

Article

Heritage Hebrew in Finland: Insights from Multilingual Families

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Abstract: This study addresses the research gap in heritage Hebrew in Nordic countries, focusing on the perspectives of Hebrew-speaking immigrant parents in Finland. The objective is to understand family language policies and the use of Hebrew within multilingual families, exploring factors influencing parental decisions on heritage Hebrew transmission to the children. Employing a mixed qualitative–quantitative approach and the FLP analysis method, the research explores language management and the dynamic use of Hebrew within families, examining factors that influence heritage Hebrew maintenance in Finland. A survey of 36 families revealed a shift away from Hebrew towards the majority languages in Finland, with approximately a third of the children having poor or non-existent oral Hebrew skills. Despite the emphasis on Hebrew literacy by many parents, the reported proficiency levels were low, with slightly over 10% of children demonstrating good or excellent reading and writing skills, while 43% were entirely illiterate in the language. A third of respondents cited challenges in accessing Hebrew education, attributing it as the primary reason for the children’s illiteracy, as only 26.3% of children received external Hebrew teaching. While the connection between the birth order of the children and their heritage Hebrew skills presented diverse patterns, the survey revealed a notable shift towards Finnish as the primary communication language among siblings. A unique connection was found between parents’ birthplace and language choices, indicating reduced Hebrew transmission among repatriated parents. These insights contribute to understanding heritage Hebrew dynamics in Finland, with potential implications for informing policies supporting language transmission in similar contexts and practical application in multilingual families worldwide. Furthermore, by analyzing the dynamics of maintaining heritage Hebrew in Finland and investigating the language policies of immigrant Israeli families in the Nordic context, this study expands the theoretical understanding and contributes to the advancement of the fields of heritage languages and family language policies.



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Keywords: heritage languages (HL); family language policy (FLP); multilingual family; Hebrew; Nordic countries

1. Introduction

Successful integration of children with an immigrant background is significantly influenced by the dual process of maintaining their heritage culture while living in the host country’s culture (e.g., [De Houwer 2017](#); [Fielding 2021](#)). Family Language Policy (FLP), i.e., language policy established within a family, encompasses parental ideologies and the implicit and explicit decisions parents make regarding the languages to which their child is exposed, playing a crucial role in shaping the linguistic development of multilingual children ([Curdts-Christiansen 2018](#)).

This study explores family language policies influencing the process of heritage Hebrew transmission among children in Hebrew-speaking families residing in Finland. The study aims to answer the following questions: What are the family language policies (ideologies, management, practices) in Hebrew-speaking families in Finland? What factors influence heritage Hebrew maintenance in Finland?

Examining the unique context of Finland, this research provides comprehensive insights into how Israeli parents foster Hebrew among their children, potentially informing

policies in similar contexts to support language transmission in countries with few Hebrew speakers. It aims to inform policies supporting language transmission to enhance minority language speakers' well-being globally through practical applications rooted in understanding heritage Hebrew dynamics. From a broader perspective, this research offers a nuanced insight into the complexities surrounding multilingualism in immigrant families, shedding light on both the challenges and opportunities of heritage language transmission. Identifying factors influencing heritage language maintenance provides practical guidance for fostering multilingualism in diverse language landscapes.

In this article, I discuss heritage Hebrew transmission within the Finnish context. First, I explore the theoretical background of heritage Hebrew in diaspora worldwide, as well as heritage language maintenance and FLP research in families with an immigrant background in Finland. Second, I present empirical data concerning parental evaluations of their children's Hebrew proficiency, along with discussions on the roles of siblings and birth order. Next, I elaborate on parental ideologies and strategies concerning heritage Hebrew maintenance, subsequently comparing these with pan-European findings (Dimenstein and Kaplan 2017). Finally, I discuss the major factors influencing heritage Hebrew transmission in the Finnish context. This comprehensive analysis underscores how the complex interplay of FLPs and external influences shape the transmission of heritage Hebrew in Finland.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Multilingual Family

A multilingual family, viewed as a sociolinguistic domain in this study, represents a unique and complex social unit where family members engage in communication through diverse linguistic practices (Lanza 2021). The relationship of multilingual families with broader social units for language maintenance is characterized by mutual influence between internal family dynamics and external socio-political and socio-economic factors. Language ideologies, family practices, and external influences interact to shape language maintenance or attrition within these families. An understanding of multilingualism in families necessitates considering the interplay of these factors, including economic, political, and social influences (Sherman et al. 2016).

Migrating families, especially highly mobile ones, face complex challenges in language practices—their management, learning, and maintenance (Duff 2015). Language decisions made by migrant families play a pivotal role in shaping intra-family relationships and influencing the learning, retention, or attrition of languages (Hirsch and Lee 2018). Such families engage in ongoing negotiations aiming at establishing shared languages; their FLPs impact cultural assimilation, connections to the homeland, and both the social and linguistic capital of all the family members (Hirsch and Lee 2018).

It is crucial to emphasize that every multilingual family possesses a unique version of multilingualism, representing a distinct identity largely shaped by their languages. While emerging from linguistic behavior, multilingualism extends beyond linguistic aspects, encompassing physiological, psychological, and social dimensions; it is not merely the knowledge of multiple languages but involves everything related to their use and learning, shaping characteristics of every family member, expressed through actions, perceptions, attitudes, and life scenarios (Aronin 2016). In this context, it is necessary to mention that immigrant children's well-being strongly relies on a dual process of enculturation (maintaining the heritage culture) and acculturation (learning the host country's culture). Maintaining the home language correlates with a stronger ethnic and cultural identity, improved family relationships, and enhanced psychological adjustment in immigrant children and youth (Fielding 2021), ultimately contributing to the well-being of both parents and children (De Houwer 2017).

The language constellation in multilingual families in most cases consists of the majority language, i.e., the language that the majority of the people in a given population use (Triggs 2021), and the minority language(s), a term that needs a more multifaceted

definition. As defined by [Grenoble and Singerman \(2014\)](#), in its simplest terms a minority language is a language spoken by less than 50 percent of the population in a given region, state, or country, with the key criterion being the size of the speaker population within that specific geographic context. [Bosma and Blom \(2020\)](#) extend this definition, asserting that a minority language encompasses a group of people who are not only numerically but also politically in the minority, and whose goal is preserving their linguistic and cultural identity. Minority languages can be roughly divided into three main categories: indigenous, immigrant, and ethnic linguistic minorities ([Grenoble and Singerman 2014](#)), with Hebrew not clearly fitting into this categorization ([Avni 2012](#)). While the majority language can be acquired outside the home environment, the minority language acquisition relies more on exposure at home, with both input quantity and quality playing significant roles in the development of vocabulary and grammar in multilingual children ([De Houwer 2017](#)). In this context, the term “heritage language” (HL) is introduced to enhance precision.

2.2. Heritage Languages

A heritage language (HL) is an ethnolinguistically minority language acquired in contexts of early bilingualism or multilingualism, typically within the family ([Montrul and Polinsky 2021](#); [Montrul 2015](#)). HL proficiency differs from that of monolingual or native language speakers ([Protassova 2018](#); [Montrul and Polinsky 2021](#)). HLs are seen as “a languages of personal relevance”, distinct from the majority language ([Van Deusen-Scholl 2003](#), p. 216). Proficiency in the HL is not the sole criterion for HL status; it serves important social and identity-building functions ([Ahlers 2017](#)). In this broader context, HL speakers’ initiatives in studying, maintaining, and revitalizing their HL, along with their self-positioning and self-negotiation, are central to their identification with their HL ([Valdés 2005](#); [Hornberger and Wang 2008](#)). In Finland, different terms are used for HL, reflecting different perspectives: in the Finnish educational system “kotikieli” (home language) is used alongside the newer term “perintökieli” (heritage language), thus illustrating the close link between HL studies and minority and indigenous languages ([Sippola and Peterson 2022](#)). In this study, I refer to the term “heritage language” as an ethnolinguistically minority language that is acquired in a multilingual context, often within the family setting, and which holds substantial importance in terms of self-identification and fostering a sense of belonging within a community.

With multiple studies identifying parents as the primary source of HL input (e.g., [Montrul 2015](#); [Melo-Pfeifer 2015](#)), parental decisions significantly influence the maintenance of the children’s HL. These decisions in multilingual families exhibit a spectrum of possibilities: some actively choose to communicate in the HL at home, while others, proficient in the local majority language, prefer using it with their children. Alternatively, some may refrain from speaking the HL directly to their children but utilize it in conversations among themselves. On the other end of the spectrum, some parents may decide not to incorporate the HL into their home environment at all. In extreme situations, parents may even feel compelled to communicate with their children in a language they barely know ([De Houwer 2017](#)).

HL maintenance in Finland is shaped by the unique context of the country, characterized by a multilingual society and robust language policies aimed at preserving HLs. Hebrew speakers, despite being a small linguistic minority, hold historical significance in Finland. The Jewish community, recognized as an official national minority for over two centuries, has taught Hebrew in the Jewish school of Helsinki since the early 20th century ([Latomaa and Nuolijärvi 2002](#)). In the 2023–2024 school year, the Jewish Community School of Helsinki (Helsingin Juutalainen Yhteiskoulu), a private Finnish-language school maintained by the Jewish congregation of Helsinki, served approximately 100 students from first to ninth grade, following the basic education curriculum of the Finnish National Board of Education ([HJYK 2024](#)). It is also necessary to mention that the Jewish community of Finland, numbering around 1500 members, is concentrated mainly in the Capital region, with the majority of community members belonging to the Jewish Congregation of

Helsinki. The other Jewish congregation is situated in Turku and counts ten times fewer participants than in Helsinki (Czimbalmos 2023). The relative size of the community in Helsinki and the availability of the only Jewish school in Finland may also influence the language transmission attitudes, the learning opportunities, and subsequently the actual Hebrew skills of the children.

2.3. FLP

Language policy at the societal level serves as the overarching framework for understanding FLP. Language policy, emerging from diverse societal beliefs about language, refers to a society's approach to linguistic communication, encompassing its positions, principles, and decisions regarding verbal expression and communicative potential (Bugarski and Hawkesworth 1992, p. 18). It addresses not only specific language varieties but also individual elements across various linguistic levels. Language policy can take two forms: explicit (Spolsky 2004), also known as official or *de jure* (Schiffman 1996), which involves formally written and stated language policies, not always aligning with actual language practices within a community, and implicit language policy (Spolsky 2004), also referred to as covert or *de facto* (Schiffman 1996), which is not explicitly stated but can be inferred from observed language practices within a community. These policies operate within speech communities of varying sizes, ranging from families to nation-states or regional alliances.

