similarities and regularities as well as differences between languages and cultures’ (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 27).

Furthermore, Reyes and Moll (2008) stress ‘that bilingual children tend to engage in *code-switching*, a linguistic phenomenon in which children blend two languages. Although often denigrated by language purists, this phenomenon can be characterized as an effective communicative strategy and tool for understanding and clarifying meaning’ (p. 150). Similarly, studies with, for example, bilingual German-Turkish youth have explored translanguaging as a means of communication, but also as a reflection of hybrid identities, of group solidarity or as a stylistic marker (Montanari & Panagiotopoulou, 2019; Tracy, 2008). Finally, advantages of bi/multilingualism and education have been found to provide metalinguistic advantages or an increased mental flexibility, and benefits to social and emotional development. Therefore, learning in a multilingual environment is significant for children, as they can more easily acquire the ability to incorporate other people’s perspectives (Reyes & Moll, 2008, pp. 149–150). At the same time, bilingual speakers express their own identities through the use of two languages (Tracy, 2008, p. 53).

In sum, there are many reasons for encouraging the development of plurilingualism in children. Educational institutions are of fundamental importance in constructing the use of multiple languages as beneficial, but it ultimately depends on both schools and homes. Reyes and Moll, when analysing home practices of first-generation Mexican families in the US, found that ‘family members play key roles in biliteracy development, benefiting not only the young child but each other as well’ (Reyes & Moll, 2008, p. 152). What is relevant here is that the parents play a supporting role

in ‘bidirectional learning’ which ‘occurs when family members learn from each other. This bidirectionality is especially relevant in language minority or immigrant families when the child acquires greater linguistic competence than the adults in mastering the dominant language’ (Reyes and Moll, 2008, p. 147). In other words, not only children but also their parents may be influenced by competences acquired at school when new practices and skills are used to develop the whole family’s language repertoires, in particular since parents and children ‘tend to develop biliteracy as they participate in different interactions with each other’ (Reyes & Moll, 2008, p. 152).

An overview of the sociolinguistic and educational situation in Latvia

Before moving to our case studies, we need to provide more information on the sociolinguistic background of Latvia, where Latvian is the only state language and the L1 of more than 60% of the population (cf. Lazdiņa & Marten, 2019). Almost 40% of the population use Latvian as L2. Many of these people were born in (Soviet) Latvia; mostly, they have Russian as their main language. About 1% of the inhabitants use other home languages (Oficiālās statistikas portāls, 2019).

In 2019, about 81,000 children in Latvia attended Latvian-MOI-pre-schools, 18,000 Russian, and 245 Polish. About 135,000 students attended Latvian-MOI schools, as opposed to 39,000 students with Russian MOI. Moreover, 22,500 students were enrolled in mixed schools, and about 2,700 students had another language as MOI (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2020). However, some families with other home languages, in spite of the bilingual Latvian-Russian schools, send their children to Latvian-MOI (pre)schools. Others attend international schools with English, German, or French as MOI.

Political debates on education in Latvia regularly focus on languages (cf. Marten & Lazdiņa, 2019). Our research has taken place in the context of such a tradition. At the same time, also changing policies have an impact on FLP. In September 2020, schools in Latvia started to introduce new curricula and methodological approaches for primary and secondary education. There is a stronger focus on Latvian, but also on general literacy development and comprehension skills (Skola2030 Mācību resursi, 2022). This curricular reform thereby tries to anticipate successful ways of how to teach Latvian with the aim to develop students’ pluriliteracy, while Latvian, together with other languages, is seen as a common tool for learning other subjects (see also Marten & Lazdiņa, 2022).

A new focus on strengthening Latvian as language of societal integration was also initiated in 2021 by the Latvian President (‘Par latviešu valodas kā vienīgās valsts valodas nostiprināšanu’, <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/322742-par-latviesu-valodas-ka-vienigas-valsts-valodas-nostiprinasanu>). Similarly, a new law states that ‘an international school shall concurrently ensure the acquisition of the Latvian language, Latvian history and culture, Latvian nature and geography’ (International School Law of the Republic of Latvia, 2020, Section 7), thereby strengthening the role of Latvian in the international community. In practice, this means that since September 2021 all six international schools in Latvia (whose main MOI is English, German, or French) have had to offer ‘Latvian Studies’ as a new subject. In addition, at the time of writing (November 2022), new initiatives have started which may eventually replace the dual system with Latvian-MOI and bilingual schools with an integrated system within the next years (Eng.LSM.lv 2022). The suggestion to unite ‘Latvian’ and bilingual schools has been discussed for several years; however, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it has gained momentum.

