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Singing in multilingual early childhood centers in Luxembourg

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ABSTRACT



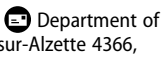
Singing activities are a staple in early childhood settings. Beyond offering moments of relaxation, singing has potential benefits for children's development and promotes language learning. Nonetheless, educators seem to value singing more as entertainment than as a learning tool. Furthermore, few studies have examined either the functions of songs in multilingual settings or the manners in which teachers scaffold children's learning. This study, based on three early childhood centers serving children aged 2 to 4 in multilingual Luxembourg, analyzes the purposes of songs and the young children's participation in singing with a qualitative methodology. The three centers were selected on account of their different locations, dominant languages, and prior experiences with either literacy or collaboration. The authors selected adult-initiated and child-initiated singing episodes to investigate the purposes of singing throughout the day, identify potential benefits in relation to valuing and encountering institutional languages and home languages and examining children's engagement. Findings indicated four main areas for the use of songs: structuring the day and helping understand routine activities, enhancing socialization, entertaining children, and valuing home languages. Furthermore, children's participation varied across centers and educators and depended on the pedagogical practices, the opportunities offered by the educators, and the ways the educators scaffolded learning. We conclude with research and policy recommendations, highlighting the need for professional development training that expands the educators' knowledge and skills necessary to maximize the benefits of songs in multilingual settings.

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Introduction

Music making is one of the most common activities in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings. Activities that involve singing with other peers and adults, moving to music, or listening to pre-composed songs, seem to be a staple in the centers' daily routines. Beyond offering moments of relaxation and adding an element of entertainment to the day, such practices contribute to young children's learning (Barrett, 2012; Hallam, 2015). Songs, rhymes, and dances enhance children's socio-emotional and cognitive abilities (Bautista et al., 2024) and enrich language experiences and aural sensitivity (Chen-Hafteck & Mang, 2018) through the lyrics, movements, and rhythmical patterns (Vaiouli & Grimmet, 2020; Vaiouli & Ogle, 2015).

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Music activities are likely to be highly relevant in multilingual contexts where children not only differ in relation to socioeconomic status and their diverse needs but also to their social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Studies with bilingual and multilingual children have shown that singing promotes language use and children's socialization (Palojärvi et al., 2024). The songs performed during morning circles, for example, afford language learning opportunities owing to the repetition of melodies and the lyrics (Kultti, 2013). Studies in Luxembourg and in the Netherlands showed that the use of songs along with the visual arts encouraged children to use home and institutional languages, fostered language learning, promoted communication with peers, and enhanced children's socialization (see Kirsch & Aleksić, 2021; Rickert, 2022). While singing is generally hailed as a method to promote language learning, the learning opportunities afforded through singing remain, nevertheless, understudied in monolingual and multilingual contexts (Kultti, 2013).

Luxembourg is an ideal place to study singing in multiple languages in ECEC owing to the country's language diversity and its program of multilingual education that requires professionals to familiarize children with Luxembourgish and French and value their home languages. In an earlier study (Kirsch & Aleksić, 2021), reported communicating in several languages throughout the day and in planned activities and choosing songs in multiple languages. For example, 86% of educators indicated that they sing every day, and of these, 98% reported doing so in French, 73% in Luxembourgish, 47% in English, 36% in German, and 33% in Portuguese. Considering children's multilingual repertoires and the frequent, though not daily use of songs in early childhood centers in Luxembourg, we aimed to deepen our understanding of pedagogical approaches and strategies that promote language development through investigating, firstly, the ways in which and purposes for which songs are used and, secondly, children's participation in singing activities.

Theoretical approach and literature review

In this paper, we draw on sociocultural theories of learning and outline well-studied music practices to understand young children's interactions with others during singing episodes and their familiarization with languages. Under this scope, activities are central to children's development and learning because they structure children's interactions with other peers and adults and shape their participation, communication, and language development. Interactions among peers and adults are understood under the prism of Rogoff's work (2012) on guided participation and the importance of having more experienced social partners to expand on children's communicative interactions. That is, adult guidance enriches children's participation through exchanges that challenge and extend children's verbal and non-verbal interactions (Rogoff, 2012; Rose, Rouhani, & Fischer, 2013). In this article, we study children's participation by examining their multiple languages as well as their non-verbal actions during their involvement in the singing activities.