Language policy established within a family is called family language policy (FLP). According to Spolsky (2012), FLP refers to language choices and practices within a family setting. It can be either explicit or implicit. The current study primarily investigates FLPs in Hebrew-speaking families through explicit parental language ideologies, and strategies of linguistic management reported by the parents. This study also examines the external factors influencing heritage Hebrew maintenance in Finland beyond parental control, taking into account that in the majority of families, the FLP is not consciously planned but is shaped by historical factors and circumstances (Spolsky 2012). While the default home language policy for many families involves speaking the mother's native tongue or both parents' languages in the case of bilingual families (Spolsky 2012), some families consciously choose to raise multilingual children, viewing this explicit decision-making regarding language use within the home as providing advantages and enhanced social capital to children (e.g., Howlett and Davis 2018), a situation clearly observed in Hebrew-speaking families in Finland.

Spolsky (2012) argues that FLP involves three aspects within the family setting: ideologies (strong beliefs about languages, language learning, language maintenance, etc.), management (plans and approaches adopted to support a specific language policy within the family), and practices (actual use of language by family members). The current research examines the beliefs, plans, and language use within Hebrew-speaking families in Finland, focusing on understanding how different family members view and manage languages with varying statuses in the environments of the family and the society.

2.4. Multilingual FLPs in Finland

Previous research on FLPs in multilingual families in Finland has predominantly examined a narrow selection of immigrant languages. A rich linguistic diversity in Finland, with over 150 different first languages spoken by 8.9% of residents with an immigrant background—those whose both parents, or the only known parent, were born abroad, or whose parents' information is not included in the Finnish Population Information System (Lindén and Dyster 2023; Official Statistics Finland 2024), is supported and promoted by the national core curriculum for basic education, highlighting effective policy-level support for various linguistic groups in Finland (Eurydice 2019). However, it is challenging to acquire data on individual multilingualism in Finland, since each individual can be assigned only one "mother tongue" in the official registration system¹ (Palviainen and Bergroth 2018). Therefore, conducting extensive research on FLPs across various immigrant languages is essential for gaining comprehensive insights into the complexities of multilingualism in

immigrant families in Finland. The research on heritage Hebrew can potentially inform policies supporting language transmission in Finland and in countries with diverse immigrant languages, thus enhancing the well-being of minority language speakers globally.

Research on FLP within multilingual families combining Finnish with major immigrant languages like Russian (1.6% of the population, Official Statistics Finland 2022), has shown that parental ideologies include prioritizing the majority language, leading to children developing as passive bilinguals with limited balanced bilingualism (Protassova 2018), and parental management supporting a balanced language environment during preschool years, with a focus on Russian in kindergarten, and an increased emphasis on Finnish in later schooling (Moin et al. 2013). Vorobeva's study (Vorobeva 2023) explored how Russian-speaking mothers in Finland shape their FLP decisions based on their emotional experiences.

Research on Estonian, the second-largest immigrant language spoken by 0.9% of the population of Finland (Official Statistics Finland 2022), has explored parental ideologies, with many prioritizing their children's proficiency in Estonian, with English and occasionally Russian serving as vehicular languages for communication with other minority groups (Praakli 2015). Studies on HL management revealed that children played a significant role in shaping FLPs, while parents would not strictly adhere to the OPOL strategy in everyday interactions (Teiss and Perendi 2017), and there were limited opportunities for Estonian language use outside the home (Praakli 2015).

Several studies have investigated FLPs among families speaking less common immigrant languages in Finland. These studies revealed similar language ideologies, including positive attitudes towards multilingualism and the preservation of HL as essential for maintaining cultural identity (Urdu, Haque 2011; Polish, Kędra 2021; Persian, Mashayekhi 2023), as well as recognition and prioritization of English for practical reasons (Urdu, Haque 2011; Portuguese, Kumpulainen 2020). The educational management of HLs primarily occurred within the home environment, as institutional educational support was often unavailable or not tailored to the families' needs (Urdu, Haque 2011; Indonesian, Sholihat 2020; Persian, Mashayekhi 2023; 46 immigrant languages, Nyberg 2021). In the research on 34 immigrant languages performed by Palviainen and Räisä (2023), the perceived status of the HL played a crucial role in decisions regarding its maintenance. In practice, many families experienced a shift towards using Finnish in children's language interactions, leading to reduced HL usage among the children (Haque 2011; Palviainen and Räisä 2023; Kumpulainen 2020).

2.5. Heritage Language Education in Finland

In the EU, while most children speak the school language, which is often the majority language and also the main or official language in local public life, many of them also speak minority languages; however, these languages are seldom or never used in educational and public contexts (De Houwer 2017). Managing language education presents another challenge, requiring decisions on prioritizing the language of the host country, integrating previously acquired languages, or choosing English as the common language. Migrant families encounter complexities as their children are exposed to diverse languages and environments (Hirsch and Lee 2018). While family efforts to transmit HL literacy are vital for its acquisition, development, and maintenance across generations (Schwartz 2008), many heritage speakers often lack literacy in their HL. This deficiency is typically attributed to insufficient formal education in the language or limited access to such education (Lohndal et al. 2019).

Children with immigrant backgrounds in Finland, up to the third generation, are entitled to two hours of complementary basic education in their "mother tongue" or "home language" ("oma äidinkieli" or "kotikieli"), aimed at fostering active multilingualism, with a focus on native language literacy and multiliteracy development (OPH 2022). As stated by the Finnish National Board of Education, "mother tongue" can be defined in several different ways: the language(s) that the individual first acquired or, for example, the language(s) that the person knows best or with which he or she identifies (OPH 2022).

The selection of languages offered and the minimum group size are determined independently by each city, varying between 4–12 students and “depending on feasibility” (“mahdollisuuksien mukaan”) to over 40 languages (City of Seinäjoki 2024; City of Helsinki, Education Division 2024). However, it is important to keep in mind that a consistent disparity will always exist between policy and implementation. While a governing body may advocate for linguistic minorities’ rights to mother-tongue education, it does not necessarily guarantee the realization of these rights by the minorities (Grenoble and Singerman 2014). The report from the Finnish National Education Evaluation Center (Venäläinen et al. 2022) outlined key challenges in organizing native language classes, including a scarcity of “own mother tongue” teachers, either insufficient student numbers or oversized groups with varying ages and language skills, and resource constraints. The significant shortage of native language teachers in certain languages has resulted in the employment of individuals who do not meet the teacher qualification requirements in Finland.

The survey on minority mother tongues and religions, conducted by the Prime Minister’s Office (Tainio et al. 2019, pp. 70–71), revealed that English teachers had the highest percentage of qualified teachers (88.9%). Similarly, a significant portion of Russian (79.3%), German (75.0%), Spanish (71.4%), and Estonian (54.5%) teachers met the eligibility criteria, having completed both a higher university degree and pedagogical training. However, a limited number of Arabic (20.0%), Chinese (20.0%), Somali (12.5%), and Vietnamese (25.0%) teachers fulfilled the eligibility requirements. None of the teachers for Albanian, Thai, and Kurdish met the eligibility criteria, with most or all of them lacking a higher university degree and pedagogical training.

As a consequence, some children with an immigrant background receive institutional support that does not align with Finnish educational standards, while others receive no institutional support at all for maintaining their HL, thus leaving the decision to preserve the HL and the responsibility to transmit it exclusively to the caregivers of the child.

2.6. Modern Hebrew in Diaspora

Modern Hebrew, whose speakers in Finland I focus on, has a multilingual and multicultural background. Originating from a diverse linguistic background, Modern Hebrew emerged as a result of intense linguistic contact and language convergence, or koineization, processes (Henkin 2020). As of 2022, modern Hebrew is the predominant language in Israel, serving as the first language for 49% of the population, and as the common language of communication for 92% of Israelis (Central Bureau of Statistics 2022). Moreover, Israeli immigrants in other countries also speak modern Hebrew, and it is familiar to heritage speakers and learners in Jewish schools worldwide (Grossman and Reshef 2020).

Measuring Israeli emigration poses challenges due to the lack of direct data on the annual number of Israelis explicitly intending to emigrate (DellaPergola and Lustick 2011). Additionally, many Israelis living abroad, even for extended periods, view themselves as temporary expatriates rather than permanent emigrants. Data on returning Israelis suggests that a significant number eventually return home after spending 5, 10, or even 20 years abroad. Currently, approximately 10 percent of Israel’s population resides outside the country. Economic factors emerge as more influential than ideological or security-related variables in explaining variations in emigration volume from Israel (DellaPergola and Lustick 2011).

Israelis who have moved away from Israel typically continue speaking Hebrew in their homes and with friends, and they often maintain connections to Israeli culture and identity (Spolsky 2016). Despite the weakness of Hebrew education abroad, they often ensure that their children learn Hebrew, thus passing down their Israeli identity to the next generation. However, a gradual shift away from Hebrew is evident, influenced by factors such as the size of the diaspora, the higher prestige of other languages, and the level of skills and professional proficiency in the diaspora (Spolsky 2016).

Nevo and Verbov (2011, pp. 428–30) adopted an even more cautious outlook regarding the ongoing relevance of Hebrew outside of Israel. They highlighted factors contributing

to its declining relevance, including changes in Jewish identity, limited focus on spoken Hebrew in educational settings, and a lack of clear objectives in Hebrew instruction. Additionally, the absence of local Hebrew-speaking teachers and a preference for other languages such as English further diminished the importance of Hebrew in diaspora education.

Recent research on the transmission of Hebrew in families living outside Israel highlighted a notable language shift away from Hebrew. A study on Israeli families in Europe, including parental FLPs, which was conducted as part of “The Israeli-European Diaspora: A Survey about Israelis living in Europe” (Dimenstein and Kaplan 2017), uncovered varying attitudes among Israeli parents in different countries regarding the preservation of Hebrew language and culture for their children. For instance, in Italy, 93% of respondents considered it important for their children to speak and read Hebrew, whereas in Denmark, the percentages were 71% for speaking and 55% for reading, respectively. Regarding overall parental ideologies toward Hebrew maintenance, among the 890 Israeli respondents surveyed out of an estimated total population of 100,000 across 27 European countries, 85% emphasized the importance of their children being proficient in Hebrew. However, concerning Hebrew management outside the home, 55% of the children never attended any Israeli educational programs, while 27% participated occasionally (Dimenstein and Kaplan 2017). This comprehensive study also acknowledged Hebrew speakers in Finland, yet it refrained from presenting percentages or drawing conclusions due to the limited participant pool of nine individuals (see Section 4.4).

In diaspora communities outside Europe, there is also evidence of a shift away from Hebrew. In Australia, adult Israel-born migrants used Hebrew for everyday communication in 71.4–87.4% of cases, while those who migrated as minors utilized Hebrew in less than 30% of instances (Porat 2018). In Noar’s Master’s thesis (Noar 2023), in New Zealand children in Hebrew-speaking families demonstrated higher proficiency in English than in Hebrew, despite positive attitudes towards heritage Hebrew maintenance. In Mexico, only 37% of Israelis who migrated as minors spoke Hebrew at home, with 59% using Spanish as their primary language in the household (Aizencang 2019).

