

Spatial Perspectives on Adopting and Developing the Two-Way Immersion Program in Estonia's Kindergartens: Resources & Risks

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Introduction

Ethnic and racial segregation is a common challenge around the world, and resistance to school integration is all too familiar. Exceptions to these patterns thus merit special attention, particularly in contexts where communities have maintained high degrees of separation for generations. In Estonia, where the dominant Russian-speaking minority throughout the Soviet period seldom learned the language, (re)independence in 1991 reversed the ethnic power structure and left most Russian residents with little to no competency in the sole official language of Estonian. A new national initiative in Estonia to develop and support voluntary dual-language education (DLE), rolled out in the 2015–2016 academic year, showcases the ways schools, even at the pre-primary level, can be reimagined as spaces that intentionally bring together divided populations. These efforts allowed four local governments – two in 2015–2016 and two additional ones in 2016–2017 – to restructure and fund public pre-primary education to create DLE, also called Estonian-Russian two-way immersion (TWI) kindergarten classes for children aged 3–6. It is clear that TWI offers unique integrative potential by putting both languages spoken in children's homes on an equal footing in the service of full bilingualism and social cohesion (Alanís & Rodríguez, 2008; de Jong & Howard, 2009; Ortiz & Fránquiz, 2016). But, we still know very little about how certain groups and communities come to propose it, adopt it, and promote it. Its potential for broader adoption is not rooted as much in the proven effectiveness of its methods, but in policy landscapes that make settings conducive or unreceptive, to adopting TWI. Ethnographic research

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can illuminate the ways key policy actors – government officials, kindergarten directors, and teachers – undertake TWI in Estonia, and shed light on the general policy conditions and societal circumstances that allow it to flourish.

In this article, I examine the engagement and transformation of space, which I understand from a critical constructivist perspective as something socially constituted through cultural practices (Massey, 1995) at the international, state, city, school, and class levels. I engage in this research in an effort to advance the growing understanding of space both as a socio-cultural process of schooling and as a key aspect of language policy. I focus on how kindergarten space transforms during the development and the take-up of the dual-language immersion approach. I sought through my research to answer the following questions: In what way does space play a role in dual-language program development? How do key policy actors identify and address potential resources and risks in their appropriation of the TWI program?

Despite the tremendous linguistic and social gains made through immersion programs (Lindholm-Leary, 2012) and the promise of this approach as it spreads across education levels (Marian, Shook, & Schroeder, 2013), we only are just beginning to understand why parents choose this option for their children (Bekerman, 2016; Garena, 2011; Lopéz, 2013; Parkes, 2008; Whiting & Feinauer, 2011) and why administrators (Armendáriz & Armendáriz, 2002; Menken & Solorza, 2015) and teachers (Lee & Jeong, 2013) opt into dual-language immersion. We also lack research on the diverse ways different socio-economic and political histories shape the form, functioning, and appeal of two-way immersion across various national contexts. Current TWI research focuses disproportionately on the United States (Potowski, 2007; Whiting & Feinauer, 2011) and Israel (Bekerman, 2016; Hertz-Lazarowitz et al., 2008) (see also exceptional cases in Europe, Budach, 2009; Tankersley, 2001). An examination of TWI in Estonia expands our appreciation of the endurance and transformation of the “post-Soviet space,” particularly the legacy of separating learning tracks by the medium of instruction, common to all the former Soviet Union republics, and attempts to transform this model. Finally, although dual-language education has begun to spread to the pre-primary level around the world (Milcev, 2013; Schwartz & Palviainen, 2016), the bulk of TWI-related research concerns the primary and secondary levels (Bearse & de Jong, 2008; de Jong & Bearse, 2014; Wiese, 2004). A greater understanding of TWI at this earliest level of schooling will deepen our appreciation of institutional possibilities and challenges of expansion.

Concepts of space, resource & risk

Three concepts serve as central pillars in this study: space, resource, and risk. I understand space to be socially constituted through cultural practices (Massey, 1995; Cook & Hemming, 2011) where relationships define its significance (Horton and Kraftl, 2014). In line with the geographer and urban theorist Edward Soja, I find that “social relations are intertwined with space across time... [and] that space is socially constructed and therefore more than a background, it is essential to any understanding of human society” (Queirós, 2016, p. 159). Burke (2011, p. 418), as quoted by Hope and Montgomery (2016, p. 307), points particularly to school-based relationships and the intentionality of the school space in reflecting on the power of relationships: “the planning of schools... always reflects the ways that relationships in education are envisaged: relationships between adults and children, children and their peers, areas of knowledge, and between the school and the community.” The temporal aspect of space is another one of its key dimensions. Kwan (2013) argues for the greater attention to spatiotemporal experiences that incorporate “various facets of time as integral elements” alongside with spatial concepts to gain greater insights (p. 1079). Importantly, the construction of space over time has implications and consequences for advancing, or stalling, efforts to promote equity through schooling. Vavrus (2016) argues that “over time, the social production of space in both its material and symbolic dimensions contributes to the sedimentation of inequality through the uneven distribution of schools and other socio-economic resources...” (p. 137).

