

Elkarif, Halah (2026). **What Do Multilingual Families Need? Voices from Four German ECE Settings.** Paper presented on the 34th Annual EECERA Conference, Funchal/Madeira, Portugal, 26.8.2026.

Abstract

This study investigates the perspectives, practices, and needs of multilingual families regarding their children's multilingual development in Germany. It is part of the broader SpraBiL project (2024–2026), which addresses language support for multilingual children in German ECE settings. The research gives voice to multilingual families and addresses an empirical gap, complementing studies in Belgium (Van der Wildt et al., 2023) and Norway (Ståpor et al., 2025). The study draws on family language policy and sociocultural-ecological perspectives, highlighting how parents' beliefs and strategies shape children's multilingual development (Spolsky, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978). A participatory research design was employed, including multilingual project materials, iterative consent procedures, feedback workshops, and semi-structured interviews with parents of 26 multilingual children across four ECE settings. Parents provided written and voice-recorded consent after being informed about research aims, procedures, and their rights, ensuring transparency and cultural sensitivity. Project materials, consent forms, and interviews were available in German, English, Arabic, and Turkish, enabling multilingual families to participate fully and express their perspectives with minimal loss in translation. Reflexive thematic analysis revealed five main themes: (1) expectation of support for children's German language development, (2) need for clarity on language proficiency, (3) practice of maintaining first languages, (4) perspectives on nurturing multilingual environments, and (5) experiences with culturally sensitive communication with ECE staff and centers. The findings underscore the importance of incorporating multilingual parents' voices in research and practice, as understanding their perspectives can enhance culturally responsive and linguistically inclusive ECE practices, supporting multilingual children's development and family engagement.

Keywords

multilingualism, parental perspectives, language diversity, early childhood education, Germany

All authors:

Halah Elkarif, Hildesheim University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Germany

Tim Rohrmann, Hildesheim University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Germany

Bianka Wachtlin, Hildesheim University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Germany

Anja Siemens, Hildesheim University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Germany

What do Multilingual Families Need? Voices from Four German ECE settings

**Halah Elkarif, Tim Rohrman, Bianka Wachtlin
Presented by Anja Siemens**

*Insights from the **SpraBiL** Project*



Sprachbildung und **L**ogopädie



**Early language education
& Speech and language therapy**



- **Prof. Dr. Tim Rohrmann**
- **Prof. Dr. Bianka Wachtlin**
- **Dr. Halah Elkarif**
- **Nina Theis**
- **Claudia Funk**
- **Anja Siemens**
- **Laura Praetze**

*Insights from the **SpraBiL** Project*



Primary objective: To address the language support needs of multilingual children in German early childhood education (ECE) centers.

*Insights from the **SpraBiL** Project*



Primary objective: To address the language support needs of multilingual children in German early childhood education (ECE) centers.