The following sections synthesize literature from various fields; music education, early childhood education, multilingualism, and English as a foreign language (EFL). This is necessary as we do not look at songs in isolation but in relation to the ECEC context in Luxembourg where a program of multilingual education requires educators to offer activities both to boost French (or Luxembourgish) – which can be interpreted as a second or foreign language – and to value home languages. Therefore, we added literature on learning a foreign language with very young

learners (EFL in ECEC) and on multilingual education that focuses less on opportunities to teach languages and reinforces valuing home languages.

Benefits of music in general and its role in ECEC curricula

Most children naturally play with sounds and sound sources (Acker, 2020; Adamson et al., 2019; Powell & Somerville, 2020; Trevarthen et al., 2018). It is very common for young children to sing songs, enjoy nursery rhymes, and experiment with body percussion and musical instruments, as well as listen and dance to music (Ruokonen et al., 2021). Beyond the aesthetic experience, engagement in music is a form of communal wellbeing (Marsh, 2017; Nome, 2020). That is, children gather and sing, even create small-scale musical performances, to generate joy. At the same time, music-making supports and shapes acts of exploration, interactions with their social environment, as well as participation in their cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Kultti, 2013; Rickert, 2022).

Musical activities develop young children's sensory, cognitive, emotional, motor, and social skills (Bautista et al., 2024; Dumont et al., 2017; Pino et al., 2023; Vaiouli & Grimmet, 2020) as well as children's first languages (Sylva, 2010). However, Hamilton & Murphy (2024) deplore the lack of high-quality studies on the benefits of songs and warn that that professionals may base their understanding of these benefits on folk pedagogy rather than serious evidence.

Owing to the ascribed benefits, music is part of the ECEC curricula in many countries (Barrett et al., 2022). In Finland, for example, the curriculum asks professionals to provide children with opportunities to listen and dance to music; sing songs and recite rhymes; experiment with body percussion and musical instruments; express emotions and create musical performances. Professionals are also encouraged to integrate music into creative activities such as drama and organize activities where children can gather to enjoy music together (Ruokonen et al., 2021). Despite the important role of music in the curricula, Ruokonen et al. (2021) found in their survey that only 40–57% of professionals who worked with toddlers (children aged 1–3) reported that music was a part of everyday education. This percentage even decreased to 30% for educators who worked with four-year-olds and to 20% for those who worked with five-year-olds.

Music appears to be given a less prominent role in the curriculum for non-formal ECEC education in Luxembourg. The national framework appears to emphasize receptive, social and motor skills as well as a teacher-centered approach (Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de l'Enfance et de la Jeunesse [MENJE] & Service National de la Jeunesse [SNJ], 2021). The section "creativity, arts and aesthetics" indicates that music, dance and rhythm motivate children to engage and move and enhance community-building. It reminds educators to take into consideration children's musical interests and cater to their preferences and encourages them to offer opportunities to listen to and exchange various music styles to expand children's musical repertoires.

Purposes of musical activities and songs in ECEC

According to Bautista et al. (2024), the aim of musical activities is to help children express themselves and contribute to their holistic development. They paint a worrying picture of the current state of music education in Western and Eastern countries, stating that the pedagogical approach to music is largely teacher-centered and reproductive. They found that professionals rarely teach about beat, rhythm, melody, and dynamics and have children

explore, improvise, and create music. Their findings are reminiscent of a Canadian study which found that all 108 participating centers reported engaging children in a variety of music activities (e.g., sound recognition, songs, creation, music appreciation), but that the practices varied in relation to the professionals' musical knowledge (Bolduc & Evrard, 2017). Practitioners with little musical knowledge tended to use activities related to perception, such as singing songs, while those with good and in-depth musical knowledge used additional activities to stimulate production and analysis. Furthermore, Bautista et al. (2024) hold that professionals tend to use music, mainly songs, in daily routines or as a mere classroom management tool to manage transitions and fill gaps (Barrett et al., 2022) or teach other areas of learning in more entertaining ways. A good example is the use of songs to teach vocabulary in children's first or a foreign language, mainly English (Liao & Campbell, 2016). These findings are in line with a study in the UK where Hamilton and Murphy (2024) examined the reasons for using songs through a survey and interviews. They found that ECEC teachers used songs frequently for classroom routines to engage children, build a sense of class community, and manage transitions, as well as teach content, especially in relation to language.

Purposes of songs in language education in ECEC

Theories of second language acquisition hold that children acquire language when they get comprehensible input and engage in meaningful and enjoyable activities (Cameron, 2001; Edelenbos et al., 2006). In ECEC, such communicative activities can be songs, given they capture children's attention and raise their excitement (Kumar et al., 2022), as well as motivate them to engage verbally and physically. That is, children learn words more easily and remember them better when they learn them with music, for example, when they sing, move to the rhythm of the song, and perform its actions (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012).