In sum, Latvian society is highly multilingual, whereas language policies have focused on the acquisition of Latvian for societal integration. However, even after several decades of post-Soviet independence, solid proficiency cannot be taken for granted among families with other home languages. Our research therefore aimed to investigate how skills in Latvian as the societal language

can be increased among children with Russian (and other languages) as a family language (cf, e.g. Latvian Information Agency (LETA), 2021) while ensuring that bilingual children can continue to learn their home languages. Notably, our research was conducted in 2019 and 2020 and therefore reflects views before the war in Ukraine and recent initiatives. However, our interests remain highly relevant: how do families try to ensure that their children's education pays justice to their individual pluriliteracy in their home languages, Latvian, and other languages.

Data and methodology

So how do people with home languages other than Latvian position themselves in these historically grown, but also newly actualised discourses on languages and education? For approaching this question, we chose two datasets originating in research which broadened more traditional research on schools in Latvia such as on language proficiency or attitudes (cf. Martena, 2021 on learning Latvian as L1 and L2) which did not include perspectives of multilingualism or of international schools. The only previous study which linked the home domain with school practices in the context of Latvian was conducted on Latvian as a heritage language in the diaspora, relating to Sunday schools (Mieriņa et al., 2021). Our research provides insight into an international school and into how plurilingual families in Latvia perceive and shape the language education trajectories of their children. It is grounded in the Interactional Sociolinguistics framework as one theoretical approach within Discourse Analysis, which pays 'a great deal of attention to social context' (Holmes, 2014, p. 179). Interaction is perceived as a 'dialogical process in which the interlocutors, explicitly or implicitly, constantly refer by means of indexicality to other persons, things, times and spaces' (Busch, 2017, p. 49). In our studies, references are most explicit towards time and space: contemporary Latvia is contrasted to Soviet times, and micro-spaces (school) are compared to the macro-space of Latvia. Our data allows us to explore social meanings of discourses about languages and educational settings, for example, how parents construct their beliefs about the roles of languages, and the arguments on which their choices are based. In addition, our research gives voice to families who try to find a balance between individual plurilingualism, official policies, and societal debates.

Our first study is based on narratives, that is, biographical stories of families in the context of language education. Interest in 'research based on qualitative narrative interviews as a biographical method in Applied Linguistics' has increased considerably since the 1990s (Busch, 2017, p. 48). In this light, our broad research question was: *How do parents in Latvia choose (pre-)schools for their children?* For this paper, we investigate the data from the narrowed question *What are the reasons for traditional Russophone minority families in Latvia to choose (pre)schools with Latvian as MOI?* In the light of changing discourses and policies, the answers also feed into the discussion on whether Latvian politics does justice to the needs of our informants in their multilingual realities.

The dataset used for this study consists of interviews with families whose main language is Russian but whose children attend(ed) (pre-)schools with Latvian as MOI. This combination is still marked as 'unusual'; the majority of children with Russian as the main home language attend bilingual (pre-)schools (cf. Lazdiņa & Marten, 2021). We have chosen three families for a qualitative analysis of extended interviews. All families live in Riga, but their ancestors have backgrounds in different regions in and outside Latvia. The families were randomly selected on the basis of the educational choices taken. All families have children who attend(ed) educational institutions in Latvian, even though the interviews reflect different time periods.

Family 1 has two daughters who have already graduated from high school. In the 1990s, the mother took a decision to take her older daughter, later also the sister, to a kindergarten and a school with Latvian as MOI. Today, both adult daughters lead lives which take place mostly in Latvian.

