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# Language in multilingual families during the COVID-19 pandemic in Norway: a survey of challenges and opportunities

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**Abstract:** The first lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in school closures and homeschooling for families across the world. This provided a unique scenario to investigate multilingual family language interaction, and specifically, challenges and opportunities for home language (HL) use. This study is rooted in Family Language Policy (FLP) research, building on previous models of language policy as language beliefs, practices and management, as it addresses the effects of the lockdown on the use of, and exposure to, HLs. An online survey was used to assess the language beliefs, practices and management in a sample of families in Norway, a country with a significant and complex linguistic diversity. Our results indicate overall positive attitudes towards multilingualism in Norway, which are associated with an increased use of, and exposure to, Norwegian and HLs during the lockdown. Furthermore, we find a unique presence of English in multilingual families in Norway, especially across online spaces. Lastly, our study shows that the perception of multilingualism as a source of well-being is associated with positive effects of the lockdown in the use of HLs during the pandemic. We contend that this result can be taken as an example that, even in dire times of despair, families can find opportunities to promote multilingualism and language maintenance.

**Keywords:** Covid-19 pandemic; Family Language Policy; language maintenance; multilingualism; well-being

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# 1 Introduction

The ongoing global pandemic of Covid-19 has caused a major impact on all aspects of human interaction, including family language communication and children's overall language development. In this respect, multilingual families have experienced a unique change in their daily dynamics due to school closures, home confinements, homeschooling, and the impossibility to travel for extensive periods of time. This situation created a once-in-a-lifetime scenario to study the challenges and opportunities multilingual families faced during the pandemic. In an increasingly globalized world with mounting migration across borders, children growing up with more than one language have become a rather frequent phenomenon (Lanza and Lexander 2019). Nonetheless, multilingual families are heterogeneous and so are their family language dynamics. Moreover, the political, demographic, and socio-cultural factors around children growing up multilingual can be radically different depending on the country, the linguistic diversity, and the socio-cognitive environment. While these factors pertain to the general field of Language Policy, family language interaction not only concerns language policy but also child language acquisition, upon which the field of Family Language Policy (FLP) was originally founded (King et al. 2008).

FLP brings together the study of language acquisition and language policy by focusing on the social environments and caretakers' ideologies and decision-making strategies that influence children's developmental trajectories and, in connection with formal schooling, impact their future use of, and relation to, minority and home languages (HL), including the development of literacy skills (Curdt-Christiansen 2018; King et al. 2008). In spite of the extensive research on language socialization in children, the perspective on the family as a social nucleus under FLP has only gained focus in the last ten years, most likely due to increased transnational mobility in Europe and North America, which has drawn attention to multilingualism worldwide (Wright and Higgins 2022). These new waves of international mobility are precisely what may have shifted the tradition of studying multilingual language acquisition from a comparative approach with monolinguals, as noted in Serratrice (2019), to focusing on the diversity of factors that influence the multilingual experience as a whole (De Houwer 2022; Lanza and Lomeu Gomes 2020; Schalley and Eisenschlas 2020). Here, FLP can offer a more holistic approach to the study of child language development.

The three components of FLP, deeply rooted in Spolsky's (2004) tripartite model of language policy, are language beliefs, language practices, and language management. *Language beliefs* refer to the attitudes and ideologies surrounding a language or languages in the family and community. Accordingly, Sevinç (2016) showed that HL identity decreases across generations, with first-generation immigrants more

likely feeling stronger linguistic identity through their language, which decreases in second and third generation immigrants. In addition, multilingual speakers with immigrant backgrounds can experience language anxiety, which ultimately affects language maintenance over time (Sevinç and Dewaele 2018). While positive or negative linguistic attitudes towards multilingualism may be related to family socio-economic status (SES), an environment that fosters positive views towards multilingualism might promote language use and maintenance. This is not only in the case for spoken language, as attitudes towards early bilingualism in the family have been found to have a major impact on the development of literacy in the HL as well (Kang 2015). Moreover, societal language ideologies play a role, with a hierarchy of languages at play in each society, often with English at the top. *Language practices* comprise the choices caretakers make about language use in their family. Some may choose to follow a One-Person-One-Language (OPOL) strategy (Ronjat 1913), whereas others may switch languages in their daily conversation (Lanza 2004). Although these practices done regularly could be construed as policy, observation data on parental language practices indicate that parents who claim this policy do not always maintain it and rather switch between languages. Lastly, *language management*, or planning, according to Spolsky (2004), referred to the impact of individuals' or groups' actions that influence language beliefs and practices, and ultimately, possible changes in linguistic behavior. When it comes to family language management, such actions might come indirectly or directly. For instance, a caretaker might choose not to respond to their child if they choose the "incorrect" or unexpected language, to which the child might infer the need to switch languages to continue communication. In other cases, caretakers might offer more direct forms of reward or sanction. More recently, Spolsky (2019: 323) called for a modified and enriched theory of language policy (and management), in which he posits that language policy "may be blocked or hampered by non-linguistic forces such as genocide, conquest, colonization, introduced diseases, slavery, corruption and natural disasters". Covid-19 was indeed such a drastic non-linguistic force that had an impact on personal language management in the home. Spolsky's model is widely accepted in the field of FLP, although several authors point at more holistic views that interpret all three constructs as a continuum where such policies depend on explicit as well as implicit choices (Caldas 2012; Slavkov 2017). Indeed, in line with current approaches to the study of language policy, implicit and patterned language practices across time can form *de facto* language policies, also in the home.

While language beliefs, practices and management are crucial to understanding the environment surrounding the child's language development, children's ability to communicate, read and write in the parents' or caretakers' language(s) is highly dependent on their access to input in the minority HL. The amount and variety of the input, such as the diversity of speakers and contexts in which the HL is used, plays an

important role in language development (Unsworth 2016). Subsequently, the more types and sources of input in the HL, the greater the chances of a richer multilingual experience. Often, the only source of input is from the caretaker(s), and a more diverse community of speakers is not always readily available to the child. In this respect, children's only chance to secure diverse sources of input is family abroad.