Several quantitative studies confirm that songs in ECEC in English as a foreign language (EFL) led to gains in listening skills (Lestary & Seriadi, 2019) and vocabulary (Davis, 2018; Pavia et al., 2019; Setiawan, 2019). For example, in Spain, Coyle and Gracia (2024) found that songs helped five-year-old preschool learners of English develop their receptive vocabulary. A study in Iran showed that songs also positively impacted children's productive vocabulary (Hassani & Hadizadeh, 2021). Songs may, however, not be the most effective method to develop incidental vocabulary. Albaladejo et al. (2018), who examined whether children aged 2–3 learned more English words when listening to stories, songs, or both, found that songs were the least effective method.

While many quantitative studies measured vocabulary gains through tests, other researchers investigated children's language and singing experiences in the naturalistic classroom environment. Researchers in Serbia and Hungary, respectively, indicated that preschool children learning English were able to reproduce small chunks of the lyric of songs and sing rhythmical lines of songs to themselves (Lugossy, 2018; Prošić-Santovac & Radović, 2018). There is also evidence that multilingual toddlers acquired new words while singing with the teachers in ECEC centers in Sweden (Kultti, 2013). In Luxembourg, three-year-olds appropriated songs and spontaneously reproduced them during free play. They demonstrated their language-based agency by transforming the morning routine songs through adding imaginative lyrics in their home

languages (Kirsch & Mortini, 2023). While many qualitative studies mention singing in ECEC in EFL classes (e.g., Lugossy, 2018; Prošić-Santovac & Radović, 2018), bilingual and multilingual settings (e.g., Gort & Sembianti, 2015; Kultti, 2013; Ruokonen et al. 2021) or monolingual classes with a multilingual practice (e.g., Young & Mary, 2016), few researchers examined the process of language learning through songs. A notable exception is a study in Finland where the researchers examined the involvement, emotions and social interactions of children aged one-to-three in 327 Finnish centers. Ruokonen et al. (2021) indicated that in settings where children experienced more music, children were happier, more adaptive, more involved and received more adult attention than in settings where music was less frequently used. It is noteworthy that this study examined children's engagement in musical activities in general, rather than in relation to language education and involved slightly younger children than in Luxembourg. A different study in music education provided insight into the importance of actions while singing. Albaladejo et al. (2018) found that children who were physically more engaged when singing, performed the songs less well than those who appeared quieter. Their findings were reminiscent of a study by Coyle and Gracia (2024) who showed that gestures, actions and onomatopoeias distracted children who eventually focused on the actions rather than on the language.

In sum, this review has pointed to the dearth of observational studies on children's involvement in naturalistic studies and revealed that few examined the purpose of songs in multilingual settings or the manners in which teachers scaffolded children's learning. Furthermore, it indicates a lack of systematic and structured approaches in ECEC on using singing to promote multilingualism and familiarization with languages and support children's interactions. Therefore, the following questions guided our study:

RQ1: In what ways, in what languages and for what purpose do the educators use songs?

RQ2: In what ways do children participate in singing activities?

Methodology

The data set for this qualitative study has derived from larger mixed-method research project *Collaboration with parents and multiliteracies in early childhood education* (COMPARE) which examined the development of multiliteracy and collaboration between parents and educators in daycare centers in Luxembourg. The project had been approved by the Ethics Review panel of the University of the University of Luxembourg. Following the work of Corti and Bishop (2005) on secondary analysis of qualitative data, the authors of the present study revisited the video-recordings, the thick descriptions, and the fieldnotes of all events observed over one academic year and selected those that included musical interactions in the daycare centers we called *Earth*, *Air* and *Water*. In the present paper, we include all three centers because one of the authors had previously analyzed the pedagogical practices and we stipulated that the existing differences may help us understand the functions of the songs, the languages use and children's participation during the musical activities.

Table 1. Participants.