Family 2 has two children (8 and 13 years at the time of the interviews) who also attended pre-school, and later school with Latvian as MOI. Family 3 has twins (daughter and son of 4 years and 9 months) and a son (one year and 9 months at the time of the interviews). Both parents grew up in Russian-speaking families; in this family, we interviewed the father, in the other two families the mothers. All three narratives reflect upon experiences at different times. In case 1, the children started to attend pre-school at the beginning of the 1990s, in case 2 in the 2010s, and in case 3 in 2017. The interview with Family 1 therefore turned out to be partly retrospective; parts of the answers expressed strong emotions. The answers in narrative 3 were more implicit; case 2 lies between the two other cases.

The second source of research is a survey conducted in 2020 at Riga German School (*Deutsche Schule Riga*, further: DSR, 2021), a private school founded in 2015. As indicated on DSR's web page, it was attended by about 160 students from about 25 countries in 2020. The main language of instruction is German, but the pupils also learn English, have lessons in Latvian or Russian and have opportunities to acquire further language competences. The school does not collect data on the families' language backgrounds, but for anybody in the school community, it is obvious that Russian is the most frequent home language of the children.

The questionnaire for the survey was developed in the winter 2019/20 in cooperation with the school's leadership. Delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the survey was conducted online in four languages (German, English, Latvian, and Russian) in October 2020, at a time when teaching took place on site. Survey questions were based on previous research on German learning motivation (e.g. Riemer, 2019), international schools (e.g. Nørreby & Madsen, 2018) and general language learning motivation theory (cf. Al-Hoorie, 2017). They included questions about the school choice, language competences and practices of the children, practices of DSR, and others. In total, we received answers from 51 out of about 100 families, that is, about half of DSR's families (nursery to Grade 4).

The data confirm the strong position of Russian as a home language in the DSR community but also reveal a very diverse composition of other languages used in the families. Individual monolingualism is an exception, and competence in English, in addition to Russian and/or Latvian as home languages, is the norm. About half of the respondents have competence in German; competence in other languages is rare. About one-third of the families use several languages at home; the 16 families who reported multilingual practices at home comprised a diverse combination of languages, most often Latvian/Russian (5 families) and English/Russian (3 families), but also included, for example, one family which claimed to use German and Russian. Of those informants who reported monolingual home practices 27 were Russian speakers, but also individual cases of Latvian, German, English, and Estonian were reported.

The main research interest of the survey was similar as for the first study: Why do families choose DSR, even when their home language is not German? In addition, we again addressed the link between educational settings and families in line with the concept of bidirectional learning (Reyes & Moll, 2008; see above), that is, whether the choice of school has an impact on home in a continuity of linguistic practices. Our first case study takes up this issue with regard to Latvian among families who have lived in Latvia for several decades and who have Russian as their main home language; the second study provides insight into practices of linguistically highly diverse families regarding the competence of German.

Results

Narratives in Russian-speaking families

The choice of (pre)school with Latvian as a MOI. In the following, we will first provide some summarising examples from Study 1. For our informants, the motivation for choosing (pre)schools

with Latvian instead of the main family language as MOI is grounded in sociopolitical and socio-economic factors. The political changes in the 1990s led parents to think about education from a macro perspective. Latvia had become independent, and the families reacted to that. Extract 1 reflects that Latvian independence turned out to be a ‘critical event’ (Webster & Mertova, 2007):²

Extract 1 (Family 1): I allowed this decision, even if at the time it was very difficult, in 1991, 1992. Yes, it was difficult, but I had that expression by Suvorov in mind: ‘*Difficulties when learning, easiness when fighting*’.³ Therefore I understood that, with joint efforts, we will manage in some way that my children will be able to feel free in Latvia’s environment. [. . .] I noticed that there were not so many people who took similar decisions.

The Russian proverb *Difficulties when learning, easiness when fighting*, was, interestingly enough, used by Russophone informants in both studies. In Extract 1, it refers to learning Latvian as L2. Metaphorically, living in a society where the dominant language is not a family language is compared to ‘fighting’, and it is easier to fight when one has appropriate ‘weapons’.