The concepts of resource and risk also undergird this research. Ruiz's (1984) notion of “language as a resource” informs my conceptualization of “resource.” While I broaden my scope of resources beyond languages to include architecture and school organization, Ruiz's work aptly focuses on the twin aspects of resource development and conservation (1984, p. 26), which likewise suits an analysis and understanding of the development of TWI. The orientation highlights the development of resources to address existing deficiencies as well as the necessary conservation of existing resources as “reservoirs of existing skills” (1984, p. 26; for more on the “language as resource” concept see Berezkina et al. 2021). My use of “risk” in this article draws on Gadsden, Davis, and Artiles' (2009) conceptualization of “ideas of risk as places where expected trajectories are interrupted and new ones developed” (p. ix). The attention to the disrupting forces of anticipated pathways points to the necessity of working in the context of uncertainty, when considering policy adoption.

Background

In Estonia, a small northern European country with a significant (~30%) Russian-speaking population, questions concerning the integrative potential of schools – at all levels – are paramount.² Estonian and Russian speakers live in largely separate and segregated worlds. Many Russian speakers (58%, Tõnurist, 2015) do not speak Estonian and have low rates of intermarriage with ethnic Estonians (Lember, 2016). Among ethnic Estonians, only half self-identify as active speakers of Russian (Kultuuriministeerium, 2015). Public schools have contributed to this separation that took root during the Soviet occupation of Estonia (1940–1991). A well-established and popular system of parallel Estonian- and Russian-medium education from the pre-primary through the secondary levels leaves the majority of the younger generation learning in separate schools. The historically and currently uneven distribution of resources, particularly qualified Estonian-language teachers, further distances these populations through schooling.

Since the country's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the Estonian government has grappled with ways to integrate Russian speakers into Estonian society. Various strategies have articulated and guided government policy,³ with Integrating Estonia 2030 being the most current. The foundation of the Estonian state's integration strategy is to increase the Russian-speaking population's fluency in Estonian (Soll et al. 2015). These efforts focused first on improving Estonian-language instruction in Russian-medium public secondary schools (grades 10–12), where 60% of the curriculum must be taught in Estonian, and then on basic schools (grades 1–9) (Masso & Soll, 2014). At the pre-primary level, the state guarantees Estonian instruction (in some form) from age three on in kindergartens using languages other than Estonian for instruction. With Estonian-language ability framed as a “human right” for Russian speakers (Speek, 2015) and the enduring governmental concern about improving the younger generation's sense of belonging, the state continues to concentrate on schools as the primary institution to promote integration and Estonian-language learning.

² According to 2016 estimates, 29.6% of the population speaks Russian as a mother tongue. This figure includes the majority of ethnic Russians in Estonia as well some percentages of other ethnic groups, including primarily Belarussians and Ukrainians (Wikipedia, n.d.). Given the ethnic diversity of Russian speakers, in this article, I use the term “Russian speakers” rather than “Russians”. It is also worth noting that in 2020 more than 200 different ethnic groups living in Estonia are likely to speak just as many languages (Eesti statistika, 2020).

³ These strategies include the state program “Integration in Estonian Society 2000–2007,” the Estonian Integration Strategy (2008–2013), and the Strategy of Integration and Social Cohesion in Estonia “Lõimuv Eesti 2020” (2014–2020).

In addition to promoting (and improving) Estonian as a second language instruction at all levels, efforts began in 1998, with cooperation from Canadian and Finnish experts and universities, to develop voluntary Estonian (one-way) immersion programs in Russian-medium schools. Various organizations, including the Integration Foundation (Mitte-eestlaste Integratsiooni Sihtasutus, 1998–2008), Our People Integration and Migration Foundation (Integratsiooni ja Migratsiooni Sihtasutus Meie Inimesed, 2009–2012), the Foundation Innove (from 2013–2020), and the Education and Youth Authority (2020–current), have coordinated these efforts through a range of connections with the Estonian government – from financial support to direct supervision under the Ministry of Education and Research. From the initial opening of a complete early immersion⁴ (*varane täielik keelekümblus*) program in 2000 in four basic (Russian-medium) schools to the subsequent launch of early immersion kindergartens in 2002 and late immersion (*hiline keelekümblus*) school-based programs in 2007, this initiative has expanded to 35 schools and 70 kindergartens by 2021 (Hardius-ja Noorteamet, 2021).

In continued response to the state emphasis on integration through schooling, two-way immersion instruction began in 2015 for pre-primary institutions in Estonia. Efforts to develop this program emerged already in 2013 with Innove's call to local governments to adopt a TWI program. Five regional authorities – Kunda, Pärnu, Tallinn, Tapa, and Tartu – responded with one kindergarten of interest in each city, save Tapa, which had two. Of the original six kindergartens interested in TWI, four opened TWI classes in waves of two with Tartu and Pärnu (in 2015) and Tallinn and Tapa, though in the latter only in one kindergarten (in 2016). The goals of this initiative are multifold: to increase both populations' language skills in Estonian and Russian, to offer ethnic Estonians the possibility to learn another language at a young age (already a possibility for the Russians), and to enhance integration (Jairus, 2016). In practice, TWI offers yet another choice for organizing kindergarten with an intentionally linguistically mixed class (i.e., half home Russian-speaking and half home Estonian-speaking). These two-way immersion classes follow a “50–50” model, with half the day taught in Russian and the other half in Estonian. Teachers commit to a “one teacher-one language” approach of consistently using only one language with the students.

⁴ Complete early immersion begins by the second half of the second grade in a Russian-medium class. The amount of instruction increases each year so that by sixth grade, about 40% of the curriculum is taught in Estonian. By the end of Basic School (i.e., ninth grade), 60% of the curriculum is taught in Estonian.