Center	<i>Earth</i>	<i>Water</i>	<i>Air</i>
Location	Rural, East	Rural, West	Urban, center
Dominant language	Luxembourgish	Luxembourgish and German	French
Qualifications	Educators, pedagogues	Educators, pedagogues, social worker	Educators, pedagogues, teachers, social carers
Language background of the children	French, German, Icelandic, Luxembourgish, Portuguese, Swiss German	Arabic, French, German, Greek, Luxembourgish, Portuguese	English, French, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Romanian, Russian, Spanish

Participants

The managers as well as one educator of the three above-mentioned ECEC settings had participated in a short professional development training on multilingual literacy activities and collaboration with parents in May 2020, and, thereafter, volunteered their center to take part in the observational study that began in September 2020. To create a contrastive sample representative of the variety of centers in Luxembourg, the second author selected these three centers on account of their different locations (i.e., West, Centre, East), dominant languages (i.e., Luxembourgish, French, German) and prior experiences with either literacy (i.e., *Air* and *Water*) or collaboration (i.e., *Earth*) (Kirsch & Hornberger, 2024). In each center, they worked with children aged 2 to 4. While the language diversity of the children was high in all centers (see Table 1), the languages used differed based on the staff's language competencies. When communicating with children, many multilingual professionals in *Earth* and *Water* spoke Luxembourgish, German, French, English and some in addition Portuguese. By contrast, the French-speakers in *Air* rarely switched to languages other than French even when they knew them.

The pedagogical approach differed in each of the three centers. The practices of the rural Luxembourgish-dominant center *Earth* were underpinned by social constructivist learning theories and the educators intended to create an inclusive multilingual environment. In *Water*, located at the German border, the educators moved flexibly between Luxembourgish and German and valued children's perspectives like the educators in *Earth*, but, unlike them, they used a highly child-centered approach. *Air*, an urban French-dominant center, offered a highly structured environment which aimed to prepare children for school (Kirsch & Bergeron-Morin, 2023; Kirsch & Hornberger, 2024).

Apart from these structural and pedagogical differences, the three centers varied with respect to the number of children and staff organization. At the beginning of the data collection, *Earth* had only one group of children aged 2 to 4 while *Water* and *Air* cared daily for approximately 16 children, split into 1 or 2 groups depending on the educators. Table 1 provides an overview of the settings.

Data selection procedures and analysis

As part of the COMPARE project, three researchers observed and video-recorded literacy practices (e.g., shared reading, rhyming, singing) over a period of 72 days from September 2020 to July 2021 and carried out interviews. The main method consisted of video recordings because they enable detailed analysis of interactions (Heath et al., 2017). For the purposes of the current paper, the authors returned to the above-mentioned

observational data set and selected those that included singing activities. There were 99 events. Of these, they selected events in the video-recordings, fieldnotes and thick descriptions for further analysis based on the following criteria: 1) singing lasted more than fifteen seconds to allow for interactions and music-making episodes to unfold; 2) facial expressions, gestures, and bodily movements of a least two children were clearly observable; 3) fieldnotes mentioned the languages used and described children's and educators' actions, interactions, and comments during music-making.

This selection process resulted in a total of three hours and twelve minutes of video recordings along with fifty-two pages of field notes and thick descriptions. Most of the videos were described in the original languages and detailed information on gaze, posture, gesture, or mime, had been added. The data sets were then examined and classified according to the participants (e.g., educators sing with children, children sing on their own, parental involvement), the occasions (e.g., morning routine, free play, eating, walking), the use of devices or materials (e.g., tablet, props), and the languages used.

To investigate the purpose of the songs we explored: 1) the occasions (e.g., circle time, free play); 2) lyrics/content of the songs (e.g., traditional song, made up song); 3) languages used (e.g., institutional language, home language), and 4) indications relating to the choice of languages and text for learning (e.g., speaking about the language). Based on this information, we inferred whether the educators used the songs to structure the day, socialize, entertain, or familiarize with languages. As there were only a few occasions where children sang on their own and demonstrated that they had acquired a few words in a new language, we did not analyze language learning per se.

To explore children's participation during the singing activities in groups or in spontaneous acts, we focused on their actions and interactions with peers and adults during music-making. We examined children's expressions of affect (e.g. happy, cheerful, involved, or uninvolved), behaviors of socialization (i.e. making eye-contact with peers or adults, gestures to accompany the singing along with the group, repeating and/or expanding on the music activity), and body gestures. We identified different types of behavior depending on the situation (e.g., daily routine, spontaneous singing, guided activity). To ensure confidentiality in this article and in line with ethical considerations, we refrained at times from stating the participants' languages and changed the language backgrounds of two children.

Findings

Singing was a daily activity in all three settings, and we witnessed all educators using specific songs as part of their daily routines with the children. In the following sections, we present the purposes of the songs and the ways in which the children participated in the musical activities.

