
The politics of belonging: Educators' interpretations of communities, positions, and borders in preschool

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to advance knowledge about the politics of belonging in Norwegian preschools by exploring how educators describe and consider processes of belonging in their educational practice. In educational research, the dominating focus has been on the sense of belonging and children's emotional bonding to others. Here belonging is approached as a relational and power-loaded phenomenon entangled with ideologies, politics, ethical values, and the positions people occupy in their daily lives. We regard preschools as arenas for constructing and negotiating borders for various communities and to determine who is regarded as inside and outside these borders. Our analysis revealed that participants primarily focused on maintaining a preschool community that included all children and their parents. This taken for granted hegemonic preschool community represented the majority culture of society and, therefore, the significant values of the preschool. This community recurred across the data as the centre of how participants constructed and interpreted borders and the hub around which other communities circled. Preventing children's exclusion and enhancing their belonging are complex matters. The challenge for educators is to critically examine how processes related to values, othering, and belonging may play out in various communities in early years settings.

Keywords

Politics of belonging; preschools; educators; communities; borders

Introduction

This paper's central interest is the exploration of processes of belonging in early years settings in Norway.¹ The term 'processes for belonging' refers to the construction and negotiation of borders for various communities and who is regarded as inside or outside these borders. We will explore how educators describe and interpret processes of belonging in their preschool educational practices. Preventing children's exclusion and enhancing their sense of belonging have become major policy agendas around the world (Armstrong et al., 2011; Sumsion & Wong, 2011). There is a broad agreement that every child has a right to experience belonging, be valued equally, and be treated with respect.

In Norway, the Framework Plan for Kindergartens (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017) based its core values on the Kindergarten Act (2005). Section 1 of the Kindergarten Act states that kindergartens shall build on values fundamental to Christian and humanist traditions. These values are respect for nature and human dignity, freedom of thought, compassion, forgiveness, equality, and solidarity. The Kindergarten Act refers to these values as existing in various religions and worldviews and entrenched in human rights law. All kindergartens are mandated to adopt these core values and promote democracy, diversity, mutual respect, and equality. In Norway, the Framework Plan for Kindergartens highlights diversity and every child's need for belonging and respect as core values preschools must uphold. However, a growing body of studies shows that children's exclusion, rejection, bullying, and victimization are major challenges in education around the world (Goryl et al., 2013; Levine & Tamburrino, 2014).

Diversity is also a global feature of today's societies. Children, families, and educators in early childhood settings come from multiple ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds and value preferences. At the same time, children possess differing abilities and resources. As classroom diversity increases, concerns grow about children's experiences of belonging and feeling 'at home' (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 10). Given this, there is an increased need to understand how early childhood educators experience and interpret processes for belonging in their daily work.

In addition, research has illuminated various challenges in the implementation of inclusive education. Educators have described challenges they encounter related to resources, curricula, policies, and a lack of requisite knowledge and skill (Piskur et al., 2017). Phillips (2010) found that educators' support for the inclusion of diverse children is high in rhetoric but low in practice. Shulman (2004) identified three elements necessary to support educators' work with diverse children: theory, practice and ethical dimensions. Research has also pointed to a limited understanding of inclusion in which it is conceived of as gathering children with different needs in the same place (Stratigos et al., 2014). These studies call for a perspective that goes beyond this limited understanding in favour of an approach that understands how belonging manifests in relations between children, professionals, and parents in educational settings.

This research project responds to this call. In this paper, belonging is approached as a relational and power-loaded phenomenon entangled with ideologies, politics, ethical values, and the positions people occupy or relate to in their daily lives. We regard

¹ We use terms such as 'early years settings' and 'preschools' as synonyms. With these terms, we refer to full-time or part-time early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions for children between 1–5 years.

preschools as arenas for constructing, contesting, and negotiating borders for various communities and to determine who is regarded as inside and outside these borders (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

The aim of this paper is to advance knowledge about the politics of belonging in Norwegian preschools by exploring how educators describe, interpret, and consider processes of belonging in their educational practice.

The study is led by the research question: how do educators experience and describe processes for belonging in their preschool practice?

This study is part of a large cross-cultural research project supported by NordForsk (no. 85644), and it explores the promotion of children's inclusion in educational settings in Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. Its theoretical inspiration is grounded in Yuval-Davis's (2011) proposition that there is a difference between belonging and the politics of belonging. 'Belonging' refers to an emotional connection to a community and sense of feeling at home, whereas 'the politics of belonging' refers to boundary work – processes of safeguarding borders to determine who is inside and outside a community.