A particular institutional space: Kindergarten

Cook and Hemming (2011) argue that “education spaces cannot be considered in isolation from other social processes operating at a variety of social scales” (p. 2). In the case of Estonia, while the early years of kindergarten development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century influenced pedagogy,⁵ the Soviet occupation of Estonia in 1940–1991 and the period following the regaining of independence in 1991 up to the present, have shaped kindergarten space through major social and political processes. While historic overviews exist of the developments in both these eras (Ugaste & Õun, n.d.; Kõöp, 2013), what is most important to highlight are the dynamics and developments in the Soviet period that continue to influence kindergartens today. These include the massive growth of the pre-primary network across the country and the considerable Soviet influence on the organization and format of kindergartens (Ugaste & Õun, n.d.). Significant demographic shifts in Estonia, particularly the spike in the Russian-speaking population and the rise of work collectives, transformed the formation and composition of neighborhoods. Many kindergartens, including the majority of those in this TWI study, were founded to serve the families of kolkhoz workers. This labor connection linked the kindergarten to a particular location in the urban area for ease of service to these workers. Of additional enduring importance was the organization of kindergartens during the Soviet era with different medium-of-instruction classes and a range of service ages in one building. Kindergartens were founded as either a completely Estonian-medium, a Russian-medium, or a mix of these distinct groups in one building with a certain number of crèches (*sõim*) for children up to three years old and kindergartens (*lasteaed*) serving 3–6-year old.

Estonian re-independence in 1991 brought demographic shifts, including declines and spikes in enrollment, local governance, and attention to changing language requirements and needs. All of these factors have deeply influenced the space of kindergartens. Before turning to these factors, it is important to note that the reach of pre-primary schooling is extensive in Estonia, with close to 94% of children from age four until six attending kindergarten in 2021) Kangur, 2021). First, as the population changed in Estonia, so did kindergarten

⁵ Kindergarten development in Estonia has followed a gradual arc of expansion and the ever-increasing role of local government. From the first private kindergarten, which opened in Tallinn in 1840, and the then primary role of religious and charitable organizations in the gradual expansion of the kindergarten network to the increased number, especially in urban areas, of kindergartens and expanded role (and responsibility) of the local government (in 1937–1938 local authorities owned close to 25% of all kindergartens) in their ownership and administration in the pre-WWII era, the network of kindergartens remained modest and unevenly spread across the country (Torm, 2009).

enrollments in terms of demographics and the number of children. Kindergartens have responded to these periodic contractions and expansions by shifting the number of crèche and kindergarten groups as well as the number of Russian- and Estonian-medium groups. Some Russian-medium kindergartens have transformed into institutions offering Russian- and Estonian-medium instruction, while the reverse is true of some Estonian-medium kindergartens as well. Therefore, the dynamism of the language environment is part of the recent history of this level of schooling in Estonia.

Second, and related to this language environment, are the set of language laws and a rise in popular expectations about the role of language instruction at the pre-primary level. In contrast to the multilingualism encouraged and fostered through primary and secondary schooling in Estonia, kindergartens, since their founding, have had a single-language focus at the class level. A notable and dynamic shift to introduce more languages at the pre-primary level has begun in the re-independence period, especially in the twenty-first century, due to popular demand and governmental laws. The Estonian national government has contributed to this multilingualism by requiring Estonian to be taught to children from the age of three in Russian-medium kindergarten classes. The government has further facilitated multilingualism through its financial support for developing and implementing a kindergarten-level immersion program to introduce complete Estonian instruction in varying percentages to Russian speakers. Several political parties in the twenty-first century have called to unify Russian- and Estonian-medium classes, and the former President of Estonia, Kersti Kaljulaid, observed that “It is an immense waste of a child’s time and resources that we do not teach them another language in kindergarten” (N.A., 2017).

Popular demand for increased language offerings at the pre-primary level and access to high-quality Estonian-language instruction have also transformed kindergartens. Polls reveal that Russian speakers (or “speakers of languages other than Estonian” [*eesti keelest erineva emakeelega inimesed*]) have taken up these government-initiated opportunities as well as the standing option to enroll their children in Estonian-medium schools (Verschik, 2005, p. 296) and kindergartens have shifted away from Russian-medium instruction. During the academic years from 2010/2011 to 2015/2016, the percentage of “children with a mother-tongue other than Estonian,” a group dominated by Russian speakers, increased in Estonian-medium kindergartens from 14% to 19%, increased in immersion (not including dual immersion, which began in September 2016) from 13% to 24%, and decreased in Russian-medium instruction from 73% to 57% (Selliöv, 2016, p. 5)

The introduction of TWI in Estonia's kindergartens requires reorganizing pedagogical space within this dynamic multilingual environment. The opening and maintaining of the TWI kindergartens depend ideally on the equally split enrollment of home-speaking Russian- and Estonian-language children (i.e., 50% from Russian-speaking and 50% from Estonian-speaking homes).⁶ The TWI class must also ideally be large enough to meet an agreeable threshold established by the municipality.⁷ In addition, the two core kindergarten teachers, who must be fully bilingual – with one working as the Russian teacher and the other as the Estonian teacher, are recruited from *within* the kindergarten and must be willing to work together. An Estonian-Russian bilingual assistant teacher also serves as a key member of the classroom team. Additional key TWI personnel include Estonian-Russian bilingual music and sports teachers. Logistically, a classroom must be selected and recreated as a TWI space.