The purposes of the songs

We identified four purposes: structuring the day and helping understand routine activities, enhancing socialization, entertaining children, and valuing home languages. We will explain these in turn. Throughout the year, the educators in the three centers used songs to structure the day, announce the beginning of the day, nap time or breakfast, and help

children make meaning of these events and act appropriately. Some educators in the three settings used songs to remind children of what to do (e.g., the “how to dress song”). Only one center used songs to state what not to do. These educators created their own songs based on melodies children knew to ensure discipline. Children sang “I sit down and am quiet” or “I sit against the wall, 1, 2, 3, hand on my mouth.”

As part of the morning circle, all educators performed one or more songs. These songs eased children into the day and created a feeling of community, but they also had a socializing effect. While the actual songs and languages differed between the centers, the purpose was to greet the children individually and encourage them to sing along as a group and alone in response to an educator’s question. For example, in *Water*, Mr. Paul sang a German or French song translated as “Hello, hello . . . are you there?” for each child who was then supposed to answer “Yes, yes look I am here.” The educators in *Air* used two French songs to welcome children “Bonjour tout va bien” and “Comme les perles d’un collier” (Good morning, all is well” and “Like the pearls in a necklace”). A representative example follows.

Example 1. Circle time in the morning in Air

Ms. Fabienne sits on a chair in front of the children who sit on sofas. They sing the song “Bonjour tout va bien” and gesture to show they are all right (thumbs up), have hands and fingers (moving them), and have tired eyes (rubbing them) as every morning (rising sun). Ms. Fabienne sings a second time on her own before she starts “Comme les perles d’un collier.” As before, children make the relevant actions. The educator ends the song with the name of the child who has to come to the front and identify their name card.

Like the educators in other centers, those in *Earth* used songs (e.g., the song “Salibona” in Nbele) to greet children daily, but, in addition, they also welcomed parents in this way when they visited. For example, in October, two mothers visited to teach children a German and French song and in December, many came to read stories (Aleksić et al., 2024). Upon the arrival of an Icelandic parent, Ms. Dominique adapted the “Salibona” song by singing “a warm welcome” in Icelandic, an expression she had looked up. Socializing into routine acts also happened through rhymes. For example, children in *Water* were frequently observed reciting a short rhyme to wish their peers and the educators a “gudden Appetit” (a nice meal). Furthermore, educators in all three centers offered songs to familiarize children with traditions. Children learned typical Christmas songs, Easter songs or the traditional song to walk their lantern for Candlemass, one of the oldest Luxembourgish traditions. In line with their community values (Kirsch & Hornberger, 2024), the educators in *Earth* invited parents to the center for Easter to sing the songs the children had learned and perform some of the dances together.

A third purpose was entertainment. Educators often sang with children to keep children occupied while waiting. For example, the children in *Water* were observed singing “Wheels on the bus” in Luxembourgish while waiting for the bus at the bus stop. Furthermore, the children in *Water* and *Earth* but not in *Air*, were singing on their own and with educators while on walks (e.g., “un km à pied/one km by foot”). While the songs had an entertainment value, they may also have helped children bond and enjoy time together. We also observed educators, mainly in *Air*, educators trying to entertain children by having them listen to songs for up to twenty minutes. The main expectation appeared to be for the children to behave and stay quiet,

while the adults, at times, made use of this time to converse with a colleague. They mostly adhered to playlists of prerecorded music from the tablet which children listened to while sitting against the wall. A few times, the adults played popular children's songs in English, Italian, Spanish, and Romanian which corresponded to children's home languages.

Songs for the purpose of language education (learning Luxembourgish/French, familiarizing with French/Luxembourgish, valuing home languages) were performed in all centers, but with large differences. In all three centers, children performed topic-related songs which helped them remember and understand words. In *Water*, every morning, the educators asked children whether they wished to sing the morning song in Luxembourgish or French. The children tended to select Luxembourgish, and the educators respected this choice which meant that French was rarely used. To meet the multilingual education program's objective, some educators occasionally chose popular French songs such as "Dans mon pays d'Espagne" ("In my country Spain") and "Frère Jacques" ("Brother John"). The child-centered approach of the center as well as its status as an institution of non-formal education meant that the educators did not intend to formally "teach" children through songs and rarely engaged them in discussions about the content of the lyrics. Thus, they would not sing the same song in different languages and compare the sounds or words which happened at times in *Earth*. As for home languages, they asked children to bring in songs from home, let children choose songs they wished to sing, engaged in one-to-one interactions while singing, and sang in smaller groups. By contrast, the educators in *Air* mainly used French songs while also regularly singing in English. They followed a scheme to familiarize children with English (rather than Luxembourgish). On the few occasions they also chose songs in children's home languages, but they did not engage children in conversations about the songs, the lyrics, and the languages of the songs. At times, children mentioned that they knew the song and or its language, but the educators did not expand on the comments to raise awareness of languages or cultures. Finally, the educators in *Earth* planned their choice of songs in relation to themes (e.g., animals, times of the year) and languages. As a result, in spring, children sang long and complex songs, among others "I like the flowers" in English and "C'est le printemps" ("It is spring") in French. They sang mainly in Luxembourgish but also in French and in all of the children's home languages. To value all backgrounds, they asked some parents to record themselves singing "head, shoulders, knees and toes" with or without their child in their home language. The children frequently asked to listen to and sing the songs in Luxembourgish, French, German, Portuguese, Icelandic and Swiss German. In line with their child-based approach, the educators let children select songs in multiple languages, conversed with them about their preferences, and nurtured moments of spontaneous singing.