Socio-affective factors are also crucial for children's language development. In their systematic review, Hollebeke et al. (2020) report a number of studies that relate socio-emotional well-being to FLP (cf. De Houwer 2020). Positive or negative emotions towards the HL are heavily associated with linguistic outcomes: "Linguistic well-being, on the one hand, refers to positive or negative emotions related to language acquisition, proficiency, use, etc. (e.g., parental frustration due to a child's low home language (HL) proficiency or reluctant HL use). Socioemotional well-being, on the other hand, involves family relations, identity, general feelings of well-being, etc." (Hollebeke et al. 2020: 4). When families are able to create a solid emotional connection to the HL and culture, they might create stronger family cohesion (Tannenbaum and Berkovich 2005), which potentially may lead to more use and higher proficiency in the HL (Hollebeke et al. 2020).

Considering the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on multilingual families, some questions must be addressed. As we have discussed, growing up in multilingual households is greatly influenced by the language beliefs and attitudes around the child (whether positive or negative), the language practices at home (e.g., input and environment provided by the caretakers), and the language management, for instance, the interventions and initiatives taken to use the HL. These are heavily influenced by the factors and conditions in the surrounding environment, and ultimately, are subject to any major changes that might affect social interaction inside and outside the home (Mirvahedi 2020; Purkarthofer et al. 2021).

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, whether positive, negative or neutral, have already been studied across a range of developmental and psychosocial factors. For instance, von Soest et al. (2022) found that gender and SES were predictors for social satisfaction and well-being in adolescents in Norway, where girls and adolescents with lower SES experienced more adverse changes during the pandemic. In a study of English as a Foreign Language in Germany, Hopp and Thoma (2020) found no negative effects of school closures on the foreign language vocabulary or grammar of school age children. Lastly, a study of the stressors of Covid-19 in family life in the United States reported that anxiety and perceived negative effects of the pandemic in the family increased the risk of moderate depression (Crandall et al. 2022). However, participants who expressed more positive associations towards family well-being were less likely to experience depression and anxiety symptoms. It is clear that the effects of the pandemic are various and exist across countries and populations.

## 1.1 This study

The Covid-19 pandemic provided a unique scenario that offers multilingual families not only challenges but also opportunities for the use of, in particular, minoritized languages in multilingual families. To address this, research should concentrate on the relationship of the three components of FLP during the lockdown in a specific context. Norway presents an excellent locus for investigating these issues due to the wide language diversity in the country and greater tolerance for linguistic diversity, given its two written norms (Bokmål and Nynorsk) and acceptance of dialects in all situations, both formal and informal. There is, however, some tension when this ideology of acceptance meets diversity from migration, creating disturbances and dilemmas (cf. Røyneland and Lanza 2023). Mother tongue instruction is a good example. Scandinavia has had waves of acceptance and repeal of such instruction across the years (cf. Salö et al. 2018). In Norway, the Education Act currently states that students whose mother tongue is other than Norwegian or Sámi are entitled to special training in Norwegian until they are proficient enough in Norwegian to follow the regular school teaching. If necessary, these students are also entitled to mother tongue teaching. Using the mother tongue is only meant as a transition in schools until the children are able to follow the teaching in accordance with the regular curriculum in Norwegian. As for kindergarten or preschool children, there are some communities that have organized complementary or Saturday instruction in the respective HL.

Multilingual families faced important challenges during the lockdown that might have limited the input in HLs, such as the inability to travel to the home country or attending extracurricular activities in the HL outside the home. However, home office and homeschooling might have provided opportunities for further interaction between caretakers and children in the HL. In this study, we will indicate how the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown are associated with each component of FLP, across a variety of families in one country – Norway, with diverse family language constellations. We address the following questions:

- 1) What are the beliefs about multilingualism in multilingual families in Norway, and how do they shape language practices and management during the lockdown?
- 2) What are the language practices and activities in the HL and Norwegian before and during the lockdown and social distancing measures?
- 3) What is the impact of school closures and social distancing measures on children's exposure to, and use of, Norwegian and the HL?

We expected parental beliefs to show associations with language practices and management during the lockdown (i.e., more positive attitudes towards

multilingualism could lead to more use of the HLs during the pandemic). This should reflect in more time and more activities using the HLs during the lockdown than before, for those families who value multilingualism. Moreover, we anticipated that the closing of schools would contribute to more use of the HL, since many children spent less time than usual in a Norwegian-speaking environment. While case studies may provide in depth understanding of one family, we deemed a questionnaire survey would be able to tap on to the diversity of families and their experiences, and thus provide enough data to observe some statistical tendencies in a population.

## 2 Methods

### 2.1 Participants

A total of 193 multilingual families with children in Norway (see Appendix I for geographical distribution) participated in the study. Participants were recruited through social media posts and social networks in public libraries established prior to the pandemic; the survey was available in both Norwegian and English. Of the total sample, 140 families responded to the survey in English and 53 in Norwegian. The final sample consisted of 188 families (*Mean age* of the child = 5.9 years, *SD* = 4.1 years). Data from 5 families were excluded due to children having special learning needs or developmental conditions, including autism, deafness or learning impairment. While these families were indeed of interest, the low number of families reporting special needs, which were varied, made it impossible to make a fair assessment of how families with children with special needs may have been impacted by the pandemic. A total of 45 languages was represented in the data; 56 % of the families used Norwegian at home (in addition to other languages). Language background is summarized in Appendix I. When it comes to the language practices caretakers chose to use with their children, 53 % of the families reported using the OPOL strategy, 30 % reported mixing languages with their children, and the remaining 17 % were a single-language household. The majority of caretakers had higher education (73 % had at least a Master's degree, 23 % had a PhD degree, and the remaining 4 % had a Bachelor's degree or less). The background information allowed us to explore age and the presence of Norwegian at home in our analysis. The data processing plan was assessed by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research to ensure that data collected in the project was processed in accordance with data protection legislation (reference number 103144), and all participating families consented to their data being used for scientific purposes, prior to the beginning of the survey.