In Finland, as of December 2022, there lived 946 Israeli citizens, with 547 of them being dual Israeli–Finnish citizens. A total of 511 individuals identified as Hebrew speakers, with 58 being 19 and younger (Official Statistics Finland 2023). Importantly, the language registration system of Finland permits the listing of only one mother tongue (Palviainen and Bergroth 2018), which limits the ability to determine the exact number of multilingual individuals who consider Hebrew their native or HL.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Data Collection

Participants were recruited through an extensive network, including the researcher’s personal connections, meetings in the Women’s Circle monthly program organized by Chabad Lubavitch of Finland, and targeted advertisements shared by administrators of six major private WhatsApp groups and two private Facebook groups.

Eligible candidates were identified as adults who had immigrated to Finland from Israel, possessed native-level proficiency in Hebrew (both Israeli-born and those who repatriated to Israel as minors), and were parents with at least one child. To maintain survey integrity, the survey targeted one parent per household, with instances where both parents responded requiring explicit notification to the researcher (observed in 2 households, involving 4 participants and 5 children), exceptions allowed based on the recognition of a limited number of Hebrew-speaking parents in Finland. The survey was available for participation in December 2023.

3.2. Participants

Out of the 36 participants, 20 identified themselves as females, and 16 as males. The mean age of the participants was 43, with a median of 41, ranging from 30 to 67 years old. The majority of participants reported having academic education, with 14 having

completed a bachelor's degree, 11 with a master's degree, and 3 with a doctoral degree. Additionally, 5 participants received vocational professional education, 2 graduated from high school, and one participant left the field empty.

The participants reported a total of 80 children. However, since 5 children were assessed by both parents, as explained above, the actual number of unique children was 75. Due to the anonymity restrictions of the questionnaire, it would be problematic to identify which children were assessed twice; therefore, the data presented are based on 80 children: Figure 1 shows the age distribution of the children, and Figure 2—the number of children per family. The number of children per family ranged from 1 to 5.

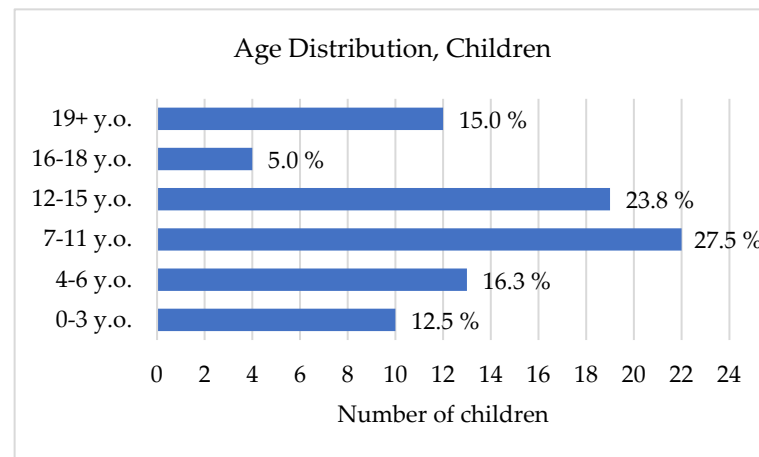


Figure 1. Age distribution, children.

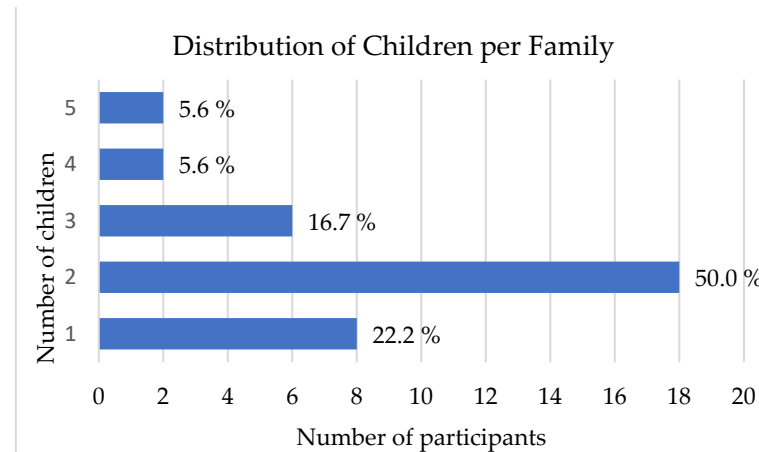


Figure 2. Distribution of children per family.

Most participants were multilingual, with 27 reporting early exposure (between 0 and 8 years old) to at least two languages, and 4 participants being exposed to three languages simultaneously from birth. Among the participants, 20 were first-generation Hebrew speakers, meaning none of their parents were native Hebrew speakers. In 7 cases, one of the parents was a native Hebrew speaker, and in 9 cases, both parents. 14 of the participants were not born in Israel, with 10 born in the former USSR, 3 in the Western hemisphere, and 1 in Finland. The age of repatriation to Israel varied between 5–19 years old for these participants.

Furthermore, 7 participants used to live in another country as adults, aside from Israel and Finland, for a period of time between one and three years, with the following countries reported: Canada, USA, Germany, Holland, Italy, and Lithuania. The remaining

participants had adult experience of living only in Israel and Finland. Time of residence in Finland is shown in Figure 3.

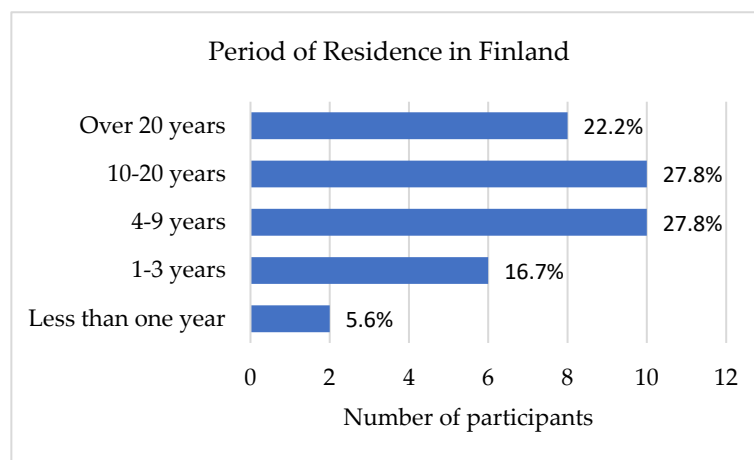


Figure 3. Period of residence in Finland.

3.3. Questionnaire

The questionnaire survey served as the first phase in a broader study of FLPs in Hebrew-speaking families in Finland. Administered via the REDCap platform, it was accessible on phones, tablets, or computers. The questionnaire comprised 20 mandatory and 16 optional questions, covering demographics, individual Hebrew usage, strategies for transmitting Hebrew to children, and parental assessments of their children's Hebrew proficiency (Appendix A).

The survey featured a mix of multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended questions, with the latter designed to elicit additional insights from participants. While the questionnaire was provided in Hebrew, respondents had the option to answer open questions in Hebrew, Finnish, English, or Russian. Time allotted for completing the questionnaire was between 5 and 10 min. The responses were automatically transferred to a secure REDCap data server, from which they could be downloaded in PDF or MS Excel format.

4. Findings

4.1. Family Language Practices

4.1.1. Parental Assessment of the Children's Language Skills

In order to evaluate whether the situation in Finland aligned with the broader trend of a gradual shift away from Hebrew outside Israel (see Section 2.5), research participants were asked to assess their children's four Hebrew skills: understanding, speaking, reading, and writing, on a scale of five options, from "excellent" to "non-existent". Every child in the family was assessed separately. The figures below represent the distribution of the children by the level of every skill, and by the child order in the family (Figures 4–7).

Among the 80 children assessed, 60% were reported to have an excellent or good understanding of Hebrew, while 16.3% did not understand it at all, and 15% had low comprehension skills. Assessments of speaking skills revealed a slightly declining trend: 46.3% of the children exhibited good or excellent oral skills, while 22.5% did not speak Hebrew at all, and an additional 11.3% had low speaking proficiency.

In terms of literacy, there was a significant decline, with only 12.5% able to read on a good or excellent level, 15% with low Hebrew reading skills, and 38% who did not read Hebrew at all. Writing in Hebrew presented a challenge for the majority of the children, with only 10% able to write on a good or excellent level, 17.5% with low Hebrew writing skills, and 43% being completely illiterate in Hebrew.

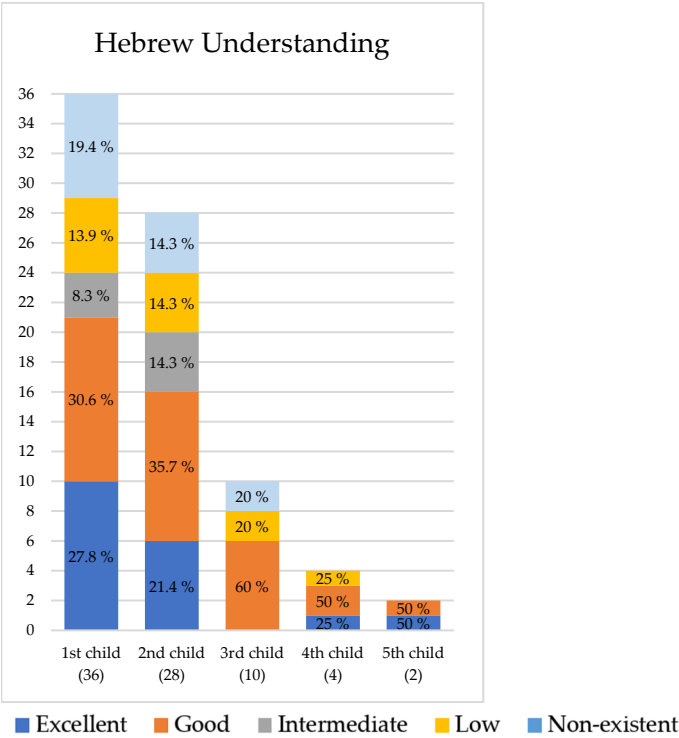


Figure 4. Hebrew understanding assessment.