After providing a retrospective view (Extract 1), the informant started to share her opinion about languages from a current perspective. In contrast to the view on the situation 30 years earlier, the dominant narrative was now about the economic value of languages, which FLP theory summarises as ‘socio-economic factors’ (Curdt-Christiansen, 2018). Based on the perspective of having her own small business, the informant creates a link between economic needs and the value of language competences (Extract 2):

Extract 2 (Family 1): Business life doesn’t appreciate borders, first of all it doesn’t appreciate language borders. And, first of all, language is the primary boundary, so that the business can exist. I am free and calm that my children, that they as thirty-year-olds don’t have obstacles, for them there are no obstacles at all, you see. If there is a need for English, they speak English, but there, as I understand, there they have a lot of partners, and sometimes partners from former Soviet republics, with them also the communication language stayed not English, but Russian.

In a similar way, societal and economic integration was a major factor also for Family 2, which, however, also stresses practical issues. When reflecting on her own upbringing, the mother recalls that she hardly ever heard Latvian in her neighbourhood. But she tells that at the time of Latvian independence, her parents explained that the situation had changed. However, since she was already at school, she continued to receive education in Russian, in contrast to her younger sister, who started school after independence. Regarding her own children, she repeats similar arguments when explaining why a Latvian-MOI-pre-school was chosen (Extract 3):

Extract 3 (Family 2): And I understood that Latvian would be very important. [. . .] Because we are Latvia, there is no Soviet Union now, you have to respect that and integrate.

The informant of Family 3 also commented on events 2 years prior to the interview, but there was no direct explanation of the decision in favour of Latvian-MOI education. He says,

Extract 4 (Family 3): It was a conscious decision. Well, there was not a really big discussion; (but) there was a little bit of doubt.

The doubts expressed relate to a lack of confidence regarding language proficiency. The family had the wish to send their children to a bilingual (Russian-Latvian) school but was aware that their children would develop by far more competence in Latvian if they chose a pre-school or school with only Latvian, due to the context of acquiring Latvian through authentic communication.

In sum, our informants reacted to societal changes and showed a high level of awareness of linguistic needs in society. This resulted in flexibility in their FLP and conscious decisions to choose Latvian-MOI education. At the same time, there were insecurities if this path would be successful.

Bilingual competence and the role of family language (Russian). The second issue here is the maintenance of Russian as the family language. Our interviews reveal that parents reflect on the children's entire language repertoires, in which the choice of Latvian-MOI (pre)schools is embedded. There are both pragmatic and emotional attitudes to their family language Russian, reflecting identity and cultural issues. Family 1 (cf. Extract 6) explains that literacy in Russian is not only relevant due to pragmatic reasons: it is more than that, it creates a special relationship between the parents and the children:

Extract 6 (Family 1): And I remember very well that my girls, both the older and the younger one, . . . all those cards, self-made, they were written in Russian, and I would say that all those letters they copied [from somewhere], yes, in order to make me happy and write some greetings in Russian. Because of that I am convinced that this emotional part, this is only in the native language.

In the same interview, the mother explains that a lot of code-switching takes place in communication with her adult daughters, consciously or unconsciously. In particular outside the home, she speaks more Latvian, whereas her daughters continue to communicate with her in Russian. Extract 7 shows that Family 3 has a strong desire to develop biliterate competences of their children, even if they send them to pre-schools with Latvian as MOI:

Extract 7 (family 3): Well it would be important that they learn to read, write also in Russian. In this sense, our plan at the moment is provisional that, for instance, from first to sixth (grade) they could be in a minority school and from seventh to twelfth in a Latvian one.

Family 3 here discusses its plans for the language education of their children. The parents believe that Russian as a home language can successfully be maintained in an explicitly biliterate development. In this line, the interviews reflect persistent efforts to support children in developing biliterate skills, even if they attend a (pre)school with Latvian as MOI. Family 1 achieves this aim through spontaneous flexibility in multilingual situations and code-switching routines, whereas the two other families have more conscious management approaches. Family 2 has agreed to use only Russian at home. These different approaches confirm research in educational linguistics such as by Reyes and Moll (2008, p. 154), who observed that 'discourse in support of bilingualism and multilingualism becomes more widespread', resulting in minority parents using diverse ways of encouraging their children to use the family language in addition to developing competence in the main societal language.