Theoretical Frameworks, Design & Methods

My work and analysis rely on actor-network theory (ANT), which is attentive to the ways “assemblages of actors” move, expand, enable, and block educational practices (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2014, p. 133). The focus on actors and networks, as Larsen and Beech (2014) note, “shifts our thinking away from the notion of space as a container, to conceptualizing the movements, flows, and networks that are constituted across territorial entities” (p. 204). Dynamism – in which “networks produce and shape space” – is a central element of ANT (Beech and Artopoulos, 2016, p. 261). Notably, ANT allows for an analysis that is attentive to the processes informing change across and within sites.

In this article, I share findings from an ongoing multi-sited ethnographic project that began in June 2015 and was paused after December 2019 due to the pandemic. I conducted research in four cities – Pärnu (May 2016 & June 2017), Tapa (June 2017), Tallinn (May 2016 & June 2017), and Tartu (June 2015, May 2016 & June 2017) – with an additional 2–3 visits to each of these sites from January to May 2018. With the staggered start date of the TWI program – Pärnu and Tartu in 2015; and Tallinn and Tapa in 2016, I was able to observe programs at different stages of implementation and adoption. At each of the

⁶ The multilingual and/or diverse linguistic background of some students (i.e., coming from homes where both languages were spoken or a language other than predominantly Estonian or Russian was used) complicated this 50-50 split. This issue only occurred, however, in a handful of cases across the four kindergartens.

⁷ Several kindergarten directors mentioned that the municipal governments have allowed the minimum enrollment for the TWI to be lower than for other non-TWI sections in order for the program to be introduced and take hold.

sites, I conducted semi-structured interviews (n=28) with administrators, especially the kindergarten director (n=4) and curriculum coordinator (n=4), and teachers (n=7) (both the Russian-language and the Estonian-language educators and the classroom assistant in all but one site). I typically conducted teacher interviews ranging from an hour to an hour and a half, during naptime on days when I conducted participant observation in the kindergarten. Administrator interviews ranged from 45 to 75 minutes. All of the interviewees were women. I also interviewed the leader(s) of the Innove kindergarten dual immersion program three times between 2016–2019. I conducted all interviews in Estonian with common interview protocols, which I developed. Interviews were recorded and then erased after transcription.

In addition to these interviews, participant observation was a key research method. I observed and took field notes for a total of two weeks of classes at two sites and attended assemblies and class parties (e.g., Mother's Day and End-of-the-Year). At other sites my visits lasted from three to six days. This research length in each kindergarten allowed me to observe both typical days as well as days with special events (or celebrations). At all sites, I arranged these visits with the assistance of the kindergarten director. In the course of my observations, I was attentive to administrators', teachers', and students' language choices as they engaged with each other and with parents. In each site, I looked to detail, at minimum (1) language choices (across all participants) in the immersion classroom, co-curricular classes (e.g., music, sport), and (common) kindergarten spaces, and (2) the ways teachers linked language with school-day routines (e.g., morning welcome, circle time, lunch, naptime, activity transitions). In addition to these kindergarten sites, I also conducted participant observation at one dual immersion teacher training (2018) and one peer-to-peer (i.e., within the dual-language immersion kindergarten network) kindergarten visit (2018). Each day I drafted research memos from the field notes. At each site, I photographed signs and places in the kindergartens that both informants pointed out to me and that I noted as pertaining to language use (total number of photographs = 184; three of these photos are included in this article). By 2019, I had taken between 40–60 photographs of the material environment in each dual-immersion kindergarten. Finally, in each of the cities, I used the local archives and historical collections housed at the city (and county) libraries and kindergartens (or individual classes) to investigate the development of the pre-kindergarten – 12th-grade network, the history of the community, and local political and social forces leading to the support for TWI. In addition, in December 2019, I conducted archival research at the Estonian Pedagogical Archive and Museum (Tallinn), centered on the history of kindergarten/pre-primary development in Estonia.

Throughout my field research, I coded data (i.e., interview transcriptions, my field notes, archival documents, and photographs) through two cycles (i.e., First and Second Cycle, Saldaña, 2015) for patterns (i.e., similarities, frequencies, differences, etc.) both during and after my data collection. In my analysis of the four TWI sites, I was attentive to patterns that arose in the data. I then grouped salient codes from the data, including, for example, “pedagogical confidence,” “adherence to the national curriculum,” “parental choice,” “practitioner network,” and “distinctive classroom,” into categories – cooperation, connection, continuity, competition, inclusiveness, and distinctiveness. An important theme emerged from these categories – they appeared to align with different spatial levels (e.g., international, national, city, school, and classroom). To enhance validity, I conducted ongoing member checks with at least two participants in each kindergarten (e.g., typically one teacher and one administrator, but sometimes two teachers) and with the state-level dual-immersion coordinator about my emerging understandings and tentative conclusions. My prolonged engagement in the field likewise contributed to an enhanced level of understanding and served as a validity technique (Rose & Johnson, 2020, p. 444). For this article, I selected key excerpts from the interview, participant-observation, photograph, and primary document (e.g., school and archival) sources. I use pseudonyms for interview participants’ quotes and observation data from kindergarten sites, including photographs, but maintain the actual kindergarten names in the background and context sections.