## 2.2 Instrument

A survey, *Language in Multilingual Families during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Norway* (see Appendix II), was used for data collection. A dummy version survey can be viewed <https://nettskjema.no/a/274750> (in English) and <https://nettskjema.no/a/274752> (in Norwegian). The survey was conducted between 18 May 2020 and 30 June 2020, immediately after the first lockdown that affected kindergartens, schools and high schools in Norway (from 12 March 2020 until 11 May 2020, with a gradual opening in late April starting with younger children). While social distancing was highly recommended and some restrictions were set until the end of the school year (for example, the number of people allowed to gather for events), there were no general rules in place concerning quarantine or isolation. Respondents were instructed to answer the survey reflecting on this time period, which captured the original reactions of families in this dramatic change in social life. This, and the unpredictability of the future situation, was the reason why we focused on the *first* lockdown and not on subsequent effects of the pandemic. While schools reopened (on 11 May 2020), restrictions were nonetheless implemented, including smaller groups, physical distancing and partial homeschooling that took place digitally until the end of term of the school year. Like most countries, Norway, and especially the greater Oslo region, maintained social distancing measures and home-office mandates to some degree for much of the pandemic.

The survey is an adapted version of the questionnaire designed for the UK and Ireland by Ludovica Serratrice and colleagues, which had been conducted there prior to the current study, and which we were granted permission to use. Questions were adapted to fit the Norwegian context. The original English survey was translated into Norwegian by a bilingual research assistant and checked by the researchers leading the project. Overall, the translation of the survey did not present any problems. Nonetheless, the direct translation of the term ‘well-being’ into Norwegian seemed somewhat confusing for a few families who did the survey in Norwegian, as there is no direct equivalent. This is understandable, given that professionals also vary with translations. Notably, a 103-page document published by the Norwegian Directorate of Health (Carlquist 2015) points out that the international literature contains a number of understandings of the concept of well-being while their document discusses how ‘well-being’ can be useful in a Norwegian public health context. That being said, the term ‘well-being’ is often used in English in Norway and hence one would be familiar with the general term and potential translations.

In addition to making the survey available in two languages, we adapted the background information section of the original UK/Ireland survey to fit factors

relevant for Norway. We added specific questions about the use of English, in addition to the questions about Norwegian and other HLs in general. The reason for adding specific questions about English is due to the particular space this language occupies in activities and in the language hierarchy in Norway. Contrary to the UK and Ireland, English is not the main societal language; however, most people are fluent speakers of English, the language is introduced early on in the education system, and it is not uncommon to hear English in social spaces. Moreover, multilingual families in Norway frequently use English at home when, for instance, one caretaker is a Norwegian speaker and the other has a different L1, or as a lingua franca when neither caretaker is a Norwegian speaker. The online survey was established on the University of Oslo's internal data platform Nettskjema. Due to restrictions with this platform, we needed to convert the original response scale of 0–100 in the UK/Ireland survey to a 5-point Likert scale. In order to allow respondents to provide some nuances to their answers, we also included a comment section at the end of the survey. In our survey, participants could choose English or Norwegian language versions of the same survey, although about 70 % of the families responded in English, as noted above.

### 3 Analyses

The survey consists of three sections related to FLP as well as demographic information described under 2.1. Sections 1–3 examine caretakers' feedback, each targeting one aspect of Spolsky's (2004) model: beliefs, practices and management. To analyze our data, we aggregated related variables to facilitate the statistical analysis. Variables in the three sections are average ratings of questions pertaining to the same category (cf. Appendix II). Below, the aggregate variable is noted in *italics*, with the survey questions on which it is based indicated in parentheses. In total, there are 14 variables.

#### 3.1 Section 1: Beliefs

The questions in this section include targeted caretakers' beliefs concerning, and attitudes toward, multilingualism, mapped by their (dis)agreeing to statements. Answers were collected on a 5-point Likert scale rating level of importance (not important, slightly important, moderately important, important, and very important). These variables reflect caretakers' identity and beliefs related to aspects of multilingualism, such as maintaining contact with family abroad in the HL or the importance of HLs and OLs (Other languages) for school and future career.



1. *Identity* = Parent/Caretaker value of their and their child's multilingual identity (Q17, Q18)
2. *HL-Communication* = Value of maintaining regular contact with foreign family and use of the HL (Q19, Q20, Q27)
3. *HL-Schooling* = Value of HL/OL for school (Q23, Q24)
4. *HL-Career* = Value of HL/OL for the child's future career perspectives (Q25)
5. *HL-Literacy* = Value of reading and writing in the HL (Q28, Q29)

### 3.2 Section 2: Practices

This section gathered information on language use in the family during the lockdown and social distancing measures. Answers were given on a 5-point Likert scale rating the level of frequency of different activities (never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often) and in different languages, such as reading to their children, watching TV, playing computer games, speaking to family abroad on FaceTime, speaking to siblings, and reading and writing for the older children. These variables reflect caretakers' language practices and activities in each language.

6. *Literacy-NOR* = School and literacy practices in Norwegian (Q30, Q32, Q44, Q46)
7. *Literacy-HL* = School and literacy practices in HL/OL (Q31, Q33, Q45, Q47)
8. *Digit-NOR* = TV, videogames, Skype, etc. in Norwegian (Q34, Q37, Q42)
9. *Digit-HL* = TV, videogames, Skype, etc. in HL/OL (Q35, Q36, Q38, Q39, Q43)

### 3.3 Section 3: Management and impact

This section targets caretakers' perceptions of the impact of school closures and social distancing measures on language use in their families (and in the different languages). Answers were given on a 5-point Likert scale rating level of disagreement (strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree and strongly agree) to tap into positive and negative effects in the different languages. We were particularly interested in changes in the use of their languages before and after the lockdown (like reading, writing, recreational activities).