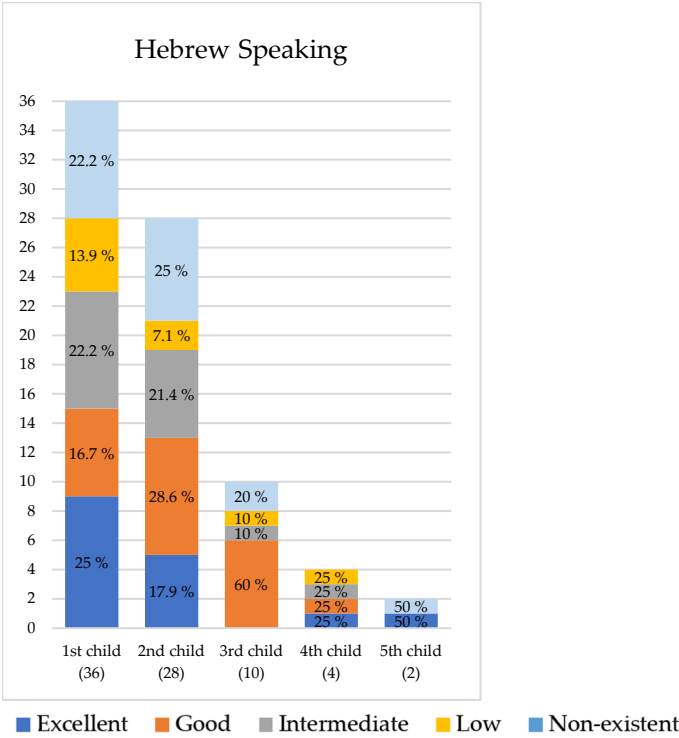


Figure 5. Hebrew speaking assessment.

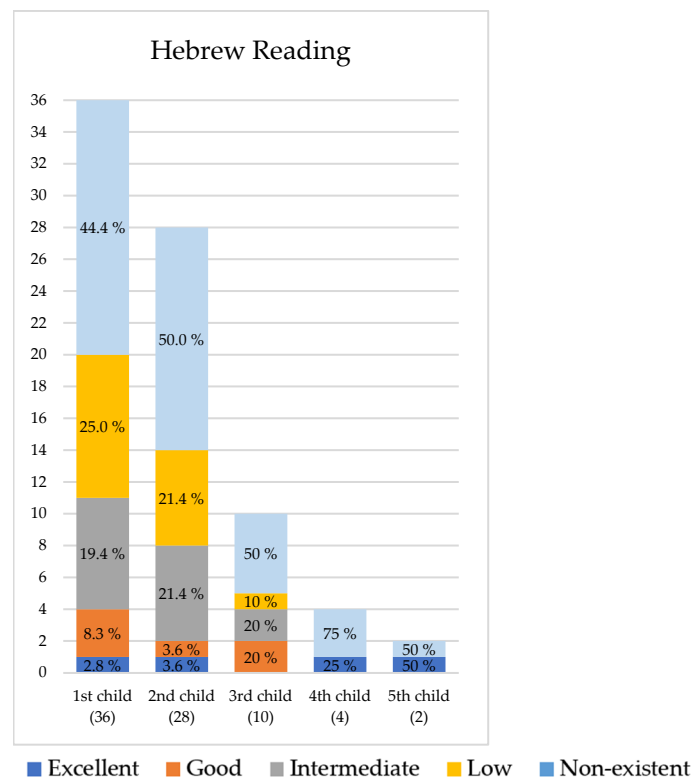


Figure 6. Hebrew reading assessment.

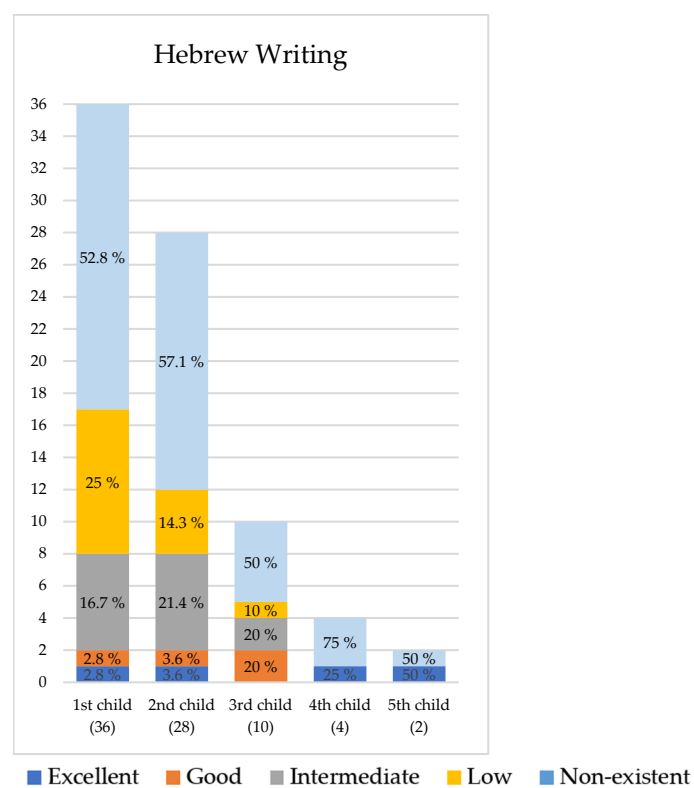


Figure 7. Hebrew writing assessment.

4.1.2. Birth Order

Research on the impact of birth order on language development in monolingual children shows mixed results, with some studies suggesting first-born children have better

language skills (e.g., Berglund et al. 2005; Zyrianova and Chertkova 2011), while others find the reverse pattern (Oshima-Takane et al. 1996), or no relation at all (Lu et al. 2022). For bilingual children, birth order may influence language input, with older siblings potentially playing a significant role (Keller et al. 2015), providing more advanced language input compared to mothers (Bergroth and Palviainen 2016).

The connection between birth order and HL skills in children with an immigrant background is still unclear (Keller et al. 2015), showing variations in different domains of HL (Armon-Lotem et al. 2021). Some studies suggest older siblings generally have better HL skills (Bridges and Hoff 2014), while others indicate first-born children may initially have higher proficiency, but having older siblings can enhance conditions for HL acquisition (Tsinivits and Unsworth 2021; Armon-Lotem et al. 2021).

In order to understand the trend in Hebrew-speaking families, I first present the Hebrew level by the order of birth of all the children in general, and then compare Hebrew skills between the siblings in the 28 responses of parents to 2 or more children.

Out of the 36 first-borns, 58.4% had either an excellent or good understanding of spoken Hebrew, while 19.4% did not understand Hebrew at all. In terms of speaking, the results showed a slight decrease but still coincided to a large extent with the first children's ability to understand Hebrew: 41.7% of the children were reported to have either excellent or good spoken Hebrew; 22.2% did not speak Hebrew at all. The responses regarding the level of written Hebrew already within the first children showed significant attrition of the reading and writing skills: while 10.1% and 5.6% had excellent or good skills in reading and writing, respectively, only one first child was reported to have excellent both reading and writing skills. A total of 44.4% of the first children did not read Hebrew at all, and 52.8% did not possess the skill of writing in Hebrew.

Responses regarding the second children (28) showed oral Hebrew skills similar to first-borns, with 57.1% understanding Hebrew either excellently or well, and 14.3% not understanding it at all. Regarding speaking Hebrew, the numbers were 46.5% and 25%, respectively. Concerning reading and writing, one child was reported to excel in both skills (from the same family where the elder sibling excelled in both skills, with the family having lived in Finland for a period of less than one year), one more had both skills on a good level, making it 7.2% of the second children. Half of the second children were completely illiterate in Hebrew (no reading skills in 50%, no writing skills in 57.1%).

The responses regarding the third children (10) indicated a decline in overall Hebrew level—no third child was reported to have excellent Hebrew in any of the four skills. A total of 60% of the third children had good understanding and speaking skills, while 20% did not speak or understand Hebrew. The Hebrew literacy level of 20% of the third-born children was estimated as good, and 50% of the third children were completely illiterate in Hebrew. Among the four fourth children, all of them were able to understand and speak Hebrew to some extent, whereas reading and writing were excellent in 25% of the cases, and non-existent in 75%. In the two families with a fifth child, one child was reported to excel in all four skills, and the other one could understand Hebrew well but did not speak, read, or write due to their young age.

For comparing the trends between the siblings in each family, I grouped understanding and speaking under “oral skills” and reading and writing under “literacy”. Out of the 28 participants with two or more children, 35.7% (six cases with two siblings and four cases with three siblings) reported each child's Hebrew skills equal between the siblings across all domains. In three out of these cases, Hebrew level was reported as non-existent, and in the remaining instances, the children's proficiency ranged from intermediate to excellent. Notably, 40% of the latter exhibited comparable levels of oral and written proficiency, while 60% had reported literacy levels lower than oral proficiency.

Five responses (17.9%) indicated similar oral skills between 2 and 4 siblings, whereas their Hebrew literacy levels varied. In 80% of these cases, the older siblings were partially literate in Hebrew, while the younger ones were entirely illiterate; however, it is important to note that half of these 80% involved very young siblings, aged 1–3 years old, whose

literacy skills could not be taken into account. In the one instance remaining, only the youngest among the three siblings had some literacy in Hebrew, and the other ones were completely illiterate, while all of them exhibited good oral understanding and intermediate speaking skills.

In the remaining 13 cases, 53.8% reported higher oral Hebrew proficiency among the older siblings, while the remaining 46.2% displayed the opposite trend. Among these 13 cases, 10 (76.9%) reported the children's Hebrew literacy as either low or non-existent. In the cases where families had four or five children, at least two in each family were literate in Hebrew at an intermediate to excellent level. However, the pattern varied—in two families, the older siblings had similarly high levels of written Hebrew, while the younger ones were reported as illiterate; however, upon examining the ages of the younger siblings, it became evident that they were all under school age, so their literacy could not be considered. In the third family, oral proficiency was higher the younger the children were—from low for the adult child to intermediate for junior high school-aged children, and excellent for primary school siblings.

The survey findings regarding the connection between birth order and HL skills in Hebrew-speaking families in Finland presented diverse patterns, affirming previous research claims about the unclear connection between these two factors. The complex and varied outcomes emphasized the necessity for more extensive and diverse research to better understand the nuanced relationship between birth order and HL skills in children with an immigrant background.

4.1.3. The Role of Siblings in Heritage Hebrew Transmission

The languages used between siblings often vary from the languages used in interactions between children and parents (Caldas 2012). The role of parents in transmitting the minority language to the children should not be exaggerated, since siblings often play a more significant role in shaping each other's language dynamics, influencing language choices and policies, which can lead to changes and adaptations in response to various factors such as school language, friends, and the social environment (Bergroth and Palviainen 2016).

While older siblings generally have a positive impact on the younger siblings' development of the environment language, this communication often leads to a shift away from the HL (e.g., Spanish in the US, Bridges and Hoff 2014; Rojas et al. 2016). Older siblings often use the environmental language more frequently with their younger siblings, resulting in more advanced environmental language development (Spanish in the US, Bridges and Hoff 2014; Greek in the Netherlands, Tsiniivits and Unsworth 2021), while the absence of a school-aged older sibling is associated with greater proficiency in the HL (Spanish in the US, Bridges and Hoff 2014).