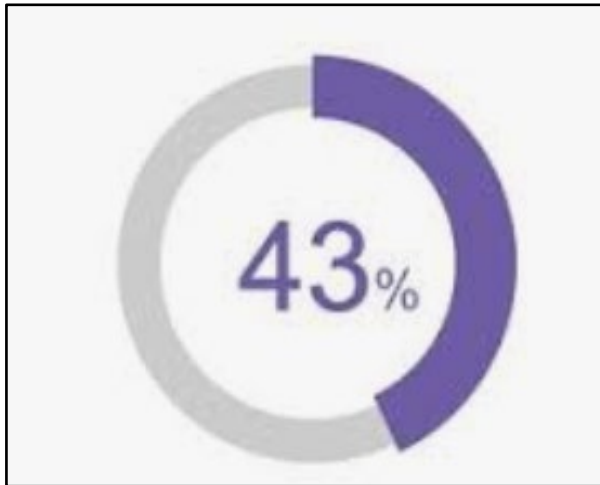


<https://share.google/V4fO8QcLLnpab5dPR>

*Insights from the **SpraBiL** Project*



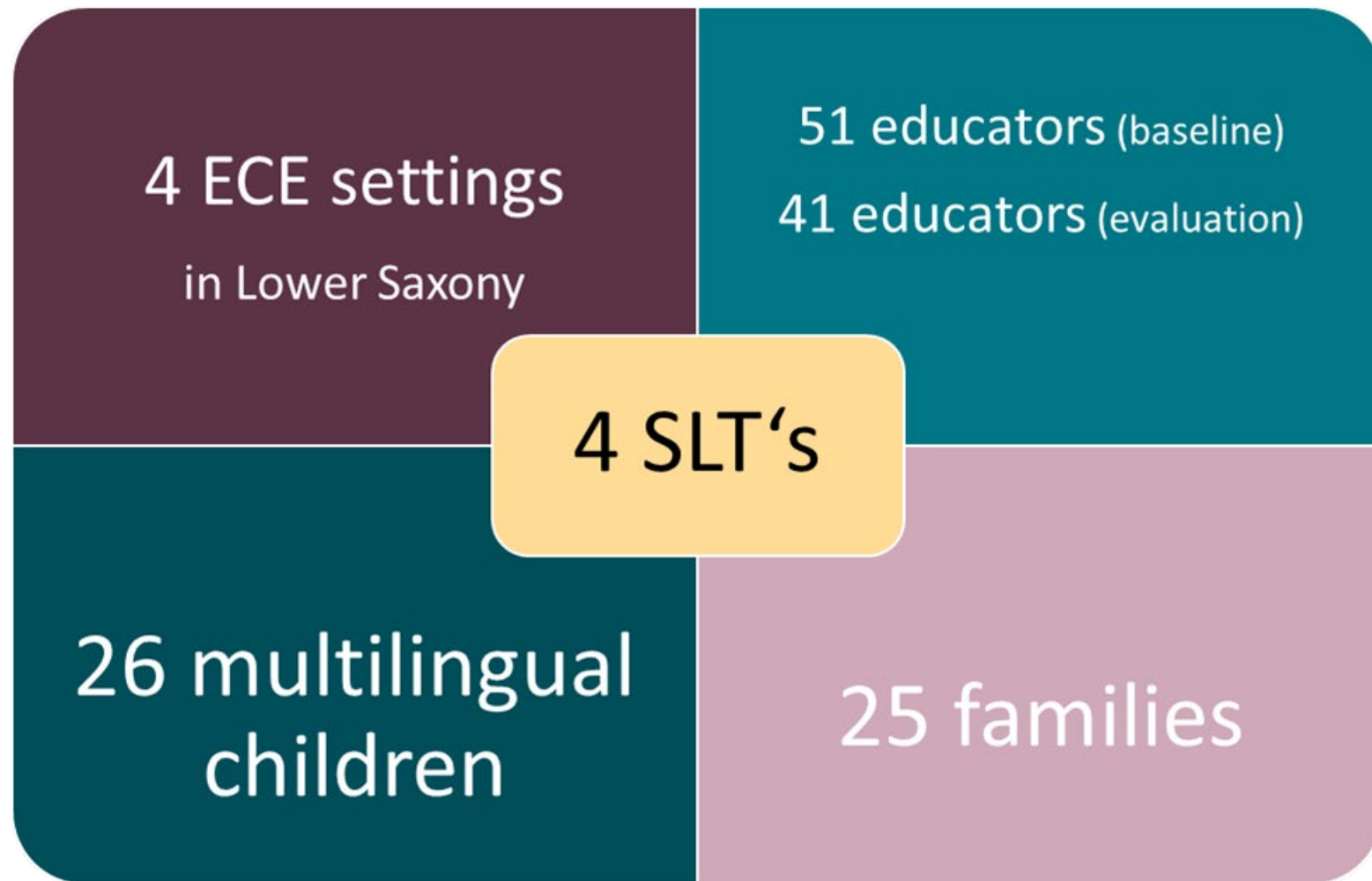
Primary objective: To address the language support needs of multilingual children in German early childhood education (ECE) centers.