10. *Neg-NOR* = Negative effects of lockdown measures/homeschooling on Norwegian (Q48)
11. *Pos-NOR* = Positive effects of lockdown measures/homeschooling on Norwegian (Q49, Q50)
12. *Pos-HL* = Positive effects of lockdown measures/homeschooling on HL (Q51, Q52, Q53, Q54, Q55, Q61, Q62, Q63)
13. *Hear-HL* = Exposure HL = Question about more input in HL during lockdown (Q61)

14. *Well-being* = Using other languages is a source of well-being in the family (Q64)

Below, we first present the statistical analyses, and then discuss their interpretation (Section 4). Pearson correlations were conducted in between variables of beliefs (Section 1), practices (Section 2) and management (Section 3). See Section 2.2 to understand the relationship between each FLP component. Below we show descriptive statistics (Table 1), a matrix correlation (Figure 1) and a summary of significant correlations (Table 2).

The means ( $M$ ) and standard deviations (SD) of 188 participants were recorded in the original 5-point Likert scale. In Table 1, aggregate variables from the beliefs section indicate very high ratings with respect to *Identity* ( $M = 4.2$ ), *HL-Communication* ( $M = 4.6$ ) or *HL-Literacy* ( $M = 4.3$ ); all of these variables focused on the importance given by these families to multilingualism in general, and the HLs specifically. While the mean ratings of variables in the practice and management sections lay somewhat in the middle of the scale, they are slightly higher for the variables *Hear-HL* ( $M = 3.7$ ) and *Well-being* ( $M = 3.5$ ), which refer to whether families reported increased exposure to the HL, and whether multilingualism is considered a source of well-being during the pandemic, respectively.

In Table 2, significant correlations ( $p < 0.05$ ) between variables are marked by an asterisk, which are concurrently represented as medium size, darker circles in the heat map (Figure 1). Significant correlations between variables do not imply a causal relationship but signal a trend observed between variables. For instance, the correlation between *HL-Communication* and *HL-Literacy* ( $r = 0.4$ ) indicates that families that foster communication in the HL are also more likely to encourage literacy in the HL.

**Table 1:** Descriptive statistics of aggregate variables, means and standard deviations.

	Variable	$N$	$M$	$SD$
Section 1	1. <i>Identity</i>	188	4.2	0.9
	2. <i>HL-commun</i>	188	4.6	0.9
	3. <i>HL-schooling</i>	188	3.4	1.0
	4. <i>HL-career</i>	188	4.1	1.1
	5. <i>HL-literacy</i>	188	4.3	1.1
Section 2	6. <i>Literacy-NOR</i>	188	2.7	1.2
	7. <i>Literacy-HL</i>	188	2.9	0.9
	8. <i>Digit-NOR</i>	188	2.8	1.0
	9. <i>Digit-HL</i>	188	2.9	0.9
Section 3	10. <i>Neg-NOR</i>	188	2.2	1.2
	11. <i>Pos-NOR</i>	188	2.3	1.1
	12. <i>Pos-HL</i>	188	3.3	0.9
	13. <i>Hear-HL</i>	188	3.7	1.2
	14. <i>Well-being</i>	188	3.5	0.9

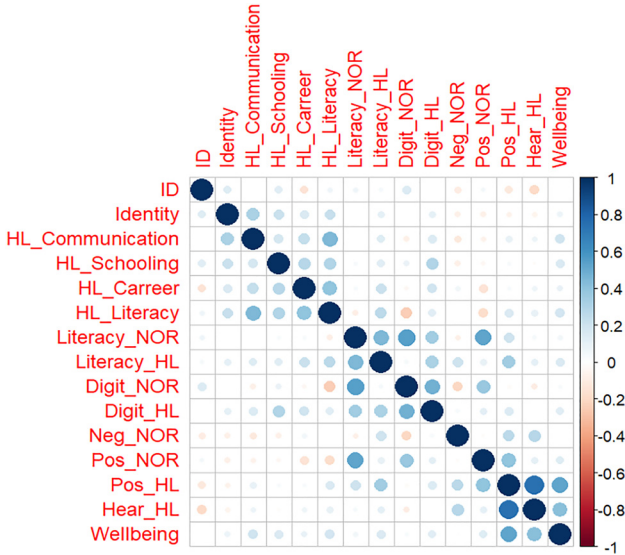


Figure 1: Correlation matrix heat map.

In Figure 1, the left vertical and horizontal axes indicate variables of Beliefs, Practices and Management. The right vertical axis (from -1 to +1) and the circles in the grid (differing in colour and size) indicate the degree of positive (blue) and negative (red) correlations. The larger/darker the dots, the stronger the correlation.

Table 2: Significant positive correlations for the aggregate 14 variables.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Identity														
2. HL-commun														
3. HL-schooling														
4. HL-career														
5. HL-literacy		0.4*												
6. Literacy-NOR														
7. Literacy-HL						0.4*								
8. Digit-NOR						0.5*								
9. Digit-HL								0.5*						
10. Neg-NOR														
11. Pos-NOR						0.5*								
12. Pos-HL														
13. Hear-HL												0.8**		
14. Well-being													0.5*	

Notes: (\*) moderate  $\geq 0.4$ ; (\*\*) strong  $\geq 0.8$ . The correlation coefficient measures the size of an effect: values of  $\pm 0.1$  represent a small effect,  $\pm 0.3$  is a medium effect and  $\pm 0.5$  is a large effect (Field et al. 2012: 212).

**Table 3:** Estimate coefficients, standard error, *t* distribution and *p*-value for each of the significant predictors in the linear regression models.

	Effect/variable	Predictor	Estimate	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
1	Literacy-HL	HL-communication	0.18	0.09	1.8	=0.07
2	Pos-NOR	Literacy-NOR	0.46	0.05	8.4	<0.001 <sup>a</sup>
3	Pos-HL	Literacy-HL	0.34	0.07	4.9	<0.001 <sup>a</sup>
4	Well-being	HL-communication	0.26	0.09	2.7	=0.007 <sup>b</sup>
5	Pos-HL	Well-being	0.52	0.06	8.3	<0.001 <sup>a</sup>

Notes: <sup>a</sup>*p* < 0.001; <sup>b</sup>*p* < 0.01.