Previous research

In educational research, the dominating focus has been on the sense of belonging and people's (often children's) emotional bonding to other individuals and communities (May, 2013). Researchers have used various concepts and theories to explore children's attachments to various peer communities. To a large extent, the focus has been on personal dimensions and how feelings of togetherness, shared lifeworld, bonding, and familiarity emerge in children's communities (e.g., Hägglund & Johansson, 2016; Hännikäinen, 2007; Johansson & Berthelsen, 2014; Koivula & Hännikäinen, 2016; Mortlock, 2014; Nutbrown & Clough, 2009; Rosell, 2016; Singer & de Haan, 2007). Common in this research is that experiences of belonging connote positive emotions. What is not so explicit is how processes of power and value preferences (beyond emotional preferences) influence senses of belonging.

However, there are studies that address belonging as intertwined with ideologies and the political and ethical values to which people relate (e.g., Juutinen 2019; Juutinen & Kess 2019; Macartney, 2012; Peers & Fleeer, 2014; Probyn, 2001; Purola et al., under review; Sumsion & Wong, 2011). In these, belonging is enmeshed in the social locations and positions people are entangled in and the power relations that may follow. Research has also associated belonging with both positive and negative emotions (e.g. Juutinen 2019; Probyn, 2001; Sumsion & Wong, 2011).

This scant research has found that processes of belonging and exclusion are seldom considered as conscious pedagogical aims. For example, in an Australian interview study, Tillet and Wong (2018) examined eight early childhood educators' understandings of belonging. The analyses revealed how educators relate dimensions of belonging to social, emotional, spatial, and temporal factors. All participants readily recognised the emotional dimension of belonging. However, they revealed their limited understandings of cultural, ethical, political, legal, physical, and spiritual dimensions of belonging. When speaking of cultural belonging, they tended to highlight differences. The categorisation of children was constantly in play and was both positive and exclusionary. The participants considered belonging as something desirable, and there were no attempts to hear children's views of their own belonging. The fact that some children might resist belonging was not

acknowledged. If resistance is considered undesirable, the authors concluded, resistant people may be seen as problematic and problematic practices may go unexamined. Therefore, challenging and enhancing educators' conceptualisations of belonging is critical.

In the Nordic context, Juutinen (2019) explored processes of belonging in Finnish schools. The findings illuminated how educators supported processes of belonging among children in their everyday practice; however, this was more of an intuitive practice than the result of educators' conscious intention. The challenge was for educators to become aware of the implicit and manifold moments of belonging and exclusion in the daily preschool settings, including their own approaches and preconceptions. The author concluded that such processes are seldom reflected upon, and changing this requires multiple competences from educators.

Continuing in this vein, Juutinen and Kess (2019) examined how educators co-create their understandings of belonging and diversity in ECEC settings in Northern Finland. A peer interview methodology was employed in which participants actively brought their personal narratives together as a shared narrative. When they discussed concepts of belonging and diversity, they first began to understand them on a personal level. They described their role in terms of supporting children's collaboration and sharing in everyday life. Peer narratives illuminated how belonging and diversity were rooted in places, communities, and cultures. The authors argued that in order to capture a more holistic view of belonging it must be conceptualised in many ways.

In a recent study, Puroila et al. (under review) explored educators' interpretations of children's belonging in educational settings in Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden². An image was produced for the study and was employed in its group discussions to inspire participants' thoughts and conversations. The findings revealed how educators categorised people in the image according to gender and generation. This way of categorising people appeared as an unconscious process. The findings also showed that participants from each country focused on ethnic and cultural differences as well as children's individual needs as differentiating aspects. This appeared even though there were other features by which to differentiate. The participants perceived the children from the perspective of difference rather than similarity.

In sum, research focusing on how educators form their points of view on belonging is scarce. What appears significant in the presented studies is the positive and intuitive approach some educators have taken to belonging. Even though categorisations of children occurred in their everyday practice, participants appeared to be unaware of their own roles in such categorisations, nor did they seem to be aware of the values and power-relations that were present. Further, participants seemed to be more aware of difference than they were of similarity. Difference is often related to culture. The research challenged educators to identify processes for belonging in their practice and to critically reflect on how the politics of belonging is intertwined in daily preschool practices. There is a need to move beyond everyday practice towards more critical, reflective, and theoretical understandings of belonging (Sumsion & Wong, 2011).

² The study is part of the cross-cultural research project supported by NordForsk (no. 85644) referred to earlier.

Theoretical frames

This study's theoretical framework applies to the conception of the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Yuval-Davis claimed that differentiating between the politics of belonging and the sense of belonging is important.