Findings

Space at the international- and national-level: Cooperation & connection

The voluntary adoption of the TWI program involves the in situ exposure of key personnel from the candidate kindergarten (i.e., teachers and director) with successful models of immersion and dual immersion. Site visits, and additional professional development sessions, facilitate skill-building and cultivate a sense of professionalism and confidence. In my project, the network of model sharing occurred on the international and state levels facilitating the propagation of a common “one-teacher, one-language” approach to immersion. On the international level, Innove has developed a significant relationship with the University of Minnesota’s Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA), particularly with CARLA faculty Drs. Diane Tedick and Tara Fortune, who were involved in both Estonia and U.S. visits. Beginning in 2015, Tedick and Fortune have been consulted regarding the development of dual-immersion

programs in Estonia, and at the CARLA annual international conference on Immersion and Dual Language Education, they presented *Connecting Research and Practice Across Context* about the TWI program in Estonia.

A professional-development trip to Minnesota played a central role in this trans-Atlantic cooperation. In March 2015, the spring before the first kindergartens planned to open their dual immersion programs, Innove organized⁸ a professional-development trip for 11 “pilot team” kindergarten teachers to visit the University of Minnesota and three two-way immersion schools in the Minneapolis area (Aab, 2015). One teacher in my project explained that while the context of Minnesota differs from Estonia, she found this U.S. trip important for modeling. In visiting the dual immersion programs, they “could already begin to imagine how this [dual immersion] might look in our kindergarten.” Likewise, a Sunshine Kindergarten teacher shared the value of the trip for bolstering her confidence in the pedagogical approach. The exposure to models abroad was “important to see and experience it as something that worked.” At the teacher training I observed in autumn 2018, Tedick and Fortune returned to provide to the teachers involved in the dual-language kindergartens (as well as a couple of teachers from a dual-immersion school) in-person sessions about current research on dual-language immersion. During a feedback discussion on the first day of this session, one seasoned dual-immersion teacher noted to the group that “professional development like this helps to remind me that we are not alone in our efforts. Sometimes it feels this way within my kindergarten. Instead, I am reminded here that we are part of a larger community – both in Estonia and the world – of teachers committed to learning and improving our practice.” This comment highlights the crucial role played by these training events both to provide pedagogical solidarity and enhance professional confidence.

Site visits within Estonia to the one-way immersion programs and the two-way immersion kindergarten classes strengthened the cross-Estonia network of educators and directors interested and invested in TWI. The relationships established during these international and national training sessions generated a vital link to share ideas and experiences as programs began and grew. As the Pärnu kindergarten director noted, “We developed a close relationship with the Tapa kindergarten and will be closely cooperating with them in the future for training.” The staggered start of the dual immersion programs has allowed for the established programs to provide a model and share experiences with aspiring kindergartens across Estonia. This cooperation and showcasing

⁸ The Estonian Education and Science Ministry and the U.S. Embassy funded this professional development trip.

extend internationally as well, into the post-Soviet area, with the Estonian dual-immersion programs serving as a model for visiting delegations from other former Soviet Republics from Central Asia and the Caucasus region. When I inquired about these countries' interest in learning from Estonia's kindergartens, the InnoVe Director explained that the states' shared Soviet-era experience of divided educational systems (by the language of instruction) resulted in common systemic struggles and a search for reforms. Additionally, the linguistic connection across the countries, through Russian, facilitated a language to discuss pedagogical developments and possibilities.

Space at the city level: Competition, change & continuity

The geography of parental choice shapes competition at the city level and impacts the continuity of TWI options in Estonia. The contemporary, choice-enabled mobility of parents contrasts with the site-static aspect of kindergartens. With pre-primary catchment areas extending to the city borders, the kindergarten directors reported that the location of the kindergarten plays a significant role in parental decision-making along with factors including available space and special programming. The directors and teachers involved in my research voiced keen awareness that the non-bounded, open choice design of kindergarten selection within their cities and their kindergarten's competition with others in the city for students creates a fragility and risk in these early years of programmatic adoption and implementation of TWI. On the one hand, as a unique initiative and possibility, the TWI class serves to attract, or pull, families to the school from across the city. Ene, one of the kindergarten directors, noted, "While parents can already choose immersion here [in this city], we have the only dual-immersion group. We hope that this will attract families to our kindergarten." Director Mari elaborated on the work involved in attracting and recruiting parents to the TWI class, "They [the parents] won't just come, and we've found that group advertising is not that effective. Every family is too different and makes their decision differently. We need to have one-on-one conversations between the parents and us to explain the program and respond to their questions." Given the relative newness of the TWI initiative, this specialized program is also understood to be a risk for under-enrollment, particularly in the first years of the program. Director Aino remarked, "Currently, our dual immersion class is not full. We will need to attract more students in order to reduce any future financial problems. And, our location near the edge of the city might make a difference to parents." In these three cases, directors reflect on the TWI program as a positive addition to their kindergartens but also highlight the stress, burden, and potential risk that this special program presents in terms of parental recruitment and long-term financial stability.