Because correlations cannot be interpreted as causal relationships, significantly correlated variables were further analyzed in linear mixed models for regression analyses (Baayen et al. 2008) using R (R core Team 2021) to evaluate the effect of certain predictors. This is summarized in Table 3. The significant predictors in the linear regression models indicate that: 1. Communication using the HL in the family marginally predicts child HL-literacy; 2. Child's Norwegian literacy predicts positive effects of homeschooling on Norwegian during the lockdown; 3. Child's HL literacy predicts positive effects of homeschooling on HL during the lockdown; 4. Communication using the HL predicts family well-being, and 5. Well-being further predicts positive effects of homeschooling on HL during the lockdown.

Unlike the correlation of variables reported above (see Table 2), the results of the linear regression models provide more precise information as to the extent to which the predictor variables can explain the effect variables; for instance, the fact that encouraging more literacy in the HLs can predict a positive effect on the HLs during the pandemic, as the third model in Table 3 indicates. In the following section, we delve into what the statistical analyses, by means of correlations and linear regression models, mean in the further scope of the paper, and the extent to which these results answer our research questions.

## 4 Discussion

By using a survey to examine multilingual families' language beliefs, practices, and management (Spolsky 2004), significant relationships were observed between variables across the three components. Below, we discuss each of the three components along with its interaction with the others.

## 4.1 Language beliefs

In regards to our first research question on the language beliefs of multilingual families in Norway, our results show positive attitudes towards multilingualism in this sample of families, as shown by the high ratings towards multilingualism in the variables reflecting identity and beliefs (cf. Table 1). The reported correlations support the inferences drawn by the data. The fact that caretakers themselves see multilingualism as an important part of their identity may contribute to valuing multilingualism in their children too. Contrary to our expectations, the variable assessing multilingual identity, which included questions regarding caretakers' value of multilingualism, did not deem a significant correlation nor a significant result in the regression analysis with other variables in language practices and management. That means that while these families showed high ratings on the importance of multilingualism for their and their children's identity, the variables targeting these questions did not predict responses on variables about language practices or management. However, other variables of language beliefs did reveal associations across sections. Specifically, caretakers' value of maintaining communication with family members abroad was a predictor of frequent literacy practices in the HL, as well as of families' perception of multilingualism as a source of well-being (see Table 3). Ultimately, our sample revealed that families' overall positive attitudes towards multilingualism were important in maintaining and increasing activities in the HL during the lockdown. The positive attitudes to and around multilingualism might have influenced the overall positive impact of the lockdown, as positive attitudes have shown to be important factors to maintain HL and to promote language learning (Dewaele and MacIntyre 2014). Conversely, negative attitudes and anxiety can in fact lead to less attachment to the HL across generations (Sevinç 2016; Sevinç and Dewaele 2018).

## 4.2 Language practices

Concerning the question of language practices and activities during the lockdown, our data revealed associations between the use of online platforms in Norwegian and in other languages (see Table 2). We interpret this result as an indication that families that rely on online activities for language use might do so in several languages, which was positive during a time when social interaction outside the home was impossible. An interesting finding is the association of literacy practices in Norwegian and in the HL. Families who are likely to encourage literacy practices in Norwegian also seem to do so in the other HL. This result is supported by the overall caretakers' ratings on the value of reading and writing in the other language. It seems that whether families choose an OPOL strategy, or a more relaxed

approach to mixing languages (Lanza 2004), promoting the use of HLs through various activities is crucial for language maintenance.

### 4.3 Language management and impact

When it comes to our third question, the actual impact of school closures and social distancing measures in these multilingual families, we observed an overall trend that spending more time at home with their children meant increased use of, and exposure to, the HL. This finding aligns with Spolsky's (2004, 2009, 2019) interpretation of language management in families, as well as Caldas' (2012) and Slavkov's (2017) more holistic view that includes caretaker's (in)direct actions on language use. In addition, hearing more of the HL during the lockdown was associated with positive effects on the HL as a consequence of the lockdown (cf. Table 2). This result echoes that of recent research showing monolingual infants' larger vocabulary growth during the first lockdown across thirteen different countries (Kartushina et al. 2022). Changes were not only found in the HL, we found an association between the different activities involving Norwegian, such as reading and writing, and a positive effect of the lockdown in Norwegian. In fact, when specifically asked about whether caretakers would like to elaborate on changes in their children's language during the pandemic, several provided valuable information. For instance, one participant reported:

“My son (...) is a bit behind the level of the class. He really improved his Norwegian reading during the lockdown, since we had more time to individually support him in a positive way. Before he was much more negative.”

When we further look at ratings in the individual questions regarding the effects of the lockdown in these families' Norwegian, we observe a discrepancy between families for which Norwegian is a primary language at home, versus families where it is not (cf. Appendix I). For the latter, concern was expressed about negative effects of the lockdown on the use of, and exposure to, Norwegian. For instance, another parent expressed:

“Our primary exposure to Norwegian language is through work and the *barnehage* ('preschool'). We [use] 100 % spoken English at home. The closures have negatively impacted the entire family's ability to learn and use more Norwegian language.”

This is a finding we did not anticipate, as our main focus was on how the pandemic had affected HLs. While they are the minority, for this subgroup of families, going to work and school is effectively the only exposure to Norwegian; it is worth noting that the social distancing measures did not only affect people's ability to socialize but it

potentially impacted linguistic and cultural access of migrant groups in different countries and thereby their inclusion in society. While this was a concern raised by some respondents when given the possibility to add individual comments, the data revealed that the practice of activities in Norwegian was in fact associated with positive effects in Norwegian, too.