Children's participation during singing episodes

Children's participation largely depended on the pedagogical practices, that is, the opportunities offered by the educators to engage in singing or those created by the children themselves, and the ways the educators scaffolded learning on such occasions. In this section, we will first examine the ways in which children engage in routine activities, then outline some behaviors in spontaneous music episodes and, finally, show the role of the educators when tensions arise while singing multilingual songs.

As explained in the section on purposes, all children had ample opportunities to engage in the morning songs or recite rhymes which tended not to change during the year in any of

the centers. During these episodes, the educators typically sang the songs or recited the rhymes, and the children participated mainly by making relevant gestures and by uttering some of the lyrics of the songs. Although the same songs and rhymes were repeated throughout the year, we did not observe children growing in confidence and independence in their singing actions.

Children's behavior was very different when they spontaneously initiated singing with other adults and peers. Two episodes will make the case.

Example 2. Expanding a child's musical actions

Ms. Isabela (a native Portuguese-speaker) is cleaning the tables while children are singing "Wheels on the bus." Joyce taps her finger on a cupboard in the rhythm of the song, then points her finger toward the other children and spins around. Ms. Isabela asks her what the doors of the bus are doing, and the girl starts singing the corresponding part of the song. Her peers join in.

Ms. Isabela noticed Joyce's rhythmical play and asked a question related to the lyrics of "Wheels on the bus," which resulted in Joyce singing these lines. In this and the following example, the educator expanded on children's musical actions. She encouraged the child's engagement with the tasks at hand and promoted interactions in a joyful manner. During snack time, she listened to Irina sing the Luxembourgish Santa Claus song „Léiwe Kleeschen“ which she had earlier sung with the group. Three-year-old Janina started humming the English song "Baby shark" and made the actions with her hand. Their peer Luisa disagreed with both choices. The girls performed the actions of their songs, looked at each other vividly, and pointed to share their music preferences. Luisa uttered a few words in Luxembourgish and Portuguese. Ms. Isabela acknowledged the children's singing and verbal interactions and let the experience unfold as shown next.

Example 3. A child-initiated song contest

Janina stops singing but then begins again to hum "Baby Shark" and makes the movements. Ms. Isabela laughs and engages with her in the song. Luisa protests again and says "Kee Shar" (no shark). Ms. Isabela asks her in Portuguese what she wishes to sing, confirms the choice, mentioning that they will sing that song later. Irina meanwhile continues to sing "Léiwe Kleeschen" while Janina and the educator keep singing "Baby shark." Luisa repeats "no shark" to Janina and suggests "gudde Kleeschen" instead, demonstrating that she remembers a few words of the song.

On this occasion, the children-initiated singing based on their preferences. Although Janina was only able to utter a few words of the English song, she happily made the movements and confidently hummed the melody. She appeared to sing to keep herself entertained during snack time. When the peers and Ms. Isabela reacted to her song, she turned her body toward them and continued singing louder with beaming eyes when they finished the last verse. Ms. Isabela actively participated in the music episode by redirecting children's attention as needed. As a result, this spontaneous and child-initiated singing created the context for musical interactions between an adult and children and brief verbal exchanges among children who voiced their preferences and made their voices heard.

The final example from *Earth* shows how singing changes when adults scaffold the interaction and intentionally support children's participation. In October 2020, children were frequently observed spontaneously performing the song "Head, shoulders, knees and toes." They sang in one language and pointed to a peer, suggesting "now in your language."