In the context of HL maintenance, the siblings' language choices, primarily in the environment language and occasionally in the HL, not only influence family interactions but also play a role in contributing to generational language shift. Even when engaging in activities that address their HL, like helping each other with language tasks, the siblings tend to blend elements of the HL into the dominant language (Farsi in Sweden, Kheirkhah and Cekaite 2018; Greek in the Netherlands, Tsiniivits and Unsworth 2021).

The survey revealed a similar trend in Hebrew-speaking families in Finland, indicating a notable shift towards Finnish as the primary communication language among siblings. Among the 28 respondents with two or more children, 11 families reported Finnish as the only language of sibling communication. Notably, this language preference correlated with the duration of residence in Finland, with 81.8% of respondents residing for over 10 or even 20 years, and 18.9% having resided in Finland for 4–9 years.

Hebrew was identified as the main language for sibling communication in three households, encompassing families with varying durations of residence in Finland—less than a year, 4–9 years, and over 10 years, respectively. Russian was reported as the main language among siblings by four respondents, with all cases corresponding to families with substantial periods of residency in Finland: between 4 and 9 and 10 and 20 years. In

three cases, siblings were reported to interchange between two languages: Hebrew–Finnish and Russian–Finnish, with both families having resided in Finland for 4–9 years; the third case involved English and Russian, with a residence duration of 1–3 years. Furthermore, in three additional cases, children used three languages for daily sibling communication, including Hebrew, Finnish or Swedish, and either Russian or English. These cases were reported by families residing in Finland for 1–3 years, 4–9 years, and over 20 years.

To generalize, when discussing the usage of Hebrew among siblings, it served as either the only or one of the everyday languages of communication in 8 households, constituting 28.5% of families with two or more children who responded to the question on the main communication language(s) between siblings. Finnish was the only or one of the everyday languages among siblings in 17 families and Swedish was reported in one family, indicating that, in two-thirds of the cases, the siblings used one of the languages of the environment in their communication. Russian followed Hebrew, being reported as the sole or primary language for sibling communication by 25% of the participants. Both languages demonstrated comparable endurance in relation to the time of residence in Finland.

Although it is challenging to make generalizations based on the results of four families with four or five children, it must be pointed out that the study results contradicted the statement by Keller et al. (2015) that having more siblings in the family is linked to the children's lower proficiency in the HL.

To conclude, the findings indicated a notable shift towards Finnish as the primary language of communication between siblings, with this shift strongly linked to the duration of residence in Finland. Notably, Hebrew as the HL faced challenges, with its prevalence decreasing over time. While Hebrew remained a significant language in some households, the data indicated a decline in its everyday use among siblings. This highlights the potential for language attrition, especially in families with an extended period of residence in Finland.

4.2. Parental Ideologies

Language ideology, according to Schiffman (1996), involves cultural assumptions and implicit policies about language, correctness, and preferred modes of communication. Language ideologies not only concern language use, but also imply knowledge about the rest of social life, entailing ideological positions that manifest in many social actions, often in contradictory and controversial ways, and have far-reaching consequences (Gal and Irvine 2019). Even in the absence of explicit language policies, implicit policies persist, reflecting societal beliefs regarding language use and standards, while dismissing explicit rules or denouncing "standard" languages as myths does not eliminate the cultural assumptions embedded in these concepts; an implicit language policy always exists.

Parental language ideology has a strong influence on the FLP formation, since the parental attitudes to multilingualism, beliefs on the importance of some languages over others, or beliefs about the importance of maintaining HLs, etc., have a direct impact on the children's language skills. This section examines the parental ideologies on heritage Hebrew maintenance, the importance of other languages to their children, and their attitudes toward their children's multilingualism.

All participants, except for one, emphasized the importance of Finnish or Swedish as essential languages for their child(ren). The exception justified their response by stating

(1) *"We are not sure that we will stay in Finland"*.

Indicating recent relocation to Finland within the past year. On the other hand, this participant did acknowledge the significance of English for their children separately. The overwhelming majority (93.4%) of participants affirmed the importance of their children's oral Hebrew skills, as indicated by their positive responses to questions regarding comprehension and speaking abilities in Hebrew. This emphasis on Hebrew proficiency appeared to reflect a strong connection between the language and identity, with 72.2% of respondents having cited Israeli or Jewish heritage as a reason for prioritizing Hebrew maintenance, or in 52.8% of the responses the personal convenience of the parents reporting it was the most comfortable way for themselves to speak Hebrew at home (Figure 8). Example (2)

highlights parental internal conflict regarding language preferences—the speaker acknowledges feeling more comfortable communicating in English due to habit, but at the same time recognizes the significance of Hebrew as their native language and holds the ideology that speaking it will foster a stronger and more authentic connection with the child. This sentiment reflects the role language plays in shaping our sense of identity, cultural connection, and emotional intimacy.

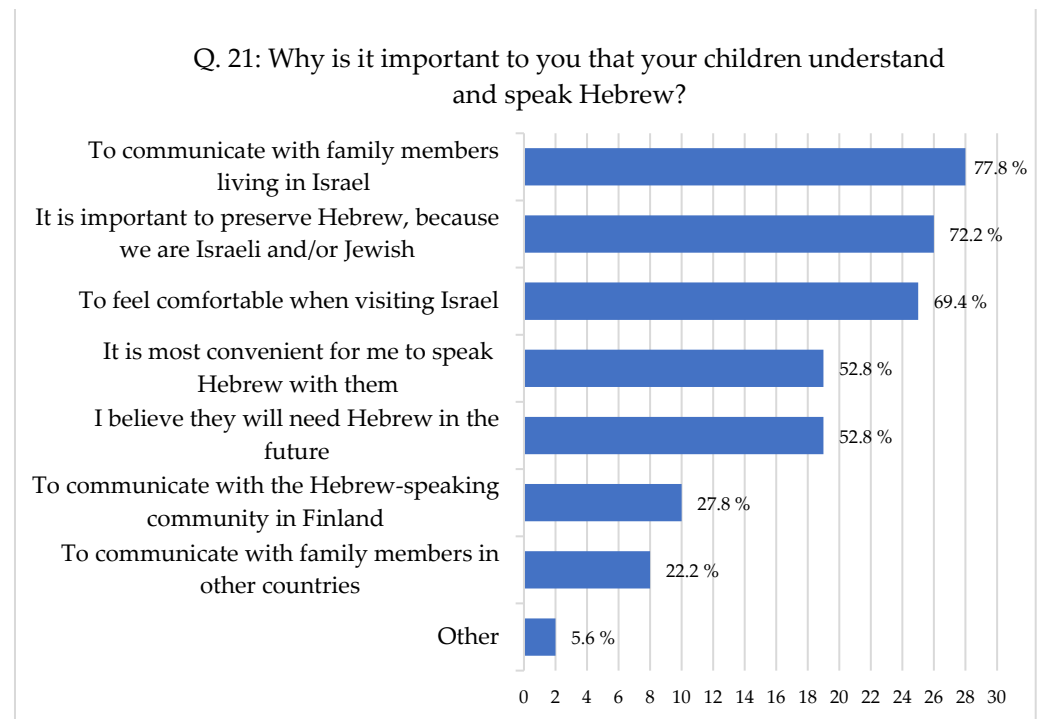


Figure 8. Importance of Hebrew oral skills.

- (2) *“I don’t know if I’m necessarily most comfortable talking to him in Hebrew, I’m more used to communicating in English these days, but Hebrew is my mother tongue so I believe that the relationship between us will be better and truer if I speak to him in my mother tongue”.*

Additionally, 52.8% of participants believed that Hebrew would be necessary for their children’s future. However, opinions regarding literacy in Hebrew were less uniform, with 77.8% considering it important for their children to read and write in Hebrew.

Raising children proficient in two languages is a prevalent FLP among parents actively making language choices for their children. The paramount factor influencing the parents’ FLP is overwhelmingly their personal experiences (Caldas 2012). Consistent with this, survey participants overwhelmingly expressed positive attitudes toward their children’s multilingualism in general. Alongside the 93.4% who considered it important to maintain their children’s oral Hebrew skills in Finland, 79.4% wanted their children to be bilingual in Hebrew and Finnish/Swedish, with the explanations often linked to three main reasons: preserving Jewish legacy in Finland (examples 3 and 4):

- (3) *“For a feeling of calling, for Judaism and Israel”.*
 (4) *“They have Israeli roots and that is part of their identity”.*

Feeling a sense of belonging to both countries (examples 5 and 6), with Example 5 demonstrating a multi-faceted approach to preserving Jewish legacy, where language serves as a bridge between cultural integration and ancestral heritage.

- (5) *“This is very important. Finnish because they live in Finland, and it is important to know the language of the country you live in. And Hebrew because we are Jews, and it is the language*

of our ancestors. We live in Finland so it is important that they learn the language and maybe one day we will live in Israel so it is important that they also know good Hebrew”.

- (6) *“In order to communicate with family members in both countries as well as feeling a double identity”.*

Additionally, facilitating communication (examples 7 and 8):

- (7) *“Opens options in life”.*

- (8) *“The two languages have a different communication audience”.*

A substantial part of the parents wanted their children to be multilingual in additional languages, with 58.3% specifically indicating English, which supported previous research on the prestige of English in Finland (e.g., Leppänen et al. 2011; Kontoniemi and Salo 2011). Language prestige and status play a crucial role in shaping FLP, while high-prestige languages, like English, enjoy greater appreciation, making them a more appealing and natural choice for families to adopt. Since 2000, English in Finland has evolved into a medium of instruction at all education levels. About 60% of Finns, particularly younger generations, are fluent in English largely due to formal education (Leppänen et al. 2011). Finland aims for “mother tongue plus two” proficiency, with English being a primary additional language (Kontoniemi and Salo 2011). The National Core Curriculum underscores English as a lingua franca, aligning with global communication principles (Zilliacus et al. 2017). English exposure through mass media has made it widely understood, and visible in commercial advertising (Leppänen et al. 2011). Attitudes toward English proficiency do not directly correlate with social exclusion but may signify detachment from an urban, international, and multicultural society (Leppänen et al. 2011).

A notable number of survey participants underscored the significance of English in their children’s linguistic development. While 8 participants (22.2%) indicated that English was either the sole or one of the languages acquired from birth, currently, 14 participants (38.9%) used English as a primary means of communication within their families on a daily basis. This included one participant and their spouse, both raised in English-speaking countries and exclusively using English at home, as well as 13 participants who integrated English alongside other languages. Furthermore, in 5 cases involving 17 children, English served as one of the languages of formal education. As mentioned above, 21 participants (58.3%) expressed aspirations for their children to excel in English in the future, citing its importance as a global language for both academic and professional endeavors:

- (9) *“English, because English is already needed in most of the good professions, and in the future even more”.*

- (10) *“English and Chinese, the two main languages for international success”.*

While English emerged as the primary additional language, Russian (19.4%) and Swedish (8.3%) were also mentioned by a number of participants. Russian was typically selected due to it being the native language of one parent or for communication with relatives, while Swedish was chosen as the parental language and Finland’s second official language. Regarding Russian, two respondents mentioned in an open-ended question that while Finnish was undoubtedly important, when faced with the choice between Russian and Hebrew, they prioritized Russian. One participant stated that besides Hebrew and Swedish, mastery of additional languages was not crucial, while 5 participants (13.9%) emphasized the importance of acquiring every new language.