The geography of policy choice also plays a role in understanding the possibilities for future TWI continuity. Since kindergartens voluntarily and individually adopt TWI, any notions of extending the program from the pre-primary to the primary level depend on the agreement with a Basic School (grades 1–9) within the city. During a focus group at the Sunshine Kindergarten, one participant remarked about this future potential, “There’s a [Basic] school interested in developing TWI, but it is across town. I am not sure that parents will want to have their children go over there when there’s another school right here.” The recognition that geographic proximity might undermine the continuity of DLI from the pre-primary to the primary levels attests to the role school geography plays in systemic continuity. At the Daisy Kindergarten, the curricular head noted a related point to the importance of geographic proximity for potential program continuity. She remarked, “We wish that the kids could go to a TWI school, but right now, there are only [Estonian] immersion possibilities nearby. This will not work for the [ethnic] Estonian children.” In this case, no basic school in the city had yet expressed interest in developing TWI, and the only options – Estonian, Russian, or [Estonian] immersion would seemingly divide the class.

Space at the school level: Inclusiveness & respect

Institutional spaces – ideologically, materially, and physically – powerfully influence TWI language-policy possibilities and appropriation. My research points to the importance of a kindergarten-wide, sociocultural orientation that supports multilingualism and values intercultural learning as a key element and resource for the adoption of the TWI program. In all four kindergartens hosting the TWI programs during this time, the directors and teachers noted the long-standing staff support of diversity, tolerance, and inter-ethnic appreciation. As one Chestnut teacher noted, “We have been encouraging interaction between Russian and Estonian students long before we started the TWI program.” The Tapa Development Plan, written well before the adoption of the TWI program, reflected the established dual valuing of Russian and Estonian cultures: “In this building exist two cultures together in friendship. Their integration is the personnel’s everyday work. We value the homeplace [kodukoht], our country’s cultural traditions, and well-known values. In parallel with Estonian traditions, Slavic culture and its distinctiveness are taught.” (Tapa Development Plan, 2011–2016). In addition to this positive orientation toward multilingualism in the building, the kindergarten directors highlighted the ideal skill of the kindergarten teachers and staff – their bilingualism – in facilitating the TWI Program. Educator bilingualism is a crucial resource that facilitates the ease of

interactions between the teachers and students across the kindergarten school as well as “priming the pump” to adopt the TWI program. Likewise, all four kindergarten directors mentioned the importance of bringing all the children in the kindergarten together for joint (ühine) traditions (e.g., spring party, sports day). Notably, the idea of respecting cultures infused the decision-making about celebrating particular ethnic/national-related holidays. In two sites, the directors noted the importance of their kindergarten’s tradition of celebrating both Estonian and Russian holidays (e.g., Vastlapäev, Maslenitsa, etc.) as a way to make all the children feel valued. In one TWI kindergarten, however, the director explained that given the ethnic and religious diversity of the students, they have decided to embrace only the collective and inclusive kindergarten-based traditions (e.g., sports day, spring party, etc.) and secular celebrations (e.g., Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, etc.) rather than religious holidays.

The ideological support for multilingualism shapes the material use of shared school space. This plays out in both the deliberate pro-inclusiveness messaging and the pragmatic allowances within the common spaces of the multilingual kindergarten. The intentional inclusiveness heavily influenced, for example, the decorations in the hallways and social hall of the Daisy Kindergarten. My field notes from the Daisy Director’s introduction of the kindergarten hallway art capture the intentionality and resourcefulness of school leaders to transform common spaces into those that communicate institutional values.

As we walked through the dim hallways of the Daisy Kindergarten we passed alcoves and walls with colorful paintings of bears. The Director explained that her son had painted most of these several years ago before the kindergarten had begun its dual immersion program. These paintings were intended, in part to capture and extend the “value train” running down the wall of one of the kindergarten’s main corridors. There a one-dimensional multi-car train was affixed to the wall chugging forever in place with each car carrying a title on its top with a value and two bears. The Director pointed out the wagon featuring “Ethnic/National Dignity”. On this particular one, it read, “Be able to hold on to your nationality; you’ll be able to find friends among others.”

The Director’s use of imagery and text in the common space to make clear the kindergarten values of inter-ethnic respect extended to the multipurpose room as well, where the same bears from the train appeared again on the walls. The multipurpose room serves as the indoor gym, music classroom, and social hall for assemblies and celebrations. Both the corridor and the multipurpose room are prominent, highly visible spaces that children and teachers use daily and parents visit occasionally.

In addition to explicit messaging of institutional values, space is used for pragmatic purposes, including the sharing of all-kindergarten announcements, advertisements, and information. The TWI kindergartens are linguistically diverse institutions serving Russian- and Estonian-speaking families in a variety of capacities (e.g., one language as the medium of instruction, Estonian immersion, or dual immersion). Common spaces – stairwells, announcement boards, gates – in and around the kindergarten reflect the two dominant languages in the building – Estonian and Russian. Whereas the official signage in the kindergartens (e.g., kindergarten name, classroom names, etc.), in accordance with the language law, is all in Estonian, Russian appears in a variety of pragmatic capacities in the majority of the TWI kindergartens. In the course of my research, I noted several bilingual announcements with the Estonian text above the Russian one's, including a notice in the entry stairwells directed to parents that sleds and carriages were not to be left in that place and, likewise, a sign on a kindergarten gate reminding parents in both Estonian and Russian to close a latch (Image One).