The sense of belonging is described as a material and affective space (a sense of feeling at home) shaped by everyday practices and social relations as well as emotions, memories, and imaginaries (Blunt, 2005, p. 506; Yuval-Davis, 2019). The sense of belonging refers to a safe space that brings hope for the future and allows room for the embracing of anger, shame, and indignation. In terms of feeling at home, the sense of belonging is closely related to views on bordering and who has the right to share the home and who does not belong there (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019, p. 7). Regional, ethnic, racial, and religious differences can be crucial signifiers of belonging.

The politics of belonging refers to political projects aimed at constructing a sense of belonging to particular communities (Yuval-Davis, 2011). The term 'communities' refers to the various small, large, lasting, or temporary groupings or attachments children and educators in preschool are part of and in which they may experience both a sense of belonging and hostility. Communities have given or taken shared identifications, activities, ownerships, experiences, and expectations and are always situated in time and space. They are created, recreated, negotiated, changed, and dissolved in ongoing processes between children and educators in preschool. They can be intentional and unintentional, and members can be aware of each other's intentions.

In sum, communities serve as origins for belonging and exclusion, which are experiences that result from a community's definition of its borders and who is permitted beyond them (Cripps, 2011). The various communities created by children and/or educators in preschool are surrounded (and constituted) by borders, and these are more or less visible, more or less explicit. Bordering processes differentiate between those who are in and those who are out as well as those who are allowed to cross and those who are not (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019, p. 7). These everyday processes of othering are linked to political boundary making and the crossing or defending of borders. Such processes of negotiation for crossing borders are ongoing between children and educators in preschool.

Analytical facets

Political projects of belonging are always situated and multilayered. They can be contextualised both locally and globally, and affect members of collectives and communities differently. This is why intersectionality is an important consideration in exploring the politics of belonging. Situated intersectionality concerns how situated knowledge and imagination construct varying ways of seeing the world (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis (2002) discussed the situated gaze, situated knowledge, and the situated imagination. The situatedness of different social agents affects the ways those agents influence and become influenced by different social, economic, and political projects.

Yuval-Davis (2011) distinguished between three major analytical facets in which belonging is constructed. They are all intersectional, as they constitute and are constituted by each other. However, they cannot be reduced to their singularities; no one facet exists without the others. The first refers to social locations and positioning and the individual's identification with particular categories, such as sex, age, ethnicity, class, or nation. The

second is about personal and collective identifications and emotional attachments to various collectivities and groupings. The third refers to the ethical and political value systems implied in the communities and acknowledged by individuals. These value systems imply the ways social locations and individual and collective attachments are assessed and valued by individuals and others.

Of significance is that the facets need to be understood intersectionally (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2011). This means that they need to be understood in relation to each other, where they are situated and how they can be changed over time (Yuval-Davis, 2019). Taken together, they offer a portrait of the politics of belonging.

Methodology and analysis

Educators from three Norwegian day-care centers participated in this study. The centers were strategically selected based on their former participation in development projects focused on cultural and multilingual differences. They were considered experienced and interested in processes of belonging in preschool. Additionally, they were selected based on the wide diversity of children in their care (3–5-year-old children of diverse ethnicities, languages, abilities, and special needs). The centers were in different areas of Southwest Norway. One center was in a large city, one in a relatively small city, and one in a rural area. Two were public and one was private.

In autumn 2018, five interviews were conducted with 21 educators, each lasting an hour. In each of the centers, educators from two departments participated. In two centers, interview participants were organised in separate groups of three to five. In the third center, which was in a rural area, educators were organised into a single group of five. Participants were 26 to 55 years old, and they were preschool teachers with bachelor's degrees or certificated childcare and youth workers. The certifications were from a vocational training course and entitles holders to practice in preschools and other institutions.

Group interviews were conducted with educators to learn how they experienced and described processes of belonging to the community in their preschool. The starting point for the interviews was an illustration of a preschool with educators, adults, and diverse children involved in various interactions. The illustration was introduced as a means of starting the discussion. It was intended to stimulate participants' thoughts about belonging and inclusion in various areas, including society, policy, institutions, and the relationships that defined participants' everyday preschool practice. The interviewer followed participants' rationales while also challenging them to give examples and clarify statements. Throughout this study, the researchers ensured all the relevant ethical requirements were safeguarded (informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and respect for individual integrity).