If we consider family languages, in line with De Houwer, as non-societal languages, the development of home languages can also be interpreted as part of parental aims to develop their children's well-being: 'Parents may feel regret, remorse, and guilt. They also may feel anger at their children and may feel that children reject them by rejecting their language, thus detracting from parental well-being, and, thus, harmonious bilingualism' (De Houwer, 2021, p. 57). Our data reveal that this harmonious bilingualism is important to all families. Although Russian is used for many purposes in Latvia, our informants connect choosing Latvian-MOI (pre)schools to situations where Latvian and Russian are constructed in accordance with the distinction between societal and non-societal languages. In this context, Family 2 shows explicit attempts of family language management in the interest of a harmonious path to bilingualism from early childhood onwards when they

agree to keep Russian as the only code of communication within the family, in addition to Latvian-MOI education.

At the same time, the parental narratives also show that the bilingual development from early childhood promotes the ability of children to communicate in two languages already in pre-school age. In this, translanguaging and different ways of code alternation are the norm. These observations are not surprising, since, for example, De Houwer (2021) concludes that ‘by age 11 and often long before, bilingual schoolchildren who are able to form sentences in two languages can fluently switch from one language to the other in a single conversation’. (p. 55) The following example of Family 3 provides deeper insight into such practices. The father tells about situations which reflect links between educational and home settings with regard to language practices (Extract 8):

Extract 8 (Family 3): Well, for example, they (the family’s children) play and very natural: *oh, let’s throw a bunny*, well, they speak Russian, and then: *oh, let’s throw a bunny*. They say it in Latvian or they just play and start [. . .] to imitate the same situations that are . . . in kindergarten, for example: *you behave badly*. There the boy says to the girl. [. . .] And whole such dialogues, which now come in.

Extract 8 indicates that Latvian enters the home territory, and the parents do not stick to monolingual Russian habits. Quite the contrary: the parents sometimes support the use of Latvian at home, thereby applying a highly flexible approach to bilingualism, even if they stress that their home language usually is Russian. Extract 8, in this sense, confirms the findings by Reyes and Moll (2008, p. 154) with regard to children bilingual in English and Spanish. In their examples, a four-year old boy and his 10-year-old sister

play the *escuelita* (little school) at home, they use both English and Spanish, even though the children originally experienced this literacy practice at school in English. Children, therefore, are transforming and adapting language and literacy that is used in the classroom to the language used at home.

This last example is also a bridge to our second case study: During the piloting of our survey at DSR, a mother in a family who mostly uses Russian at home explained that their ‘children speak both Latvian and Russian among themselves, and outside home my daughter also (speaks) German and English’. She sees these practices as a result of attending (pre-)school with German as MOI and English as a language of several subjects and regular lingua franca. She observes how her children develop plurilingual practices and explicitly allows them to ‘switch freely from one language to the other’. At the same time, the informants in both studies reported that this linguistic behaviour is not obvious. As our DSR respondent expressed: ‘In Latvia, some people don’t understand that you can use more than one language in a family’.

Perceptions and practices by DSR families

Our second study, the survey at DSR, gives insight into one of Riga’s international schools (in more detail cf. Marten, 2023; Marten & Martena, in press). The language used most often by DSR families is Russian, which makes a comparison of data from both studies especially relevant. This applies in particular to the choice of school, the development of the children’s plurilingual repertoires, and to the impact on language practices at home. Since many parents commented on the well-being of their children, we expanded the last aspect to include also other issues regarding the home environment in relation to languages.

Choice of a (pre)school with German as a MOI. One of the questions in the survey was the basic open ‘Why did you choose DSR?’. Ten of the 51 responses related to the multilingual and multicultural

education and school environment. From first grade, in addition to German as the main MOI, DSR children have classes in Latvian or Russian, and in English. From 5th grade, language classes are supplemented by Italian, Spanish, French, or Chinese. The second most important reason (9 answers) was DSR's quality. Parents expressed that they trust the school, sometimes with explicit reference to the assumed quality of German education. The third reason for choosing DSR was more practical, namely DSR's location in the centre of Riga (seven answers). Fewer answers to this question focused on the German language as such, to personal relations to Germany, or to the learning environment, for example, the generally friendly atmosphere, teachers' attitudes, or small classes.