Image 1

In addition, single-language (i.e., all Russian or all Estonian) texts hung or were shared on bulletin boards or in common seating areas. In the hallway seating area outside the Daisy Kindergarten's Director's office in 2016, I noted on the side table the mainly Russian-language *Parents' Newspaper* (produced by the Immersion Parents Organization of Estonia), a bilingual advertisement for an upcoming opera performance, and an Estonian-language card promoting Peppa Pig. When I asked about this collection of items, the instructional coordinator

noted that they “put things that might be useful for parents on the table.” This pragmatic use of common space also reflects the inclusive linguistic outreach of the kindergarten leadership.

The kindergarten playground, an existing, inherited resource part of the institutional design, also emerges as a key common space for fortuitous linguistic encounters. The kindergartens housing the TWI classes are typical of kindergartens across Estonia; they feature ample, wrap-around grassy play yards with sandboxes, swings, slides, and benches, with some paved areas for ball play or bike riding, and trees. Typically, only the play area for the youngest children (ages 1–3) is gated off; the rest is open and connected, though classes will have a regular spot designated as their base in the large yard. The well-established commitment to outdoor time (*õuesoleku aeg/õueaeg*) in the daily kindergarten schedule facilitates the opportunities for the chance or planned encounter through play. At least once a day, typically for 45 minutes before noontime lunch, all the kindergarten children will play outside. If children stay past the end of the official kindergarten day at 4 pm, there is a second opportunity for outdoor encounters. This enduring and shared commitment to outside time creates space for cross-language engagement across the many groups of the building. In two kindergartens, TWI teachers commented that they “regularly” see children with different home languages playing and interacting with each other across and within kindergarten groups.

Space at the classroom level: Transformation & distinction

The TWI classrooms represent materially the most transformed space in the kindergarten buildings. As one Daisy teacher explained, pointing to the dual-immersion classroom, “We [the two lead teachers] completely redid this classroom, every bit of it, in line with our pedagogy. Even our bathroom has Estonian and Russian labels.” These classrooms and adjoining rooms (e.g., cloakroom, sleep area, etc.) that constitute the dual-immersion class learning suite reveal the time-intensive and deliberate remaking of learning in order to advance TWI education. In Estonia, the transformation of the TWI classroom results from both an individual teacher’s efforts as well as globally circulating ideas, introduced and reinforced by government agencies and universities, about effective TWI pedagogy. In practice, these efforts result in distinctive spaces *within* each kindergarten (in contrast to either the Estonian- and Russian-medium classrooms) but similar, homogeneous spaces *across* all of Estonia’s TWI (and Estonian-immersion) classrooms. One major distinction between the TWI classroom and others in the kindergarten is the guiding philosophy of “talking walls” (*rääkivad seinad*), the concept that classroom

walls are key pedagogical tableaux for both saturating children's environments with the target languages and using in daily direct instruction. The embrace of "talking walls" (also called "focus walls") in Estonia's TWI classrooms results in all the walls and other surfaces of the group's space – foyer/student locker room, instructional/playroom, sleeping room, and bathroom – displaying Estonian and Russian texts and labels alongside pictures (Image 2). When one curricular director first showed me her kindergarten's TWI classroom, she explained that these rooms with "their walls full of pictures and words" were different from the other classrooms in the building (except for the Estonian immersion classrooms), which did not have as much on the walls. She continued, "I wonder if this [much on the walls] is stressful for the children, but this is how it is supposed to be." The use of "talking walls," now well-established in Estonia, was introduced through the development of Estonian immersion initiatives in 1998 with significant input and influence from Canada-based policies and practices.



Image 2

The TWI teachers commented on the care they took, as the primary architects of these spaces, to create a room where each language was allocated equal space and in parallel use (e.g., days of the week, weather, seasons, numbers, thematic lesson words, etc.). The languages each have their own distinctive wall or space; they are generally not presented side-by-side. This facilitates the "one teacher –

one language” pedagogical approach where the children become personally and spatially accustomed to language learning with one teacher in a particular classroom location. Teachers showed me how they included both languages but were careful to distance them as well on the many classroom surfaces. For example, children’s chairs were tagged on the back with the students’ names in Russian, whereas their desks had their names printed in Estonian. Teachers and kindergarten directors remarked that creating the rooms took a great deal of work and creativity, and with the traditional dismantling of rooms for the summer and with the students’ advancement each year, teachers recreate and transform these spaces annually and their focus lessons weekly (or more frequently).

Discussion & Conclusion

The findings across the international, national, city, school, and classroom levels of this research suggest that TWI unfolds in the Estonian context where key spatial relationships and arrangements facilitate the embracing of the policy. Examining developments within and across these four spatial levels sheds light on the first guiding research question concerning the role space plays in dual-language program development in Estonia. While the international, national, kindergarten, and classroom spaces all have a rich concentration of the professional relationships and pedagogical resources necessary for the take-up and development of TWI policies, the greatest uncertainty and risk is concentrated at the city level given the context of parental choice and the risk of under-enrollment. I will detail these aspects below. In this way, these urban educational spaces in Estonia align with “choice” environments elsewhere in the world, where choice policies contribute to uncertain futures for schools and competition for students (Singer and Lenhoff, 2022).