While the survey was designed to look at differences between Norwegian and other minority HLs, we had anticipated that English would have a unique role in multilingual families in Norway and generally in Norwegian society. Most Norwegians are fluent in English from an early age, due to the early introduction of the language in schools, its relevant role in the media, as well as the increasing number of highly skilled workers migrating to the country. In major cities like Oslo, Trondheim or Bergen, it is not uncommon for employees in the service industry to communicate in English (Røyneland 2023), and this language has a big presence in the lives of multilingual families as well. Often, parents who have different linguistic backgrounds use English as a means of communication and, even when they might use their first language with their child, he or she is still highly exposed to English, too. While the role of English was not one of our main questions, our expectations were confirmed by the data, where English has a major presence in online activities. When we split the data across Norwegian, English and other languages, activities like watching TV, playing videogames or using the internet are more likely to occur in English than any other language. This is also confirmed by some caretakers' additional comments:

“My kids have started using more English in their Norwegian speech with Parent 1 and each other during lockdown, because they are watching more YouTube and playing Minecraft, Animal Crossing and Zelda. Words from the games are difficult to translate into Norwegian.”

For some families, the presence of English was directly related to home office and homeschooling, as another participant reports:

“My children started to be interested and speaking more English during lockdown. Assume this is a result of working from home for international company and them hearing mom use this language. None of the parents are English native speakers but we started to speak English as the kids have shown interest.”

For families where English is the HL, this probably means special support in that language. Furthermore, we found results that we had not anticipated regarding the value caretakers placed on different languages. We decided to further investigate the percentage ratings of the value of Norwegian versus other languages for school (questions 22–24 in the survey, see Appendix II), which revealed that caretakers seem to value Norwegian and English for school more so than the other language(s) that might be present at home. This indicates that while caretakers wish for their children

to use the other languages beyond the home environment, including for their future careers, they consider Norwegian and English as more important for their children to do well in school than other HLs.

Question 57 (“I miss the support of other parents/friends who speak our family’s other language(s)”) revealed mixed results, based on whether English and/or Norwegian were used at home. About half of the respondents agreed (selected 4 or 5 in the Likert scale) that they missed the support of family members who speak their language, whereas the other half was divided between rates 1–3. This question generated variation in responses among the families that had Norwegian at home, the families for which English was a home language, and the families that had *other* home languages. The first two might have had more opportunities to receive input either through TV and the internet, or friends and family they were able to see in the country. On the other hand, families with languages other than Norwegian or English might have more likely missed the contact with family members in that language.

Despite the overall positive results, we acknowledge the limitations of this study. A survey of this kind provides a good overview of family experiences during the pandemic but may reduce the depth of the responses. People may prefer neutral over extreme response options in a Likert scale. In the current study, however, participants were given space to comment and elaborate, which provided valuable insights, some of which have been included in the discussion of our results. We acknowledge that the inclusion of families with children with a wide range of ages may be somewhat challenging for specific questions targeting literacy practices. The aggregate variables included questions regarding parents’ reading to their children, as well as children’s own reading practices. This could certainly have created some noise in the data. However, because many families had children of different ages, for whom all literacy questions were relevant, the exclusion of these questions would have prompted significant data loss. We nevertheless advise the reader to be mindful of this methodological limitation. Another potential challenge is the novelty of the survey, which is relatively new and has not yet been validated. Having said that, its comparative English format has been used in the UK and Ireland contexts, although we made adaptations to accommodate the Norwegian context. Another issue lies in the unbalanced representation of high SES families in the sample, which may have influenced parental expectations on HL use, as well as positive associations and attachment to the heritage culture and language of the family (Gatt et al. 2020; Pace et al. 2017; Rowe 2018). Many of the families in this sample have European language backgrounds and might have a more positive migrant experience than those coming from other parts of the world, who are more likely to experience racialization, minoritization and discrimination (Gozdziak 2021:66; Lomeu Gomes and Lanza 2022). Moreover, there were no responses to the questionnaire from Indigenous minorities in Norway such as the Sámi, nor from the Kven.



The limited representation of lower-SES families may have skewed our results, in particular with respect to Norwegian, as these families might lack the resources and time to invest in their own and their children's knowledge of Norwegian as this was a second language in the household. Being multilingual is an incredibly complex experience, and impossible to generalize across individuals with different cultural and linguistic experiences, but the specific characteristic of these subjects makes us believe this particular background might have influenced the overall positive attitudes towards multilingualism and HL in our study. In addition to the SES of the sample, the particular location where we collected our data is of important significance for our results. While Norway is a linguistically diverse country, it also has a well-established welfare system, low rates of unemployment, strong childcare support, and an overall feeling of social security. Such an environment might also support positive views on multilingualism. In addition, families such as the ones who participated in this study, who might enjoy job security and a culture that promotes work-life balance, might also have more time to dedicate to activities that promote and sustain HL use, like reading and writing, supporting homework and participating in locally organized events in the HL. It would be wrong to assume that multilingual families across the globe share this experience, especially in the extenuating circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has disproportionately affected some countries and communities over others.

We would like to pay special attention to the finding concerning language as a source of well-being, which was not only of special interest to us but has also caught the attention of the media (Hardach 2020). In our survey, we asked families whether more opportunities to use the HL was a source of well-being in their family, something for which we found an overall positive response. This finding was further supported by the responses in Question 56 ("the use of the other language(s) is a source of tension in my household") with which most families (64 %) expressed disagreement.