Closely related to the previous question was our wish to understand parents' views on DSR's role in Latvian society: *For which groups of children do you think DSR is particularly suitable?* As expected, the answers revealed a high diversity of thoughts. However, we saw that the parents here decontextualised from their own family's perspectives and expressed more general views. In line with the answers to the previous question, our respondents repeatedly mentioned that DSR is suitable if you value education in an international, multicultural environment, for multilingual parents, the international community, immigrants, or expats, or for those who generally love languages. Relations with German(y) were, again, mentioned to a lesser extent. In addition, our respondents stressed that it was important that the children receive education in the family language. A third group of answers related, once more, to the quality of education. These informants wrote, for instance, that DSR is suitable for those who want to give 'more' to their children or who wish an international education 'above average'.

Bilingual competence and the role of the family language. The answers relating to the choice of DSR reveal parents' satisfaction with the multilingual approach and the co-existence of three or more languages in teaching. Only 2 of 51 respondents expressed worries that the children might be overloaded by so many languages. Some comments explicitly reflect that the informants value multilingual education higher than opportunities to let the children learn in a monolingual or bilingual school in Latvia. These answers display beliefs that the children will benefit from multilingual education also in areas such as 'self-development, multicultural environment, thinking out of the "language" box' – that is, transgress the boundaries imposed by adhering to monolingual practices and ideologies. The answers show that many parents themselves have succeeded in leaving this monolingual 'box' and assign value to developing plurilingual competences and awareness of cultural diversity.

At the same time, answers to open questions such as 'What do you think – in which areas will your child/ren benefit most from his or her knowledge of the German language?' or 'How important is it for you that your child has Latvian or Russian lessons at Riga German School?' show that parents aim for both opportunities: to learn new languages, and to acquire literacy in their mother tongues. Extract 9 is an example of how respondents compared, for example, German and Russian culture:

Extract 9: Language first of all is a way of reflecting culture, people. German culture is very close to Russian (old, not Soviet) culture. Unfortunately Russian culture has suffered from irreversible changes during the last century. I feel happy that the child, together with (learning) the language, gets familiar with the right culture according to our views. This is also a relationship with close people [. . .].

The respondent positions him/herself as a representative of old (*good*) Russian culture (of close people) in opposition to *Soviet* culture. At the same time, learning languages implies more than language. This comment is interesting with regard to distancing oneself from contemporary Russian language and culture. Such perceptions were similarly identified in a study in Australia.

Vakser (2017) explored experiences of Russianness in multilingual home settings and provided discusses a family that positions itself at ‘opposite ends of the Russian spectrum’, and who ‘exemplifies the ways in which a single language can become a site of ideological struggle, as individuals navigate the multiple regimes of meaning’ (Vakser, 2017, p. 230).

Other respondents implicitly said that it was not easy to choose a school with an MOI other than a home language. However, in the end, their motivation prevailed to provide better opportunities for their children through a bi- or plurilingual education. Extracts 10 and 11 reveal two lines of argumentation, differentiated by short-term and long-term thinking:

Extract 10: For every child it is much easier to learn in mother tongue, but as Russian proverb says – difficulties when learning, easiness when fighting. Of course at the moment for her it is difficult, but I hope that all this will bear fruit in the future.

Interestingly, the Russian proverb ‘difficulties when learning, easiness when fighting’ quoted in study 1 was repeated, reflecting the awareness of not having chosen an easy educational trajectory. With regard to the families’ home languages, also several Latvian-speaking families assigned high value to the opportunity to have both lessons in Latvian as a mother tongue and the benefits of learning in a multilingual environment.

Similarly to the first study, also the data from DSR point to the bridge between families and school and to the interaction between home and school language practices. The children take their new language repertoires home, and parents purposefully or unintentionally engage in language learning. Different family members may learn from each other and thereby apply bidirectional learning. Extract 11 is an answer to the question, ‘Do you have the impression that your child/ren is/are happy with learning German?’ (85% of the respondents answered yes, 15% no). When elaborating on answering ‘yes’, one parent explained:

Extract 11: Because the child likes the language, learns it with pleasure. From school comes home in a great mood. Teaches German to all family members. At home tries to speak in German. Feels proud that can say something and explain his/her thoughts in German.