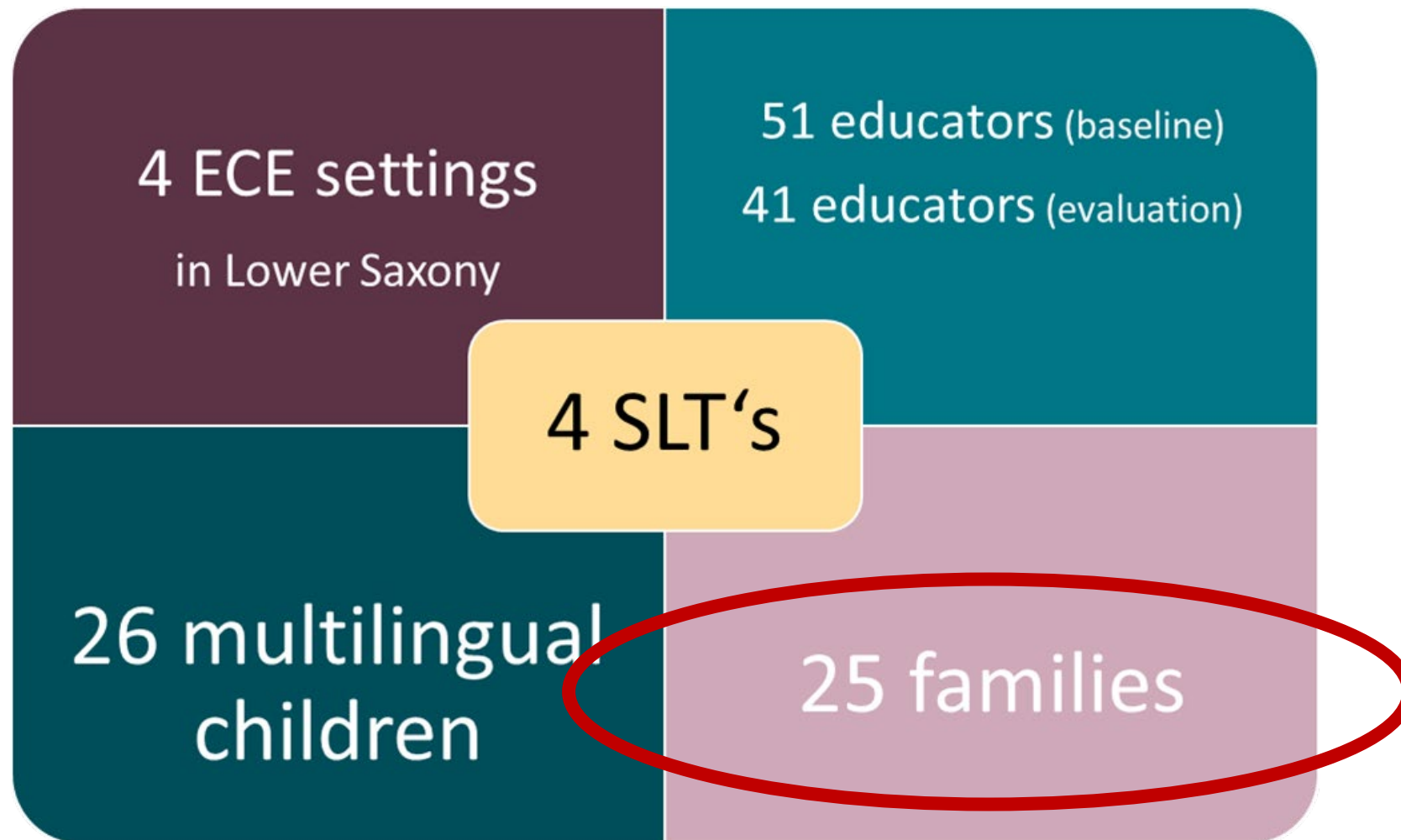
©  Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis), 2024

<https://share.google/V4fO8QcLLnpab5dPR>

*Insights from the **SpraBiL** Project*



*Insights from the **SpraBiL** Project*



Methods



German,
English,
Arabic,
Turkish

Participants

25



<https://share.google/LsDtZzzBJbEzDY8bP>

Participants

25

Albanian	Amharic	Arabic	Tamil	Bengali	Bulgarian
Chinese	Croatian	Dari	Dogri	Romanian	English
Filipino	French	German	Greek	Malayalam	Kurdish
Hindi	Marathi	Pashtu (Pashto)	Polish	Punjabi	Romani
Dutch	Russian	Serbian	Spanish	Shanghainese	Belarusian
Telugu	Tigrinya	Tunisian Arabic	Turkish	Ukrainian	Vietnamese

Participants

25

2

- Albanian, German
- Polish, German
- Serbian, German
- Kurdish, German
- Arabic, German
- Turkish, German
- Turkish, German

3

- Albanian, English, German
- English, Polish, German
- English, Malayalam, German
- Arabic, Kurdish, German
- Arabic, Kurdish, German

5

- English, French, Spanish, Vietnamese, German
- Amharic, Arabic, English, Tigrinya, German
- English, French, Dutch, Spanish, German

