Intercultural mediation in Finland – “I am no longer an interpreter, now I help these people to understand each other.”

Over the last few years, the number of paraprofessional linguistic mediators such as intercultural mediators has increased in Finland. In interpreting studies, intercultural mediators are usually compared with public service interpreters and viewed as non-professional interpreters (Pokorn & Mikolič Južnič 2020, 85). At the same time, their role in ensuring mutual understanding between the parties is also recognized (Baraldi & Gavioli 2016, 35).

This presentation is based on individual semi-structured interviews conducted in 2022–2023. I interviewed public service interpreters (n = 5), service providers working in migrant counselling (n = 5), intercultural mediators working in schools (n = 6), and teachers and school social workers (n = 6). The interviewees worked mainly in Southern Finland.

The analysis of the interviews shows that while public service interpreters were mostly seen as neutral language conduits, the intercultural mediators’ role was to build trust and understanding between school staff and non-Finnish-speaking parents and, eventually, to facilitate the families’ integration into Finnish society. The intercultural mediators who had previously worked as interpreters considered that the interpreter’s role was too narrow and restricted their agency (Vainikka & Määttä 2024).

References

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