Similarly, also Extract 12 characterises the relation between home and school language:

Extract 12: The daughter ceaselessly speaks only in German, and the son puts German words in his lexicon.

A major difference between the two studies with regard to the parents’ satisfaction with the choice of (pre)school, however, relates to the emotional well-being of the children. One of our respondents at DSR wrote that ‘it’s not the language what makes him happy but the way how studies are organized and climate in the school’. Enjoying or not enjoying language learning is often related to the teaching process, the atmosphere at school, and the teachers, for example: ‘With pleasure watches children’s programmes in German. This is a possibility to communicate with the preferred class teacher’; ‘our child likes German and teacher’; ‘Kid likes a lot the lessons, talks about school at home and waits for Monday during the weekend :)’. These answers imply that multilingualism and choosing a non-family language as MOI can lead to positive emotions – and they are not in opposition to emotional consolidation through the home language, as stressed in study 1.

To conclude, we see that there are many reasons for choosing DSR – but that cultural and linguistic diversity and multilingual education are the main, if not the most important factor – and notably more relevant than German as an MOI in itself. At the same time, also study 2 reflects that there is an interaction between school and home language practices.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of our paper has been to understand educational choices from an FLP perspective and to build a bridge between practices at home and at school. Our research shows that by choosing plurilingual educational paths for their children, our informants look for perspectives in line with current educational ideas relating to European plurilingual realities, but which only slowly reach mainstream education. Russian-L1 families do not see a contradiction in choosing a Latvian-MOI school for their children and integrating Latvian, Russian, and other languages into their practices. Families with broader ranges of linguistic and cultural backgrounds sometimes choose an internationally-oriented school as a path out of the dilemma of finding adequate multilingual education.

With respect to our main research questions, we can therefore conclude that families in Latvia choose (pre)schools with another language than their L1 as the MOI due to a mix of different reasons. They wish to guarantee the acquisition of more than just the home language – with different foci on Latvian, German, and/or English. These attitudes are based on respect for Latvia as a state, the reality of multilingualism in Latvia and Europe, and the wish to provide educational and professional opportunities through socialisation in different languages.

In this sense, our studies confirm language attitudes and FLPs reported in other studies, even if the situation of languages, political debates and educational policies in the Baltic states is certainly peculiar, regarding the century-long multilingual nature of society, but also the legacy of Soviet times with Russian as the dominant language (cf. Ozolins, 2019). In this sense, our data show that the main reasons for families with Russian as L1 to choose (pre)schools with a MOI other than the family language are, in terms of Curdt-Christiansen's model, both socioeconomical and sociocultural. Parents at DSR see the potential in being plurilingual and therefore value the multilingual environment. They connect the economic value of languages with their symbolic cultural connotations (in the case of DSR, mostly German, but also English).

Sociopolitical reasons were also mentioned in the narratives in Study 1 with regard to the restoration of Latvian independence in the 1990s. In this way, our studies show a close connection between the three components of Spolsky's theory: based on beliefs on languages and the importance of developing plurilingual repertoires in a multilingual world, the families make educational choices as active language acquisition management decisions. This facilitates language socialisation in that families adjust their repertoires and practices to the sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts in which they live, often also with socioeconomic perspectives in mind when linking language acquisition to better educational and professional opportunities for their children. The children are actively supported in becoming plurilingual so that they can get access to more diverse social groups, including Latvian as the main societal language, English as global lingua franca, and additional languages of society such as German (cf. Marten, 2021).

With regard to our second research question, both studies confirm the link between home and school language practices. Children take their language repertoires acquired at school home, and school languages become embedded into the home environment in the sense of the bidirectionality observed by Reyes and Moll (2008). Our informants in both studies report that children engage in translanguaging or code-switching and incorporate linguistic school realities in their playing, as described in the theoretical characteristics of plurilingual speakers. Thereby, our research shows how the two poles of societal debates regarding languages at home and in education can be bridged: language management choices at home influence educational trajectories, but educational practices also influence language practices in the private domain.