4

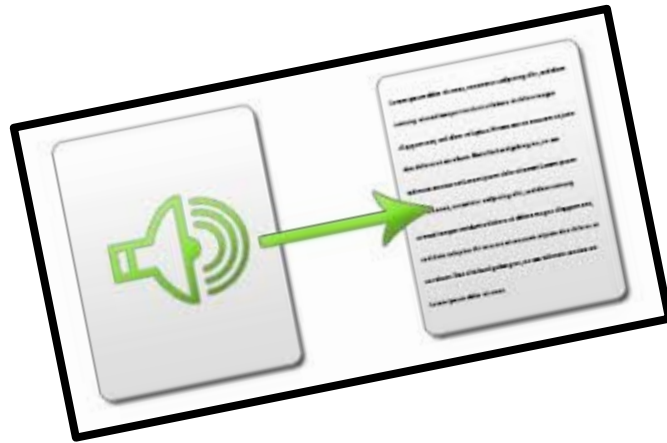


11

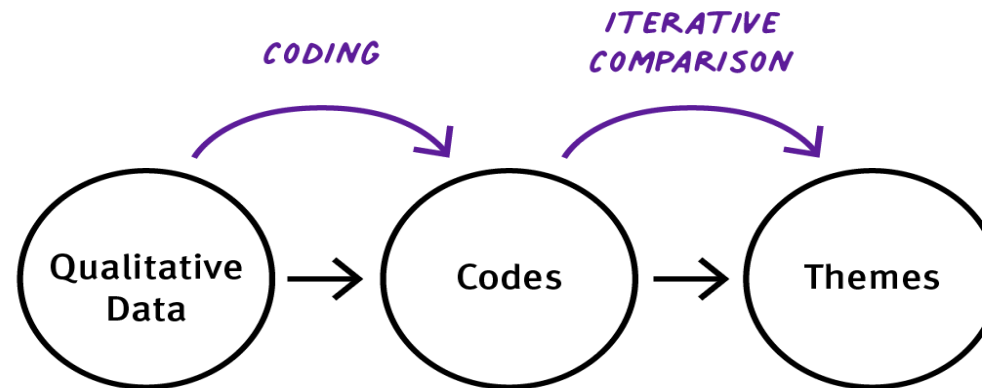
Hindi, English, Dogri, Punjabi,
Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Bengali,
French, Spanish, German

- Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian, German
- Belarusian, Russian, Ukrainian, German
- Chinese, English, Shanghainese, German
- Albanian, English, Croatian, German
- Dari, English, Pashto, German
- English, Filipino, Greek, German
- English, French, Tunisian Arabic, German

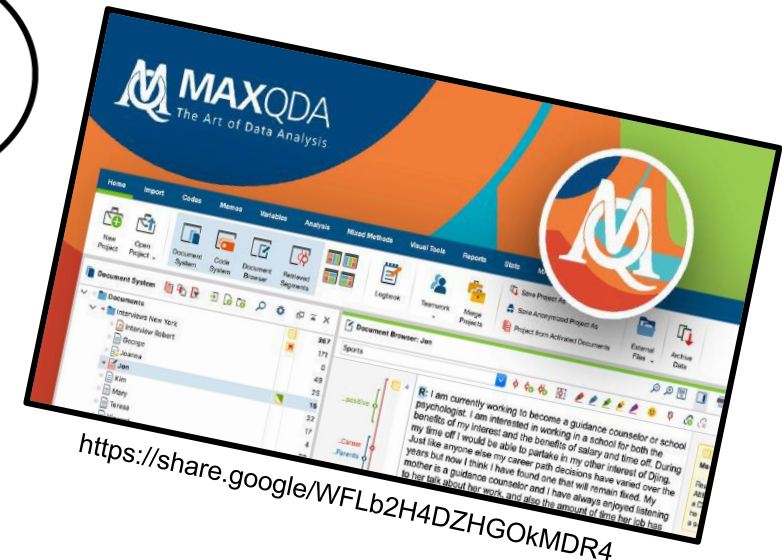
Analysis



Thematic Analysis



<https://share.google/xB0yeiNUcnjWowtvx>



<https://share.google/WFLb2H4DZHGokMDR4>

Findings: 5 Main Themes from the Thematic Analysis

Findings: 5 Main Themes from the Thematic Analysis

1. Expectations of Support for Children's German Language Development

1. Expectations of Support for Children's German Language Development (through the ECE Institution)

I really wish they would speak more German with the children, play many games with them, and have lots of conversations with them. I've noticed that nowadays much more effort is put into language support than before, and there is clearly more help and guidance. But if they spoke more with the children, it would be even more effective. (A multilingual parent in the 'SprabiL' project)