- (11) *“Nothing specific, but I’m glad they’re trying to learn additional languages”.*

- (12) *“I wish him to learn many more languages”.*

From the above, I conclude that while all but one participant had positive ideologies about Finnish or Swedish as one of the main languages for their children, the majority of parents also had positive ideologies about the necessity of oral communication in Hebrew for their children, with still significant, but lower ideologies concerning Hebrew literacy. Furthermore, all the participants had a positive attitude towards bilingualism or multilingualism within their children. While the ideologies on which languages were more

important for the children, and reasons for choosing the languages for children varied, no participant showed a desire for their child(ren) to be monolingual, and neither showed concern about the disadvantages of multilingualism.

4.3. Parental Language Management

The linguistic input children are exposed to is one of the main determinants of whether language shift or language maintenance occurs (Spolsky 2004; Schwartz 2008). This section includes parental management of activities aimed at maintaining the input of multiple languages within the children, i.e., the languages parents use in everyday communication at home (with the spouse and the children), the possibilities they find for their children to communicate in Hebrew outside the home, and languages of formal and informal instruction for the children.

A total of 10 respondents (27.8%) reported adhering to one language policy at home, with 4 cases being Hebrew, 3—Finnish, 2—Russian, and 1—English. An additional 12 participants reported two languages being used at home, when in 9 of the cases Hebrew was one of the two. All the rest, 38.8% of the respondents, communicated in three or four languages, with Hebrew being one of them in all the cases. In other words, parental language management at home included Hebrew on a daily basis for 75% of the respondents. However, when divided into communication with the spouse or with the children, the results showed a different pattern. While 22.2% never communicated with the children in Hebrew, and 77.7% did it on a permanent basis, with the spouses 33.3% never used Hebrew, and used it on a regular basis—52.8%. Nevertheless, 5 out of the 12 participants who never used Hebrew with their spouses, used it regularly with the children, and 3 out of 19 participants (15.8%) who used Hebrew as the main language of communication with their spouses, never used it with the children, which shows thoughtful decisions concerning heritage Hebrew transmission. 13.9% of all the participants never used Hebrew either with the spouse or with the children, explaining this decision by either the convenience of speaking to the children in other languages, such as Finnish or Russian, or challenges in establishing efficient linguistic management:

- (13) *“Good question, I’ve been trying to answer it for several years. Apparently, it doesn’t happen because of wrong prioritization of tasks”.*

Regarding the use of spoken Hebrew outside the home, the parents’ responses were divided almost equally, with 55.6% responding that their children did not communicate in Hebrew outside the home, and 44.4% that they did. The examples of communication in Hebrew included extended families, such as the children’s grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins both in Israel and in Finland, friends, and the Jewish school and daycare, with the latter discussed in the next section.

Heritage Hebrew Education Management

According to official statistics in 2022, slightly over half (25) of all school-aged children registered with Hebrew as their native language (49) attended Hebrew complementary classes (Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) 2020). However, it is important to note that a vast majority of all Hebrew-speaking children in Finland are at least bilingual, and some parents due to the limitation in the system allowing registration of only one “mother tongue” (Palviainen and Bergroth 2018), opt to register their children with other languages, such as the language of compulsory education or English (as seen in the personal case of the researcher and several other families). Therefore, the actual Hebrew native language classes attendance percentage is impossible to determine precisely, but it is significantly less than half.

In the survey, Hebrew as one of the languages of formal education was reported by 4 participants, counting 12 children, while 4 other participants with 9 children reported their children to receive other kinds of Hebrew tutoring such as own mother tongue classes, classes provided by the community, or private lessons, making it 22.2% of the responses and 26.3% of the 80 children assessed in the survey who received external Hebrew teaching.

Nevertheless, the conclusions on the lack of classes or non-compliance with the Finnish education standards, as well as on the feeling of own responsibility for transmitting Hebrew literacy to the children, were supported by responses to the question addressing challenges hindering the maintenance of Hebrew literacy among children (Figure 9).

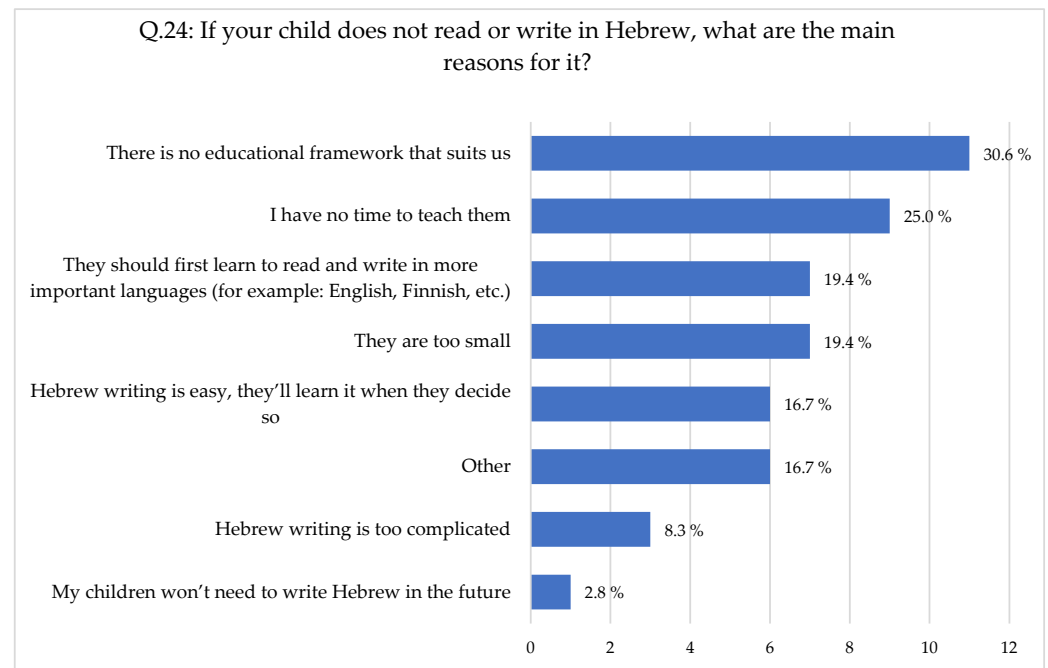


Figure 9. Challenges in Hebrew literacy maintenance among children.

The primary explanations included the absence of a suitable educational framework (cited by 30.6% of respondents) and the parents' personal lack of time to teach written Hebrew to their children at home (25%). Some parents elaborated on this:

(14) *"Because of moving to Finland".*

(15) *"He reads well. The writing will come when he needs it".*

A number of answers to the question about Hebrew literacy management also reflected the presence of well-thought management strategies within the participants, as well as planning of various possibilities in the future:

(16) *"It doesn't matter for me now. I would like them to decide if they need to learn Hebrew. If my kids reveal the interest for learning Hebrew, then I will do my best to help them to do so".*

(17) *"Their life is here (in Finland) and there and they might want to come back (to Israel)".*

As we see from the above, the management of Hebrew transmission within the survey participants involved various strategies. While many parents prioritized Hebrew in daily communication at home, they admitted challenges arising in terms of external Hebrew education. Some parents demonstrated thoughtful planning for Hebrew literacy development by providing Hebrew education for the children, while others deliberately decided to support other languages while allowing children to make their own decisions regarding Hebrew.

4.4. Finland vs. Pan-European Patterns

The aim of this section is to compare the patterns within the Hebrew-speaking community in Finland to the broader pan-European pattern described in [Dimenstein and Kaplan's \(2017\)](#) study on Israeli families in Europe aimed at investigating their level of engagement within their social networks and local Jewish communities. Despite gathering a substantial number of responses—890 in total out of approximately 100,000 Israelis permanently residing in Europe—only 9 responses originated from Finland. I conducted a comparison between the results

presented in the “Raising Children” section (Dimenstein and Kaplan 2017, pp. 33–37) and the responses to questions 3, 9, 19–23, and 27 provided by the survey participants in Finland (Table 1).

Table 1. Finland vs. Pan-European patterns.

	Dimenstein and Kaplan (2017)	Finland 2023
Importance of the following to the children, parental ideologies:		
Speaking Hebrew	85%	93.4%
Hebrew literacy	79%	77.8%
To nurture the Israeli and Jewish components of their complex identity	65%	72.2%
Do your children participate in any Jewish and/or Israeli education frameworks?		
Jewish day school	14%	11.1%
Occasional activities	22%	11.1%
None of the above	58%	77.8%

Regarding parental ideologies, the percentage of respondents from Finland who considered speaking Hebrew important for their children was higher compared to the Pan-European average, whereas the significance of literacy appeared to be nearly equal. As for parental linguistic management, namely, the children’s external exposure to Hebrew, similar proportions of children were reported to attend Jewish day schools in both Finnish and Pan-European surveys. However, participation in occasional activities was significantly lower in Finland, where almost 80% of children did not participate in any Jewish or Israeli activities, contrasting with the 58% reported in the Pan-European survey.

Dimenstein and Kaplan’s (2017) study also examined parental education levels and their perspectives on their children’s oral and written Hebrew proficiency, as well as the importance of nurturing their Jewish or Israeli identity. While over 70% of respondents consistently emphasized the importance of both spoken and written Hebrew for their children, those with doctoral qualifications notably assigned lower importance ratings to various aspects related to transmitting Jewish values and culture. These aspects included their children’s connection to Jewish traditions and heritage, as well as fostering their affinity with Israel. In the present research, drawing conclusions based on the responses from participants with a doctoral degree proved challenging due to the limited sample size (three responses). However, slightly over half of participants with a graduate degree expressed the importance of a Jewish or Israeli identity for their children, while in all other education groups, the proportion exceeded two-thirds, aligning closely with responses from the pan-European survey. Regarding spoken Hebrew, trends observed in the Finnish results mirrored those in the Pan-European survey. However, in Finland approximately 60% of participants with vocational education considered literacy as unnecessary for their children (Table 2).

Table 2. Parental education level and their attitudes towards Hebrew maintenance.