These preliminary findings also point to insights related to the second question – the ways key policy actors identify and reflect on spatial resources and risks regarding TWI development in Estonia. One of the driving forces in generating ideological and pragmatic support for TWI is the newly developed professional relationships within the international and domestic dual-language education community. Larsen and Beech note that places are “constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations that are socially produced and reproduced” (2014, p. 210). In Estonia’s TWI programs, these “constellations” involve international and national actors who influence the shape and rationale for TWI at the pre-primary level across the country. For participants in this study, cooperative trans-Atlantic networks and domestic links across the four TWI programs serve as a new, rich resource to share pedagogical expertise and confidence in generating new pre-primary programming with TWI. InnoVe,

and the leadership team of Karin Piirsalu and Anna Golubeva in particular, play a crucial role in the thoughtful and creative coordination of this dynamic community. This finding aligns with existing research (Horton and Kraftl, 2014) that underscores the importance of relationships in defining spatial significance. Importantly, the existing kindergarten-level relationships also serve as a foundational resource in the TWI program adoption. Participants identified the kindergarten-wide support for multilingualism and cultural sharing, which predated the TWI Program, as a crucial, supportive orientation that helps to facilitate the transformation of pre-primary space. The existing commitments to sociocultural inclusiveness and respect served as a foundational resource in TWI program adoption and maintenance.

Spatial insights also help to highlight the ways kindergarten architecture and organization play a constructive role as existing resources harnessed in support of TWI programming. Geographers Peter Kraftl and Peter Adey point to the role of architecture in facilitating spatial possibilities. They argue that “a building can be intended to kindle certain capacities for habitation” (2008, p. 225). In Estonia, open playgrounds and reliable curricular spaces committed to outdoor time allow for the possibility of cross-language contact. The organization of kindergartens as institutions that include classes of Russian- or Estonian-medium of instruction serves as an unexpected resource for TWI programming. In all the TWI kindergartens, Russian- and Estonian-home-speaking children already existed in that space. That demographic mix, to a greater and lesser extent depending on the kindergarten, was familiar and institutionalized. In terms of the adoption of TWI, participants identified these practices and this linguistic mixing as an existing element of their multilingual institution. This continuity of the spatially-bounded values and bilingual practices facilitated TWI program adoption.

The TWI classrooms represent a notable mix of globally-influenced and locally created new spaces. In short, both internationally circulating ideas and teacher energy and creativity serve as key resources and engines for this development. As noted previously, TWI teachers in my research noted the ways they took up the globally endorsed ideas about pedagogical best TWI practices in creating their text-rich kindergarten classrooms. This TWI-room creation results in homogeneous pedagogical spaces *across* many global and all of Estonia's TWI classrooms. The temporal aspect of this development is important to underscore – these classrooms are a break in the traditional way kindergartens have used classroom learning space, and, along with immersion classrooms, they represent distinctive spaces *within* each kindergarten.

Participants locate the central risks to TWI policy adoption and maintenance at the local (i.e., city) level. While local governments have played a supportive

role in endorsing the TWI programs and even, as noted, allowing for a period of under-enrollment, the city-wide policies of choice of enrollment lead to competition among municipal kindergartens. Research participants noted that kindergarten directors, teachers, and parents have a range of options concerning the medium of instruction – all Estonian and all Russians, complete Estonian immersion with native Russian speakers, or two-way immersion. Without a guaranteed enrollment, this policy choice could lead to under-enrollment and risks financial vulnerability for the TWI kindergarten. Additionally, policy actors noted their future-oriented concern about the continuity of TWI programming at the basic school (1st–9th grade) level.⁹ The lack of TWI educational seamlessness across levels was understood as something that might negatively impact parental interest in TWI kindergarten enrollment and risk the language gains made by students. The sense of delicate programmatic sustainability, dependent on supportive policies and parental interest, serves as a reminder that space is “a construct, not a given” (Gulson and Symes, 2007, p. 2).

Conclusion

A spatial perspective on TWI adoption and appropriation in Estonia helps us to understand the policy and material shifts working to facilitate, and perhaps frustrate, current significant development in pre-primary schooling. Importantly, for the TWI program, resources, such as the existing international networks, the reorientation of pre-primary space, and long-standing kindergarten-level commitments to diversity, significantly outweigh risks, such as the potential detrimental impact of choice and the fragility of program continuity. These spatial developments and alignments suggest a new direction in Estonian pre-primary education – a diversification of language opportunities. This stands in contrast to broader trends of increased “nationalization of minority-language education” (Brubaker, 2011, p. 1799) at the pre-primary level. Taking the long view, my research points to the pliability of educational space. Estonia’s kindergartens have been transformed to serve a range of language programs and purposes over time. Remarkably, influences and artifacts of past approaches to pre-primary education (and beyond) facilitate some of the necessary resources for adopting TWI.

Finally, this research supports the idea of the “productive capacity of space... in the process of circulation that ideas are constructed, changed, and shaped” (Larsen and Beech, 2014, p. 207). The TWI has moved globally, in part from the West (e.g., the U.S.), to Estonia. Estonia’s TWI experience has already begun

⁹ By 2020, only one city – Tapa – had opened a TWI class at the Basic School level.

to serve, as has its kindergarten-level one-way immersion programs, as models for other former Soviet Republics. In short, Estonia's TWI programs serve as a resource for other countries in the region broadly defined. This dual-language model shaping and sharing points to the enduring relevance of “post-Soviet space” (Verschik, 2010) in terms of policy borrowing and lending for language-learning policy. If, as Verschik argues, we can conceptualize the “whole post-Soviet space into a kind of language laboratory” (2010, p. 86) due to contacts between Russian and other languages, then we will possibly see in the coming years the productivity of TWI space for resource development beyond the borders of Estonia.

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