Multilingualism as a source of well-being was associated with positive effects of the lockdown in the HL. Similarly, the importance of maintaining regular contact in the HL with family abroad was also a predictor for seeing multilingualism as a source of well-being (see Table 3). This result supports Hollebeke et al.'s (2020) systematic review that shows that positive attitudes towards HL and general well-being around multilingualism are heavily associated with linguistic outcomes in the HL, as well as De Houwer (2020, 2022) who has highlighted the importance of using the HL to maintain parent-child relationships and the overall well-being in the nuclear and extended family. Furthermore, recent research has shown life-satisfaction of children and teenagers in Norway to be associated with time spent online (Milosevic et al. 2022), which aligns with this sample of families' use of online platforms such as FaceTime or Skype to stay in touch with family abroad and its connection with well-

being. As reported by Crandall et al. (2022), positive associations towards family well-being were likely to decrease depression and anxiety symptoms during the pandemic. It is thus not surprising that positive associations towards multilingualism in the family unit transpire into a stronger feeling of well-being in the families in our study. All in all, we interpret these results as an indication that the use and encouragement of HLs can promote positive associations towards multilingualism, and ultimately, keep multilingualism “alive” in the family environment. We believe this result can be taken as an example that, even in a time of despair, multilingualism can be a resource of resilience and well-being. This is very important considering that migrant families underwent particularly challenging struggles during the harsher months of the Covid-19 pandemic, when traveling to and from other countries was essentially impossible. For many migrant families, spending time in their home county is vital for maintaining their cultural identity, family ties and supporting their children’s HLs. In Norway, where extremely strict border control measures were implemented and entry restrictions were maintained for the majority of the pandemic, multilingual families’ ability to resort to multilingualism through the various activities presented in this paper might provide a sense of hope for multilingual speakers elsewhere.

It is difficult to estimate to what extent these results can generalize to other contexts and experiences of multilingual families, given the extraordinary circumstances that motivated this study and in which the data were collected. It is particularly challenging to predict whether the overall positive results we have observed for the use of HLs can and will remain after the pandemic when, slowly but surely, life will eventually go back to “normal”. That being said, we hope to have shown that *any* circumstance is a *good* circumstance to promote multilingualism and language maintenance. We are aware that raising multilingual children is a hard and arduous task, which is not always supported by the communities and societies we live in. The families in this study showed an extraordinary ability to thrive in an extremely challenging situation, and we would like to use this result to inspire other families to seek that same resilience in their own multilingual experience.

## 5 Conclusions

This study provided a unique opportunity to investigate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in multilingual families in Norway, and how the lockdown, social distancing measures and homeschooling influenced the use of Norwegian and other HLs. This study is inspired by Spolsky’s (2004) tripartite model as used in Family Language Policy research, which guided our main research questions on language beliefs, language practices and language management in this sample of families.

Through an online survey, we collected parental reported information on these questions during the first lockdown in Norway. Taken together, our results showed positive attitudes towards multilingualism, which influenced positive effects of the lockdown on language practices in the HL. Furthermore, promoting activities in Norwegian and the HL during the lockdown was associated with positive effects of the lockdown on Norwegian and the HL respectively. Lastly, our results show that viewing multilingualism as a source of well-being in the family was associated with positive effects of the lockdown on the HL. We believe that the positive trends found in our data might also be influenced by the overall positive ideologies towards multilingualism in Norway, as well as the reasonably safe and secure situation the Norwegian population experienced during the lockdown, due to its well-established welfare system, low rates of unemployment, strong childcare support, and overall feeling of social security, as noted above. While we acknowledge the limitations of using a survey to understand the complexity of multilingual families' experiences during the pandemic, this method allowed us to gain swift access to a large sample of families across the country during a time in which in-person interaction was not possible, and gave us a unique opportunity to study a once-in-a-lifetime linguistic scenario. It is important to emphasize that our results can only inform about the first phase of the lockdown which, although it was the most restrictive in Norway, limits our ability to predict whether these trends continued throughout the pandemic, and most importantly, if and to what extent the apparent positive effects of the pandemic have had a longstanding effect for these families. Having said that, we believe the results of this study can and do offer a new side of multilingualism: a source of resilience and connection even under such extenuating circumstances. We hope this study can serve as evidence of hope and resilience to other families across the world.

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## Appendix I: Background information on participants (Background section)

### *Languages represented in the questionnaire*

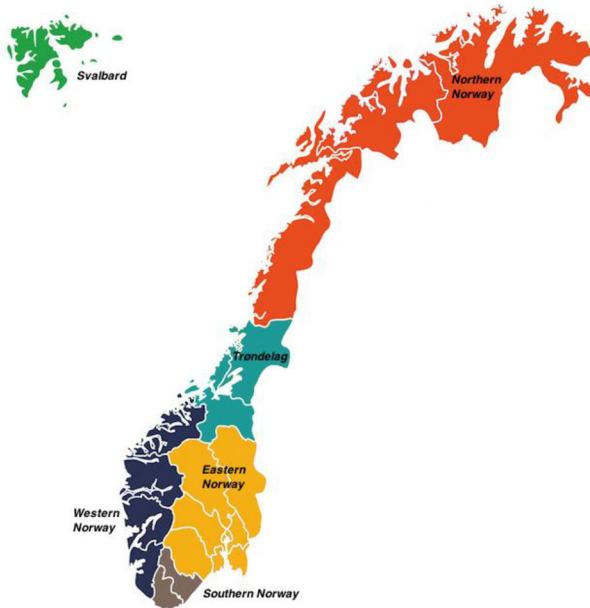
<b>Language</b>	<b>N</b>
Afrikaans	3
Arabic	3
Azerbaijani	1
Bosnian	2
Bulgarian	2
Cantonese	1
Catalan	2
Chinese	1
Croatian	1
Czech	1
Danish	4
Dutch	16
English	80
Farsi	1
Filipino	2
Finnish	8
Flemish	1
French	15
German	18
Greek	3
Hindi	3
Hungarian	3
Icelandic	2
Italian	6
Japanese	3
Kirundi	1
Kotokoli	1
Latvian	2
Lithuanian	1
Malayam	1
Norwegian	106
Persian	1
Polish	2
Portuguese	8
Romanian	4
Russian	9
Sami	4
Serbian	1
Slovakian	3

(continued)

Language	<i>N</i>
Spanish	28
Swedish	3
Ukrainian	1
Urdu	3
Vietnamese	1
Zulu	1

*Distribution of responses per region*

Region	Total responses	Percentage (%)
Eastern Norway outside Greater Oslo Region	18	10
Greater Oslo Region	106	57
Northern Norway	12	6
Southern Norway	4	2
Trøndelag	8	4
Western Norway	40	21