Sometimes the educators joined in. On one occasions, Ms. Dominique and Ms. Daria used a tablet to listen to Niklas' father singing the song in Icelandic. A group of six children watched the recording while Niklas was singing and gesturing along. Ms. Dominique then invited the children to get up, try and sing along, and make the movements. Tensions arose because one boy did not wish to sing in Niklas' home language. The following conversation, translated from Luxembourgish, took place.

Example 4. Tensions around languages in "Head, shoulders, knees and toes"

Ygor: I can't do it.

Ms. Dominique: Well, I can't do it either and that's why we learn it. When one cannot do something, one can learn it.

Ms. Daria: Niklas will show us.

Niklas: {singing the song}

Ms. Dominique: You sang it on your own for us, well done! We will learn it so that we can sing with you. It is nice when we can sing together.

Ygor{singing}: Head, shoulder

At first, Ygor did not wish to participate as he did not know the lyrics in Icelandic. He demonstrated his disinclination by remaining seated while his peers got up, listened to Niklas and engaged in the actions. Ms. Dominique allowed him although she had made it clear that she wished the group, herself included, to learn the song so that they could perform it together. She then praised Niklas for singing in front of the peers. Ygor got up and started to sing the song in Luxembourgish. Ms. Dominique and the whole group responded by singing along. They sang the song in a few more times in Portuguese, French and German, and, on the children's request, to sing faster twice more.

This example shows, firstly, that children's input and their musical and verbal actions (shared excitement, eye-contact with each, initiation of songs, singing in different languages) can offer language learning opportunities. Secondly, it also testifies to the tensions that can arise during multilingual activities and the need for good pedagogical skills to navigate complex multilingual spaces. The educators acknowledged and respected children's preferences expressed in words, acts and emotions, while inviting everyone to participate and pointing out the effect of the community. In this process, all participants co-constructed meaning and could benefit from the multilingual activity.

Discussion

In this section, we discuss our findings in relation to the purposes, the educators' pedagogical practices, and intercultural competences. Firstly, our findings showed four main uses of singing in the centers, which relate to structuring the day and daily routine activities, enhancing socialization and entertaining children, and valuing home languages. Children in all centers had opportunities to listen to or sing songs in different languages. These findings are in line with other studies indicating that songs are used in daily routines both in monolingual and multilingual settings (e.g. Barrett et al., 2022; Ruokonen et al., 2021;

Kultti, 2013; Lugossy, 2018) to manage transitions, provide entertainment or fill gaps as well as teach language (Hamilton & Murphy, 2024). In this way, the results resonate with broader benefits of music in children's socio-emotional and cognitive development (Bautista et al., 2024; Dumont et al., 2027). Nonetheless, our findings presented large differences in relation to the use of songs and the opportunities offered to children to gain familiarity and use languages, depending on the center. In groups with more spontaneous and interactive singing, such as the activities at *Water* and *Earth*, children were observed to be content, take initiatives, and sing in one or more languages. Educators who responded to and expanded on children's singing created more opportunities for children to socialize and familiarize with various languages (examples 1 & 2), similar to the findings of previous studies (Kultti, 2013; Prošić-Santovac & Radović, 2018). The children also appeared to be more involved, similarly to those in the study of Ruokonen et al. (2021). Nevertheless, overall, limited comments and adult-child interactions during singing (example 1), led to missed opportunities for enriching children's language learning environment, supporting the use of multiple languages in the centers and contributing to learning the songs. The same songs routinely appeared in the morning circles and children tended to have little input. While they muttered some words, they participated mainly non-verbally by making gestures. We noticed a lack of progress over the period of the year and wondered to what extent this could be related to both a lack of more stimulation from the educators and children's focus on gestures and actions rather than singing. While gestures help children make connections and remember words, it has also been shown that they may distract from learning (Albaladejo et al. 2018; Coyle & Gracia, 2024).

Thirdly, our results show that songs can be used to value home languages and raise language awareness but that this is not an automatic process. The song "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" promoted children's awareness of multiple languages and interest in languages. Aligned with their social-constructivist approach, the educators treated all languages equally and encouraged participation (Kirsch & Bergeron-Morin, 2023). Adopting a "translanguaging stance," they respected and leveraged children's languages and involved the parents to have recordings in all home languages. They planned for resources and opportunities that allowed children to meaningfully and collaboratively connect their home and school languages. However, not all children enthusiastically embraced this activity: a Luxembourgish-native child initially resisted participation but eventually joined in, thanks to the educators' skillful approach. Thus, songs in multiple languages are not a straightforward solution for fostering multilingualism. For such activities to be effective, professionals need intercultural competences. According to Pastori et al. (2018), intercultural competences include the following interconnected components: knowledge (e.g., self-awareness, language awareness), values (e.g., diversity and inclusion), attitudes (e.g., respect, tolerance for ambiguity), skills, and actions. In our example, the educators demonstrated all these competences, skills and behaviors. They observed that the three-year-old child was aware of both his own and his peers' home languages and voiced, showed and enacted preferences. To address tensions and help the young boy overcome his negative or ethnocentric attitudes, the educators gave him time, appealed to his sense of community and willingness to learn, and encouraged his participation, thus fostering collective well-being within the group.