Dimenstein and Kaplan (2017)				Finland 2023		
How Important to You Are the Following Goals for Your Children?						
Parental Education	Qr1 *	Qr2 **	Qr3 ***	Qr1 *	Qr2 **	Qr3 ***
High school	84%	86%	75%	100%	100%	100%
Vocational education	88%	73%	65%	80%	40%	80%
Undergraduate	82%	76%	62%	100%	78.6%	78.6%
Graduate	84%	79%	67%	90.9%	72.7%	54.5%
PhD	88%	90%	62%	66.7%	66.7%	66.7%

* Understand and speak Hebrew; ** Hebrew literacy; *** Jewish and/or Israeli identity.

5. Discussion

5.1. Summary of Findings

Positive attitudes towards multilingualism were evident, with all the parents expressing a desire for their children to be bilingual or multilingual. Parents emphasized the importance of mastering the languages of the environment for their children, alongside a strong focus on heritage Hebrew maintenance. The overwhelming majority of parents reported the significance of oral Hebrew skills, citing reasons such as cultural significance, present or future utility, and a sense of belonging to Israeli or Jewish heritage. While there was a positive attitude towards the children's Hebrew literacy among many parents, challenges such as limited educational opportunities and personal time constraints were acknowledged. English emerged as a prestigious language, reflecting broader societal trends favoring its acquisition for personal and professional purposes. Additionally, Russian held significance for some of the parents with Russian heritage or family ties, which reflected the diverse linguistic landscape within Hebrew-speaking families in Finland. While Hebrew was prioritized for its connection to Jewish identity, Russian was valued as a means of communication with relatives.

Parental language management at home varied, with Hebrew commonly used alongside Finnish or other languages. The parental management of heritage Hebrew transmission involved various strategies, including language use at home, seeking external Hebrew education opportunities, and communicating with other Hebrew speakers. Many parents prioritized Hebrew in daily communication at home, with 75% of respondents incorporating Hebrew into their daily interactions. However, challenges arose in terms of both formal and informal Hebrew education, with only 26.3% of the children receiving external Hebrew teaching.

Family language ideology reported by the parents may not always align with family language practices (De Houwer 2017; Fishman et al. 1985; Kopeliovich 2010; Spolsky 2004). Thus, investigating the correlation between parental language ideology and language management strategies in the family is crucial to understanding its impact on the children's HL knowledge (Schwartz 2008). In terms of parental language practices, the survey revealed various approaches among participants in managing their children's multilingualism, which did not always fully align with their stated language ideologies. While many parents' ideologies prioritized Hebrew in daily communication at home, they faced challenges in providing sufficient input of Hebrew to the children.

The findings indicated a disparity between the importance of their children understanding and speaking Hebrew and the language practices within the families. While 93.4% of the participants claimed that oral proficiency in Hebrew in their children was important for them, 31.3% of children were reported to have a low or non-existent understanding of Hebrew, and 33.8% of the children spoke Hebrew at a low level or did not speak it at all. A total of 16.3% of the children (13 out of 80) did not possess any Hebrew skills.

Literacy skills showed a significant decline, with only 12.5% able to read well and 10% able to write on a good or excellent level. Birth order analysis revealed mixed trends, with first-borns generally exhibiting higher proficiency initially, but the connection between birth order and Hebrew skills was complex, influenced by factors like sibling interactions, age, and duration of residence in Finland. Siblings played a significant role in shaping language dynamics, with Finnish emerging as the only language of communication in 39.3% of families with two or more children, correlating with the length of residency in Finland. While Hebrew remained significant in some households, its everyday use declined over time, highlighting the challenge of heritage Hebrew attrition.

The results showed a discrepancy between the parents' ideologies regarding the necessity for their children to be literate in Hebrew and the language management and practices in the families. While Hebrew literacy was considered important within 77.8% of the participants, and taking into account the fact that 9 children were aged 0 to 3 years, 13 were aged 4–6 years, and not taking into account their literacy skills, of the remaining children aged 7 years and older, not many children were reported to be literate in Hebrew.

on an excellent or good level—out of 58 children, 9 for reading (15.5%) and 7 for writing (12.1%). A total of 25.9% of the children aged 7 and older were completely illiterate in Hebrew, and in 10.3% of the cases, the children were able to read basic Hebrew on a low level but did not write it at all.

The analysis of patterns within the Finnish Hebrew-speaking community compared to the broader Pan-European survey responses (Dimenstein and Kaplan 2017) revealed largely similar trends. Finnish parents displayed a slightly greater emphasis on speaking Hebrew for their children compared to the Pan-European average, while responses on literacy importance were similar. Attendance rates in Jewish educational frameworks were comparable, while participation in Jewish activities notably lagged in Finland compared to Europe. This finding may signify a heightened risk of heritage Hebrew attrition within the Finnish setting, since language socialization within the HL-speaking community, including both communication within the community and educational support with HLs, plays a vital role in promoting the ideologies associated with the HL. These ideologies, in turn, shape individuals' attitudes towards HL use, motivation to maintain the HL, and their sense of cultural identity (King 2001; Duranti et al. 2012).

5.2. FLPs of Hebrew-Speaking Parents in Finland

The first research question focused on exploring the FLPs within Hebrew-speaking families in Finland. Survey results revealed several aspects of these FLPs. Firstly, parents acknowledged the significance of the official languages of Finland, primarily Finnish but sometimes Swedish, recognizing their societal importance for the children. Emphasis on the significance of oral Hebrew proficiency, often linked to Jewish identity, cultural heritage preservation, communication facilitation, and perceived future necessity, also proved to be notable. Despite this emphasis, the practice showed less uniform results, as evidenced by 22.2% of respondents who never communicated with their children in Hebrew. Additionally, Hebrew served as either the only or one of the everyday languages of communication in only 29.2% of families with two or more children, and in 55.6% of cases, children did not communicate in Hebrew outside of the home.

Despite the majority of parents expressing positive attitudes towards the importance of Hebrew literacy for their children, the actual levels of Hebrew literacy among the surveyed children were notably lower. While over three-quarters of respondents considered it important for their children to read and write in Hebrew, the survey findings indicated significant challenges in achieving this goal. Only a small percentage of children demonstrated proficiency in reading and writing Hebrew, with the majority either lacking these skills entirely or showing a low proficiency level. Several factors were reported to contribute to this disparity. First, the limited availability of Hebrew education programs, both within formal schooling and extracurricular activities, was reported to pose significant challenges to implementing effective Hebrew literacy instruction. Second, parental time constraints and competing priorities also impacted the promotion of Hebrew literacy—a quarter of the parents cited personal lack of time as a barrier to teaching written Hebrew to their children at home. Additionally, parental beliefs on Hebrew language instruction and the future needs of the children negatively affected the children's Hebrew literacy.

Furthermore, the survey indicated that all the parents held positive attitudes towards bilingualism or multilingualism, with a majority expressing a wish for their children to be bilingual in Hebrew and Finnish/Swedish. Additionally, a substantial number of parents also expressed a hope for their children to excel in English, reflecting both its global status as a lingua franca and its prestige in Finland. Interestingly, Russian also held significance as an HL for almost 20% of the respondents, either due to being the native language of one of the parents or for communication with relatives.

Overall, the disparity between parental ideologies on Hebrew literacy and the actual proficiency levels among children underscored the complexity of language maintenance in multilingual contexts. With concerted efforts to provide comprehensive support for Hebrew literacy development, such as providing external educational programs and resources for

the caregivers for home-based language learning, it may be possible to narrow the gap between parental ideologies and children's Hebrew practices.

Regarding Hebrew management at home, Hebrew was used on a daily basis alongside other languages by a majority of respondents. However, some parents did not consistently use Hebrew with their spouses or children, indicating varied approaches to language management at home. Furthermore, approximately half of the respondents reported that their children did not communicate in Hebrew outside the home, while the other half reported interactions in Hebrew with extended family members, friends, and activities provided by the Jewish school and daycare in Helsinki.

Research findings suggested that over half of the Hebrew-speaking parents were successful in creating language management strategies conducive to the development of oral language skills among their children. These findings underscored the essential role of parental input and exposure in fostering language acquisition of HLs in a different environment language. On the other hand, the survey revealed a significant lack of literacy among children in Hebrew-speaking families. Only a small percentage of children were able to read or write Hebrew on a good or excellent level, with the majority exhibiting limited or non-existent literacy skills. This gap in literacy proficiency underscored the need for comprehensive language support and intervention. While parental involvement and support play a crucial role in fostering HL development and proficiency among children (e.g., [Montrul 2015](#); [Melo-Pfeifer 2015](#)), the importance of collaborative efforts between families, educators, and community stakeholders in promoting multilingualism and cultural diversity is vital.

English and Russian languages also proved to play a role in the language dynamics within Hebrew-speaking families in Finland. English, being a lingua franca in Finland ([Leppänen et al. 2011](#)), was cited by slightly over a third of the participants either as the primary or one of the family languages, often chosen for communication with non-Hebrew-speaking spouses or due to its perceived importance for the children's future. In three cases, English was utilized as one of the languages between siblings. Russian, the major immigrant language spoken by 1.6% of the Finnish population as a first language ([Official Statistics Finland 2022](#)), played a significant role within Hebrew-speaking families as well. It was reported as the only or one of the family languages by a third of the respondents, while in a third of these families, Russian was used as the primary language of communication among siblings, despite the substantial time of residence of these families in Finland. This number surpassed the number of families where Hebrew was the only language of communication between the siblings, indicating the complexity of language choices within these households. This variation can be attributed to several factors, including the notable discrepancy in the sizes of the two linguistic communities, the accessibility of formal and informal Russian education ([Viimaranta et al. 2019](#)), and, naturally, parental beliefs regarding the significance of various languages for their children.

5.3. Factors Influencing Heritage Hebrew Transmission

The second research question inquired about factors that influence the maintenance of heritage Hebrew among Hebrew-speaking families in Finland. A multitude of factors influence the maintenance of Hebrew in Finland, revealing the complex interplay between societal, familial, and individual factors shaping the linguistic landscape. A comprehensive examination of these factors revealed both challenges and opportunities in transmitting Hebrew language skills to children in Finland. This section describes the most prominent factors that appeared in the survey responses.

Parental language ideologies and attitudes regarding the importance of Hebrew maintenance played a significant role in shaping their efforts to transmit the language to their children. While there was a strong emphasis on the significance of oral Hebrew proficiency, with the main reasons being preserving Jewish identity and facilitating communication, there were noticeable gaps between the perceived importance of Hebrew literacy and the actual proficiency levels among children. Parents generally valued Hebrew literacy;

however, challenges such as time constraints and competing priorities often hindered their abilities to prioritize Hebrew literacy development.

Language practices at home, including the languages used between family members, played a crucial role in language maintenance. Within many families, Hebrew was frequently integrated alongside other languages in daily communication; nevertheless, there were variations in language management strategies among families—while some parents consistently used Hebrew with their spouses and children, others decided not to do so. Siblings also played a significant role in shaping each other's language development and language choices, with a notable shift towards Finnish as the primary language of communication among siblings, particularly correlated with the duration of residence in Finland. Additionally, sibling interactions showed various patterns depending on the siblings' birth order. The shift away from Hebrew as the primary sibling language contributed to challenges in Hebrew maintenance and in some cases to its attrition.