*Distribution of languages per household*

<i>N</i> languages at home	Percentage (%)
1	11
2	67
3	20
4	1.5
5	0.5

*Distribution of families with Norwegian at home*

Norwegian at home	Total responses	Percentage (%)
Yes	106	56
No	82	46

**Appendix II: Questionnaire (in English)****Background questions**

3. Where do you currently live?
4. How many of your children currently live with you in your household?
  - 4.1. How old are the children living with you in your household?
  5. Do any of the children have special education needs?
    - 5.1. Please specify.
  6. What type of educational system does the child/children attend.
    - 6.1. Please specify if you chose “other” in the previous question.
  7. Do your child/children attend a complementary school (e.g. a Saturday School)?
  8. What is your relationship to the child/children?
    - 8.1. Please specify.
  9. Which language(s) does Parent 1 speak to the child/children?
  10. Which language(s) does Parent 2 speak to the child/children?
  11. If there are other adults currently living with you and your child/children, please state:
    1. *their relationship to the child/children;*
    2. *the language(s) that they speak to the child/children.*

*For example: grandmother: Italian only; grandfather: English and Italian.*

12. Which language(s) do the child/children speak to Parent 1?

13. Which language(s) do the child/children speak to Parent 2?
14. Which language(s) do the children speak to each other?
15. For each adult currently living in your household, please indicate how well they speak Norwegian.
- 15.1. For each adult currently living in your household, please indicate how well they speak other languages.
16. For each adult currently living in your household, please indicate their highest educational qualification.

### **Beliefs about multilingualism**

In this section we will ask you some questions about the importance of Norwegian and the other language(s) in your family to you and to your child/children.

If your child/children are very young some of these statements may be irrelevant and therefore you can tick the “not important” button.

If your child/children do not attend a complementary school, please skip statement 26.

By “other language(s)”, we mean the language(s) you use in your family in addition to Norwegian.

*Please rate the following statements.*

17. Being multilingual is an important part of my personal identity.
18. Being multilingual is an important part of my child/children’s personal identity.
19. Keeping in regular contact with members of our family who do not speak Norwegian is important to me.
20. Keeping in regular contact with members of our family who do not speak Norwegian is important to my child/children.
21. Doing well at school is important in our family.
22. Norwegian is important for doing well at school.
23. English is important for doing well at school.
24. My child/children’s other language(s) are important for doing well at school.
25. Speaking other language(s) is important for my child/children’s future career options.
26. Attending a complementary school (e.g. a Saturday School) is important for my child/children’s other language(s).
27. It is important that my child/children can use their other language(s) to speak with family members.
28. It is important that my child/children can read in their other language(s).
29. It is important that my child/children can write in their other language(s).

### **Language use in your family during the lockdown and the social distancing measures**

In this section we will ask you about the frequency of language activities in your household during the current lockdown and social distancing measures. When you answer these questions, please try to think about how often you carry out these activities in each of the languages.

By “other language(s)”, we mean the language(s) you use in your family in addition to Norwegian.

If the statement is irrelevant – for example, because your child/children are too old to be helped with their homework, or because they do not attend a complementary school – please say “never”.

*Please rate the following statements.*

30. We read to our child/children in Norwegian at home.
31. We read to our child/children in their other language(s) at home.
32. My child/children get help at home with their Norwegian homework.
33. My child/children get help at home with reading in their other language(s).
34. My child/children watch TV/streamed internet programmes in Norwegian.
35. My child/children watch TV/streamed internet programmes in English.
36. My child/children watch TV/streamed internet programmes in their other language(s).
37. My child/children play computer games in Norwegian.
38. My child/children play computer games in English.
39. My child/children play computer games in their other language(s).
40. My child/children speak Norwegian to their sibling(s).
41. My child/children speak the other language(s) to their siblings.
42. My child/children speak Norwegian to friends and family over the internet (e.g. via Skype, WhatsApp, FaceTime).
43. My child/children speak their other language(s) to friends and family over the internet (e.g. via Skype, WhatsApp, FaceTime).
44. My child/children read books in Norwegian.
45. My child/children read books in their other language(s).
46. My child/children write in Norwegian.
47. My child/children write in their other language(s).

### **Impact of school closures and social distancing measures**

In this section we will ask you some questions on how you think school closures and social distancing measures during the lockdown may affect your child/children’s Norwegian and their other language(s).



If the statement is irrelevant – for example because your child/children are too young for homeschooling – please choose “strongly disagree”.

By “other language(s)”, we mean the language(s) you use in your family in addition to Norwegian.

*Please rate the following statements.*

48. My child/children’s spoken Norwegian will be negatively affected by school closures and social distancing measures.
49. Homeschooling is having a positive impact on my child/children’s spoken Norwegian.
50. Homeschooling is an opportunity for my child/children to read more in Norwegian.
51. Homeschooling is having a positive impact on my child/children’s spoken other languages.
52. Homeschooling is an opportunity for my child/children to read more in their other languages.
53. Time at home is an opportunity for my child/children to speak their other language(s) more with other family members in the household.
54. My child/children use their other language(s) more often than before the lockdown to communicate with family and friends over the internet (e.g. on Skype or WhatsApp).
55. My child/children have more opportunities than before the lockdown to use their other language(s) for games and recreational activities at home.
56. Use of the other language(s) is a source of tension in my household.
57. I miss the support of other parents/friends who speak our family’s other language(s).
58. Internet resources to support my children’s other language(s) are useful during school closures.
59. Internet resources to support my child/children’s Norwegian are useful during school closures.
60. Internet resources to support my child/children’s English are useful during school closures.
61. Overall my child/children hear their other language(s) more now than before the lockdown.
62. Overall my child/children speak their other language(s) more now than before the lockdown.
63. Overall my child/children read in their other language(s) more now than before the lockdown.
64. More opportunities to use the other language(s) are a source of family wellbeing.

Anything else? Let us know!

If there is any information that you would like to share about your multilingual family, tell us in the box below. Also, if you have any comments about the survey, please let us know.

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