Our data also suggest that it is necessary to support plurilingual families. As previous studies on the bilingual development of children in educational settings emphasise, there is 'an urgent need for developmental studies to trace the dynamics of family language choices and practices over the

years' (De Houwer, 2021, p. 59). More cooperation with researchers and data-based evidence are needed and should be communicated with both sides: parents (families) and teachers, in particular language teachers. In this sense, parents should be familiarised with research on children's bilingual development, including an understanding of different approaches, which need to be adjusted to individual family constellations.

At the same time, it is important that teachers receive support for incorporating research results into their teaching and for comprehending debates on languages in education, including concepts such as plurilingualism. As De Houwer (2021) concluded, 'childcare centers and preschools should ensure that ESLA [Early second language acquisition] preschoolers do not experience a possibly traumatic long "silent period." Pedagogical approaches that recognize and value all languages that children bring to preschool are essential' (p. 58). The open question remains how to link language practices at home with multilingual approaches at school. The teachers need to be well-prepared, but our research shows that parents highly value the bridge between different languages in their families' repertoires, the main societal language, and additional languages taught at school.

In addition, our studies also confirm the value of narratives in research on multilingualism. Only since relatively recently narrative analysis has been used for investigating the mobility of individuals and communities 'in transnational and migratory contexts' (Baynham & De Fina, 2017, p. 32). Mobility can, in this vein, also be perceived as the experience of being 'in between'. For our informants as families with home languages other than Latvian, being in transition has meant either to move from other countries to Latvia, or to be between two political systems, two language ideologies, and two sociocultural spaces. As Baynham and De Fina (2017, p. 33) argue, narrative research on multilingualism has to pay attention to contextualising meanings in local interactions. In life stories such as those revealed in our first study, parents share experiences, doubts, and personal questions, which renders our data to be useful also 'to differentiate, to feed disputes and arguments' (Baynham & De Fina, 2017, p. 31). Storytelling as a meaning-making practice allows us to better understand the way how informants reflect upon and construct their choices. The same applies also, in a more limited way, to the anecdotes of the participants in study 2.

Yet, the comparison of our studies allows also to reflect on two sides of narrative analysis as a method in interview-based studies. On the one hand, there are risks to over-interpret or inadequately generalise conclusions based on only a few cases. On the other hand, the choice of even one single case can be valuable and significant for demonstrating 'a commitment to a personal trajectory' (Khan, 2017, p. 66). Biographical approaches which reflect individual life trajectories can therefore provide insight into more general discourses about language, attitudes, and practices in a specific time and space. As Busch (2017, p. 47) argues, 'the notion of biography does not reproduce the split between individual and society but rather structures both spheres'. At the same time, research based on individual life trajectories should be balanced by other studies in similar contexts. Whereas studies similar to ours certainly exist on a global scale, for Latvia, much more data would be needed.

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ORCID iD

Heiko F. Marten  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9781-0808>

Notes

1. We use the terms *plurilingual(ism)* and *multilingual(ism)* according to the understanding of the Council of Europe: *plurilingual* denotes individual competences to use more than one language, *multilingual* refers to the presence of several languages in society (Council of Europe, 2022).
2. Translations of the examples by the authors. The interviews in Study 1 were conducted in Latvian and German, including code alternation with Russian and English. The survey in Study 2 was available in Latvian, Russian, English, and German. The original quotations are not provided due to space restrictions.
3. Alexander Suvorov was an 18th-century general in the Russian Empire. Our interviewee quoted this utterance in Russian, whereas the language of the rest of the extract is Latvian.

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Author biographies

Sanita Martena is a professor of applied linguistics at Rēzekne Academy of Technologies in Rēzekne, Latvia. Her research interests focus on language and education policy in Latvia, multilingualism and family language policy, including diaspora (heritage) languages, language education, regional languages and language corpora development.

Heiko F. Marten is a senior researcher at Rēzekne Academy of Technologies in Rēzekne, Latvia, and at Leibniz Institute for the German Language in Mannheim, Germany. His work focuses on language policy, language discourses, multilingualism and minority languages in the Baltic states and in various contexts involving the German language.