The analyses were comprised of interrelated steps. First, we conducted an open reading of all excerpts to identify various ideas, activities, and narratives connected to processes for belonging, inclusion, and exclusion in educational settings and practices. Then, we conducted a more focused analytical reading, searching for recurring utterances that thematised the processes of belonging, inclusion, and exclusion related to various communities in the kindergarten. In these steps, we identified communities of both major and more specific characteristics. In the educators' narrations, we identified a taken-for-granted 'we' – a major hegemonic 'preschool community' in which all children and

their parents were expected to be included. Other communities we identified appeared to be connected to this community in one way or another.

From there, we proceeded with the help of the theoretical framework of the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011) and the three interrelated analytical facets. The facet social locations and positioning relates to how various social locations and positions allow or hinder people in being part of various communities, how they create borders for being a member of a community, and who has the right to decide on these premises. Therefore, we analysed the communities in terms of the various situated locations and positions we identified, which were either given or taken by educators, children, and parents.

The second facet, identifications and emotional attachments, indicates that various communities allow for various individual, collective, and emotional identifications. Identities are the narratives people tell about who they are (Yuval-Davis, 2011). These stories will often relate to one's own and others' ideas about what it means to be a member of a community. Identities can be both verbal and related to different forms of activities, symbols, and bodily expressions. Therefore, we believed it important to try to discern various potential collective identifications and emotional attachments embedded in participants' descriptions.

The third facet refers to ethical and political value systems and the influence these might have on processes for belonging in preschool. In our analyses, we aimed at identifying values of importance when participants described how they addressed and prioritised goals, norms, and activities, and we also aimed at recognising structures and borders for belonging (inclusion and exclusion) in the identified communities.

With reference to intersectionality and the interconnectedness of facets as a key idea, we were careful to search for and to explore interconnectedness between identities, values, and locations and positions related to the different communities.

Findings

Our analysis revealed that participants primarily focused on creating and maintaining a preschool community that included all children and their parents. This hegemonic preschool community represented the majority culture of society and, therefore, the significant values of the preschool. This community recurred across the data as the centre of how participants constructed and interpreted borders and the hub around which other communities circled.

The other communities we identified appeared to be connected to the hegemonic preschool community. They seemed to assemble around the identities, values, and locations and positions connected to migrant families, migrant children, and issues of faith. The communities became visible against one another, and what was regarded as different was mirrored against the hegemonic preschool community. We identified four communities to which children, parents, and educators were ascribed: 1) the hegemonic preschool community, 2) the community of migrant families, 3) the community of migrant children, 4) faith communities.

In the following, we present examples from participants' descriptions in which the different communities become visible, intersect with, confront, and construct each other. We explore the locations and positions, emotional attachments, and values of significance in these communities.

The challenging position of preschool children included in contradictory communities

Below, we discuss the interconnections and confrontations between the communities and how children were located and positioned in different communities in which values clashed. Othering took place when participants discussed how some children's family culture differed from the culture in preschool regarding rules, regulations, and attitudes. The taken-for-granted point of departure for participants' reasoning was the hegemonic preschool community, which represented ECEC institutional values rooted in society's majority culture.

Participant 1: Migrant children and the like differ in family culture and attitudes. In preschool, we have a totally different culture. These often clash. We say, 'No, this is not allowed. We are not allowed to do these things.' But [the child says,] 'I am allowed. My mother and father say this is okay.' So the children [ask themselves], 'What is right? What is wrong? What am I to do? How should I behave, and what is allowed and what is not?'

Participant 2: Yes, [there are] often clashes.

Interviewer: With the rules?

Participant 1: With the rules, yes... There are a lot of clashes.

Participant 1 identified some of the children as 'migrant children and the like'. This category of children is rooted in families whose culture differed from the preschool culture. The participants identified themselves as a 'we' located in and representing the hegemonic preschool community, which is 'totally different' from the culture in the families of 'migrant children and the like'. This construction can be seen as boundary work that constructed a social order in the preschool community and indicated who is seen as included and excluded.

Participants' descriptions show how these children's personal sense of belonging was related to their attachment to family, which implies that they wanted to follow their family values. This, however, meant that they would transgress the preschool's rules, which resulted in a conflict based on clashes of values, identities, and opportunities for belonging for these children. The participants' descriptions indicated that the 'migrant children and the like' resided between two communities. Their personal identification was to their family-based 'we' at the same time as they were located in the preschool-based 'we', and they were implicitly expected to balance the existing norms of both communities. This type of conflict constructs a community of children positioned between two different communities with contradictory value systems, and they are left to resolve the conflict themselves – to decide what is right and what is wrong and how to belong to both communities. The clashes between different values and norms that these children were met with worried the participants.