1. Expectations of Support for Children's German Language Development (through the ECE Institution)

For me, it would be really nice if there were someone here who could specifically support children with higher support linguistic needs. Maybe they could have longer conversations with them or simply talk more to them. The educators told us directly, 'We don't have enough staff to have longer conversations with your daughter or with this group.' ... But I think multilingual children need this kind of support in order to, let's say, make up for vocabulary or grammar... (A multilingual parent in the 'SpraBiL' project)

1. Expectations of Support for Children's German Language Development (through the ECE Institution)

..... which they sometimes miss because of being raised in a multilingual family and the limited language input at home. It would really be wonderful, because this would strengthen the areas where they need support. ... I always feel a bit guilty about it, but we try to find solutions: bringing someone to our home, taking her to more activities in German, or connecting her with German friends so she can interact more... We're really trying to close that gap. (A multilingual parent in the 'SprabiL' project)

1. Expectations of Support for Children's German Language Development (through the ECE Institution)

- *“Talk to them more.”*
- *“Tell them more stories in German”*
- *“Have a speech and language support specialist within the ECE institution”*
- *“Sing more often — more than just once a week”*



<https://share.google/OxV48UibecUsNQnm>
4

Multilingual parents in the ‘SpraBiL’ project

Findings: 5 Main Themes from the Thematic Analysis

1. Expectations of Support for Children's German Language Development

Findings: 5 Main Themes from the Thematic Analysis

- 1. Expectations of Support for Children's German Language Development**
- 2. Need for Clarity on German Language Proficiency**

2. Need for Clarity on German Language Proficiency

We can't really assess her German skills because we hardly hear her speak German, So, it's hard for us to judge her abilities. We can easily assess her Spanish, but German? That's difficult, because I don't speak German myself, so it's hard for me to evaluate her skills.” (A multilingual parent in the ‘SprabiL’ project)

2. Need for Clarity on German Language Proficiency

Unfortunately, we don't receive reliable, formal information about his German language level from the kindergarten. Sometimes the educator says he's speaking German better now, but our impression is that his German skills aren't quite there yet. He speaks Chinese very well and can organize a complex scene, sentence, or story effectively. However, ...” (A multilingual parent in the ‘SprabiL’ project)

2. Need for Clarity on German Language Proficiency

..... there are still misunderstandings when he speaks German . We really want to understand what this means. We want to know: Can he be compared to other German children his age? Is he perhaps falling behind, or is his language level normal for a multilingual child? Should we pay more attention to his language development? ” (A multilingual parent in the ‘SprabiL’ project)

2. Need for Clarity on German Language Proficiency



shutterstock.com · 2609734649

<https://share.google/euSMUAvcXuR7rj4Nd>

Findings: 5 Main Themes from the Thematic Analysis

- 1. Expectations of Support for Children's German Language Development**
- 2. Need for Clarity on German Language Proficiency**

Findings: 5 Main Themes from the Thematic Analysis

- 1. Expectations of Support for Children's German Language Development**
- 2. Need for Clarity on German Language Proficiency**
- 3. Practice of Maintaining the First Language(s)**

3. Practice of Maintaining the First Language(s)



<https://share.google/HeLlwebRha8nkgIj8>

In most of the families in our study, the first language is used in everyday life, whether in communication between the parents or with the children. For the majority, this is the most important way to preserve the first language, pass it on to their children, and thus maintain the connection to their heritage language.

3. Practice of Maintaining the First Language(s)



<https://share.google/HeLlwebRha8nkgIj8>



English course/Arabic school

long holiday in the home country (for example, the entire summer vacation).

3. Practice of Maintaining the First Language(s)



<https://share.google/xkuwIORCzf2LJt8Rq>

Findings: 5 Main Themes from the Thematic Analysis

- 1. Expectations of Support for Children's German Language Development**
- 2. Need for Clarity on German Language Proficiency**
- 3. Practice of Maintaining the First Language(s)**

Findings: 5 Main Themes from the Thematic Analysis

- 1. Expectations of Support for Children's German Language Development**
- 2. Need for Clarity on German Language Proficiency**
- 3. Practice of Maintaining the First Language(s)**
- 4. Perspectives on Nurturing Multilingual Environments**

4. Perspectives on Nurturing Multilingual Environments

How do you perceive multilingualism?