The extent of Hebrew communication outside the home, including interactions with extended family, and friends, and participation in Jewish or Israeli activities, also proved to influence Hebrew maintenance. While some children engaged in activities that provided opportunities for Hebrew language use, others had limited exposure to Hebrew outside the home, contributing to Hebrew attrition.

Regarding institutional support with HL maintenance, Finnish policies strongly support complementary education in HLs; nevertheless, there are challenges in implementation (Venäläinen et al. 2022), including teacher shortages in certain languages and logistical constraints. Consistent with this, a substantial part of the participants underscored challenges in accessing educational programs in Hebrew.

Finally, and of paramount importance, the influence of other languages significantly shaped the management of heritage Hebrew. Finnish (and in some cases Swedish), as the dominant environment language, is essential for cultural integration and societal integration in Finland. Given its role as the primary language of instruction in Finnish schools, the emphasis on Finnish education may limit the time and resources available for Hebrew language development. English, as a global lingua franca and a prestigious language in Finland, proved to hold significance for many Hebrew-speaking families, with a substantial number of parents expressing a strong desire for their children to excel in English, and in several instances, prioritizing it over Hebrew due to its perceived importance for the children's future opportunities. Additionally, Russian has been shown to have a considerable impact on language dynamics within Hebrew-speaking families. With a substantial presence in Israel, spoken by approximately 15% to 20% of the population (Dovrin and Admon 2022; Perelmuter 2018; Kopeliovich 2010), and reported as one of the everyday communication languages by a third of the survey participants, Russian also shaped the language dynamics within Hebrew-speaking families in Finland. Russian was mainly used either because it was one of the native languages of a parent alongside Hebrew, or due to communication preferences within the extended family.

In considering the broader context, it is noteworthy to mention a significant sociopolitical factor that was neither addressed in the survey nor reflected on by the participants but holds relevance to the discussion. The recent surge in antisemitism in Finland following 7 October 2023 (Czimbalmos et al. 2023; Hanhivaara 2023; Jäärni 2023), aligns with existing data indicating that 15% of Finns openly expressed antisemitic attitudes (Tuori 2022) can potentially hinder the intergenerational transmission of Hebrew as an HL and impact the implementation of FLPs. Similar concerns have been observed globally, with numerous incidents reported by prominent news outlets of individuals being targeted for speaking Hebrew in public (e.g., Lynn 2023; Dayan 2023; Howe 2024). Additionally, there are concerns regarding the safety of speaking Hebrew publicly in Nordic countries, as evidenced by advisories from Jewish congregations, such as the recommendation by the Jewish congregation in Gothenburg to avoid displaying Jewish symbols in public or speaking Hebrew openly (Radio Sweden 2023).

Overall, a combination of parental attitudes and beliefs, language practices within the home environment, external exposure to Hebrew, educational support, and the influence of other languages were the main factors contributing to the maintenance or attrition of heritage Hebrew among Hebrew-speaking families in Finland. Efforts to address these factors comprehensively are necessary to promote the successful transmission of heritage Hebrew in Finland.

6. Conclusions

The data in this study were derived from a sociolinguistic survey aimed at understanding FLPs within a specific linguistic minority group, namely Hebrew-speaking families with children in Finland. It offered a focal perspective on the language ideologies, management strategies, and everyday language practices of this minority language community. The study highlighted the complex interplay of factors influencing the maintenance of heritage Hebrew in Finland. While parents expressed strong positive attitudes towards multilingualism and the importance of Hebrew proficiency for preserving cultural identity, challenges such as limited educational opportunities, time constraints, and competing language priorities impacted the transmission of Hebrew language skills to children, with a notable disparity between parental ideologies regarding Hebrew literacy and the actual literacy levels among children. Family language practices, sibling interactions, and exposure to Hebrew outside the home further shaped the family language dynamics. To ensure the successful preservation of heritage Hebrew in Finland, it is imperative to foster collaboration among families, educators, and community stakeholders in offering comprehensive support for language development.

In terms of limitations, it is important to note that the current survey was exploratory in nature, serving as the preliminary phase of a larger study on FLPs within Hebrew-speaking families in Finland. While it captured insights from a substantial segment of Hebrew-speaking parents in Finland, it is essential to recognize that multilingual families are highly diverse, each embodying a unique variety of languages that shapes their identity (Aronin 2016). Consequently, making generalizations based on the study findings may be challenging.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the survey was not explicitly tailored for correlational analyses to investigate causal relationships between parental ideologies, management strategies, and practices should be viewed with caution, and the conclusions be considered provisional. Nevertheless, this study has identified several factors that should be examined in future research on FLPs within multilingual Hebrew-speaking families. These factors include interactions between different family members, educational opportunities, and sociopolitical context.

The findings of the survey underscore the potential for further exploration of FLPs within Hebrew-speaking families not only in Finland but also within the broader context of the Nordic countries. Conducting research in this area can offer valuable insights into the specific challenges and opportunities encountered by Hebrew speakers in their efforts to transmit the language to the next generation.

The study contributes to the field of HLs by examining the specific combination of languages involved, namely Hebrew as a heritage language and Finnish as the majority language. It provides insights into the dynamics and challenges of maintaining the heritage of Hebrew, a language linked to a very specific religion and history of a nation-state, within the Finnish context. Additionally, the study contributes to the field of FLPs by examining the language policies of immigrant Israeli families in the Nordic context, shedding light on the factors influencing language transmission and maintenance within these families.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study based on several factors: anonymous nature of data collection, minimal risk posed to participants, absence of vulnerable populations, and strict adherence to GDPR compliance standards.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study (Appendix A).

Data Availability Statement: The data are not publicly available. Portions of the data that do not compromise participant anonymity are available upon request from the author.

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Appendix A

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

I understand that:

My participation in research is completely voluntary, and I can terminate it at any time without providing a reason.

I have the right to withdraw my consent and request the researcher to delete any data already collected. I understand that, at that stage, the researcher may have only anonymized data, but she will make every effort to delete my data.

The researcher will not dispose of my identity or any information that could potentially reveal my identity.

I can ask the researcher for more information about the research, and she will answer my questions.

- I agree;
- I do not agree.

1. Age: (OPEN QUESTION).

2. Gender: male/female/other/prefer not to answer.

3. Educational background (choose highest degree):

- Comprehensive school;
- High school;
- Vocational training;
- Bachelor's degree;
- Master's degree;
- Doctorate degree.

4. What languages do you speak, and at what age were you exposed to each of the languages?

For example: Hebrew—0, French—0, English—6, Finnish—30.

5. Does at least one of your parents speak Hebrew as a first language?

- Yes, one of them;
- Yes, both;
- No.

6. How long have you lived in Finland?

- Less than a year;
- 1–3 years;
- 4–9 years;
- 10–20 years;
- over 20 years.

7. Have you ever lived in any other country except for Israel or Finland? Yes/No. If you have, name the country/countries. (OPEN QUESTION).

7A. If you answered “yes” to the previous question, where, from what age, and for how many years?

8. Which language(s) do you use in your working life in Finland? (OPEN QUESTION).

9. Which languages are spoken in your family on an everyday level? (OPEN QUESTION).

10. Do you speak Hebrew with. . . .? Yes/No/Occasionally/Not relevant.

- Your parents;
- Your siblings;
- Your partner;
- Your children;
- Your friends.

10A. You can elaborate on your language choice here: (OPEN QUESTION).

11. Where else (in which places or situations, except family and work) do you use Hebrew? (OPEN QUESTION).

12. I have children aged:

- 0–3;
- 4–6;
- 7–11;
- 12–15;
- 16–18;
- 19+.

13. How well can your child speak Hebrew? (If you have more than one child, explain the situation of each child: child 1, child 2, etc.), SLIDING SCALE.

Excellent/Good/Intermediate/Poor/Non/existent.

14. How well can your child understand Hebrew? (If you have more than one child, explain the situation of each child: child 1, child 2, etc.), SLIDING SCALE.

15. How well can your child read Hebrew? (If you have more than one child, explain the situation of each child: child 1, child 2, etc.), SLIDING SCALE.

16. How well can your child write Hebrew? (If you have more than one child, explain the situation of each child: child 1, child 2, etc.), SLIDING SCALE.

17. Do your child/children use Hebrew outside the home? Yes/no/not all the children.

17A. If you answered “yes”, where and with whom? Be specific about each child.

18. Is your child/are your children taught Hebrew outside the home?

19. Is it important for you that your child is able to understand Hebrew? Yes/no.

20. Is it important for you that your child is able to speak Hebrew? Yes/no.

21. Why is it important to you that your children understand and speak Hebrew? If you answered “no” in the previous question, skip the question.

- To communicate with family members living in Israel;
- To communicate with family members in other countries;
- To feel comfortable when visiting Israel;
- It is most convenient for me to speak Hebrew with them;
- It is important to preserve Hebrew, because we are Israeli and/or Jewish;
- I believe they will need Hebrew in the future;
- To communicate with the Hebrew-speaking community in Finland;
- Other.

21A. If you answered “other”, explain.

22. Is it important for you that your child is able to read Hebrew?

23. Is it important for you that your child is able to write Hebrew?

24. If your child does not read or write in Hebrew, what are the main reasons for it?

- They read and write in Hebrew;
- I have no time to teach them;
- Hebrew writing is easy, they will learn it fast when they decide to;
- Hebrew writing is too complicated;

- My children will not need to write Hebrew in the future;
- They should first learn to read and write in more important languages (for example, English, Finnish, etc.);
- They are too small;
- There is no educational framework that suits us;
- Other.

24A. If you answered “other” in the previous question, please specify.

24B. If the reasons are different for every child, please specify.

25. Is it important to you that your child/children master both languages, Hebrew and Finnish (Swedish)? Why?

25A. Are there other languages that you think your child should master? Why?

26. If there are several children in the family, what language(s) do the children speak to one another?

27. What is the child(ren)’s main language of compulsory education?

28. Would you be willing to be interviewed on the subject? If so, I would be very happy if you could contact me via my email or WhatsApp, which appears at the beginning of the questionnaire. Alternatively, you can leave your email here and I will contact you.

Note

- ¹ “By law, everyone in Finland has one registered mother tongue in the Population Information System. The registered language is, above all, a tool for administrative division and planning for the arrangement of society’s services. It does not show how an individual perceives his or her own language, i.e., linguistic identity, or how the individual relates to other languages. There is no legal or linguistic definition for bilingualism at the individual level. When talking about bilingualism at the individual level, the question is who considers himself or herself to be bilingual” (Prime Minister’s Office 2012).

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