Finally, our findings are in line with a body of knowledge on the potential of using singing as the framework to support children's interactions and shape communication in

their social environment (i.e. Custodero, 2012; Franco et al., 2022). Singing can create a meaningful learning context for young multilingual children, provided that adults are responsive to children's actions and reactions and use songs to assign meaning and continuity to children's use of languages. Whether or not this was the case in our study depended on the educators' pedagogy, specifically whether they were attuned to children's requests, offered verbal and non-verbal guidance (gestures to accompany song), sang along, or orchestrated children's performances. For example, educators in *Earth*, a center underpinned by socio-constructivist approaches, were often observed to actively respond to children's actions. Whether these educators sang or read stories in multiple languages, they always aimed to create an inclusive environment and guide children's participation in meaningful activities (Kirsch & Hornberger, 2024). Across the three centers, children's participation appeared to depend on the educators' pedagogical approaches, the manager's experience and the educators' translanguaging stance. The manager of *Earth* was the most experienced and the educators in *Earth* and *Water* were the most interested in drawing on children's linguistic and cultural resources.

Conclusion

The present study contributes to a growing body of research on singing activities in early childhood multilingual settings and its potential benefits for children's familiarization with various languages. Further, it sheds light on the importance of educators' pedagogical practices for children's engagement and learning.

Our findings have implications for policymakers and professionals. Currently, the national framework in Luxembourg (MENJE, 2021) includes only brief guidelines on music, with songs mentioned just once in relation to languages. It may, therefore, not be surprising that while the educators in the observed settings regularly sang with the children, among other reasons, to honor their home languages, there remained room for making connections between singing activities and familiarization with languages. Furthermore, more conversations about languages and the children's cultures, and their own experiences and life stories would be beneficial for children and for that to happen, more specific guidance in relation to the role of the educator during the musical activities and the purposeful choice of songs would be helpful.

Curricula are, however, insufficient on their own. To maximize the potential benefits of songs, pedagogical frameworks of music-infused educational strategies along with music-based resources need to be made available to ECEC educators (Barrett et al., 2019; Raynold & Burton, 2017), for example through initial training as well as professional development training on the use of songs and music activities (Bautista et al., 2024; Bolduc & Evrard, 2017). Training should also assist educators in designing learning environments based on social-constructivism and in deepening their understanding of the ways in which songs can develop multilingual competence and language awareness. For example, the repetitive and rhythmic nature of songs helps children acquire vocabulary and grammatical structures, raises their phonological awareness, and enhances comprehension (Pino et al., 2023; Vaiouli & Ogle, 2015). Within this context, the training encourages the educators to reflect on singing as a context-specific process, an opportunity to integrate performance aspects, observation, listening, and responding abilities. Such training could, in

addition, expand the professionals' knowledge of linguistic and culturally responsive pedagogies and develop intercultural competence needed to cope with the growing linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic diversity among the children in the classroom (Romijn et al., 2021).

Despite the promising findings, this study is not without its limitations. As the study draws on the activities of a mere three centers, the findings are not generalizable. They are, however, robust as the data were collected over one academic year and discussed with all team members. In addition, given that this study was part of a larger project on children's literacies, the researchers did not film all music episodes and, therefore, may have missed opportunities for analyzing the children's non-verbal reactions at a micro-level. Such information would have provided valuable insights into children's interactions and further examples of adult scaffolding and the function of songs in the setting.

Future studies could analyze the effect of songs and musical play on children's multilingual competence and language awareness in multilingual early childhood settings. Furthermore, scholars could focus on children's non-verbal and verbal actions during singing episodes and examine the impact of professional development training on music-infused pedagogy. Methodologically, scholars could opt for larger samples, longitudinal studies, and combining qualitative and quantitative components. We also advocate for the use of focus groups and concept maps as they will allow for a deeper understanding of the educators' practices and beliefs in relation to the use of songs and their professional development needs.

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