Of course, it's a good thing.

It's a positive thing.

It's like a gift.

It makes a person more open.

Multilingual parents in the 'SpraBiL' project

4. Perspectives on Nurturing Multilingual Environments

How do you perceive multilingualism?

*For adults, it's great; for children, it's a challenge.”
(A multilingual parent in the ‘SpraBiL’ project)*

4. Perspectives on Nurturing Multilingual Environments

Multilingualism is wonderful. When traveling, at airports, or in other cities—it's really great. For children, however, it can also be exhausting. My older daughter, who speaks Albanian and German, is learning English, Spanish, and French at school. Sometimes she says, 'My head, English, Spanish...' That's five languages.' (A multilingual parent in the 'SpraBiL' project)

Findings: 5 Main Themes from the Thematic Analysis

- 1. Expectations of Support for Children's German Language Development**
- 2. Need for Clarity on German Language Proficiency**
- 3. Practice of Maintaining the First Language(s)**
- 4. Perspectives on Nurturing Multilingual Environments**

Findings: 5 Main Themes from the Thematic Analysis

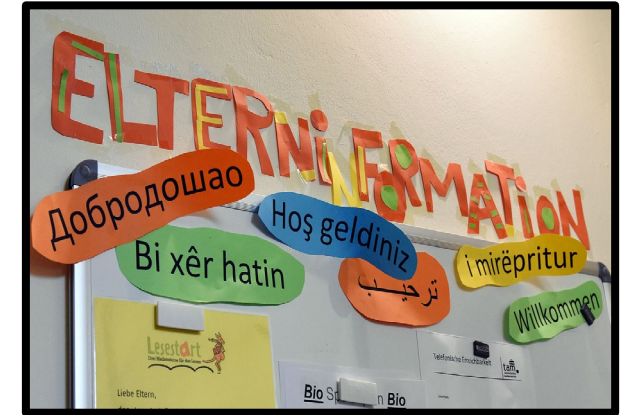
- 1. Expectations of Support for Children's German Language Development**
- 2. Need for Clarity on German Language Proficiency**
- 3. Practice of Maintaining the First Language(s)**
- 4. Perspectives on Nurturing Multilingual Environments**
- 5. Experiences with Culturally Sensitive Communication with ECE Staff
and Centers**

5. Experiences with Culturally Sensitive Communication with ECE Staff and Centers



5. Experiences with Culturally Sensitive Communication with ECE Staff and Centers

- App is appreciated
- Flexibility in using tools such as Google Translate
- Welcoming multicultural atmosphere
- Staff who speak the mother tongue or international languages (e.g., English) are considered particularly valuable



5. Experiences with Culturally Sensitive Communication with ECE Staff and Centers

As I said, it's really good here—they sing songs in many languages. For example, during religious occasions, like Ramadan or other festive times, there's a big poster at the front with “All the best” and wishes. This is done for all religions here, which is really very nice and thoughtful. It really shows that efforts are made to include all religions, and no religion is treated as less important than another. Everything is celebrated here. At Christmas, the children sing, signs are displayed at the front, and they receive gifts. That's really lovely. It's also nice to see that festive occasions are remembered—I haven't seen that in any other daycare so far. I really like that, and I usually like to take photos of it as well. Yes, it's really very nice. (A multilingual parent in the ‘SpraBiL’ project)

5. Experiences with Culturally Sensitive Communication with ECE Staff and Centers

- App is perceived as one-way communication
- Lack of staff who speak other languages other than German



Findings: 5 Main Themes from the Thematic Analysis

- 1. Expectations of Support for Children's German Language Development**
- 2. Need for Clarity on German Language Proficiency**
- 3. Practice of Maintaining the First Language(s)**
- 4. Perspectives on Nurturing Multilingual Environments**
- 5. Experiences with Culturally Sensitive Communication with ECE Staff
and Centers**

Closing Insights....

Our findings underscore the importance of incorporating multilingual parents' voices in research and practice, as understanding their perspectives can enhance culturally responsive and linguistically inclusive ECE practices, supporting multilingual children's development and family engagement.



Future perspectives...

Conversations with parents and insights into their perspectives can also help the ECE staff alleviate uncertainties regarding the development and support of children growing up multilingual in the future.