The difficult diversity of faith communities in preschool

The participants identified several cultural differences in their preschool communities, which they described as challenging to the preschool's everyday practices. A diverse group of children and their families create diverse needs and wishes that participants have to take into consideration. This can be difficult, as shown in the excerpt below.

Participant 1: Well, cultural differences can be very difficult to handle. Of course, one must show respect, but some things are more difficult to take into consideration than others.

Participant 2: Yes, and some issues are not possible to discuss or talk about because ...

Participant 1: No, no, that's the way it is.

Participant 2: Well, yes, you have to respect it then. So there are a lot of things to consider and a lot of challenges regarding food and visits. Some [of the children] cannot participate in visiting the church, and some of them are not allowed to participate in circle time, and then it's somebody that cannot participate in – yes, so, there are several challenges.

The participants described their preschool as being composed of children who requested specific adjustments regarding some common collective activities. They found these different claims challenging and difficult to handle.

What seemed to be especially challenging were differences regarding religious traditions and rules, such as what food children were allowed to eat. Some parents would not let their children participate in circle time, particularly when such time focused on religious festivals or children's birthdays. The described differences indicate that the children were located in faith communities with values that differed from the values of the hegemonic preschool community. Therefore, the children were located outside the hegemonic preschool community. The conversation revealed that some differences were more difficult to 'take into consideration' than others, and some were not possible to talk about. The participants described this as something they had to respect, which suggests that they understood these differences related to value systems and religion to be of a specific and untouchable character.

In these descriptions, participants identified the children who differed as 'them' or 'some of them'. This othering divided the preschool children: on the one hand, there were those who took part in all activities; on the other, there were those who did not participate in all activities. This bordering indicates that some preschool children do not identify with the hegemonic preschool values that they are expected to. Their withdrawal excludes them from participating in common activities with the other children; instead, they are located in different faith communities.

Educators' dilemma: Bridging the gap between the preschool and family communities

Because of the discrepancies between preschool and family communities, some children feel pressure when they are caught between them. The participants of this study described how they strove to respect families and facilitate different activities to reduce that pressure. However, they found that children caught between communities often wanted to participate in all the common activities available.

Below, we illustrate the challenges participants tried to resolve and how they positioned themselves between children and their families in order to bridge the gap between the two communities.

Participant 1: The local church invites [the preschool] to participate in different activities, and some parents do not want their child to be part of these activities. However, this puts us in an ethical dilemma because we can see [that] the child is excluded from a community, since the parents want their child to remain in preschool while the others take part in the activities in church.

Participant 2: To help the children in this contradictory pressure, and to bridge between preschool and home is to release the pressure on the child who is placed in between.

The excerpt highlights challenges the participants touched on several times in the data. Participant 1 described how ‘some parents’ in her preschool differed from other parents because they did not want their child to be part of the activities offered by the local church. This positioned ‘some parents’ as attached to faith communities that differed from the values of the preschool community. The participants positioned themselves as ‘we’ in this situation.

What worried the participants regarding this religious otherness was that the children attached to different faith communities were excluded from the preschool community when they were not allowed to visit the church.

Participant 1 described how this exclusion put educators in an ethical dilemma in which the child was caught between the preschool community and their loyalty to their family. To overcome this dilemma, participants tried to position themselves as mediators, bridging the gap between the hegemonic preschool community, the family community, and the community of children.

Discussion

In this study, we aimed to explore how educators experience and describe processes for belonging in their preschool practice. From participants’ descriptions, we identified various communities as those of children, parents, and educators. We also explained how these communities were categorised and constituted: the hegemonic preschool community, the community of migrant families, the community of migrant children, and faith communities (Yuval-Davis, 2011). The communities are related to, mirrored by, and constructed against each other.

Bordering and othering in the preschool community

Our analyses illuminated how participants’ perspectives on the politics of belonging are a question of safeguarding the hegemonic preschool community and supporting children and parents in their access to it, from which follow processes of categorisation, bordering, and othering.

When participants reflected on processes for belonging related to their professional practice, they positioned themselves as insiders representing the majority culture and professional values of the hegemonic preschool community. Reframing the preschool community did not appear to be on the pedagogical agenda. This community and its values seemed both evident and unquestioned. Of course, that approach was part of participants’ professional mandate; educators represent the educational system. They are expected to uphold the values of the framework plan (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 7). Against this hegemonic preschool community, the other communities were evaluated

and categorised as *different*. When participants described their work with belonging, they foregrounded differences in values, rules, routines, and traditions caused by cultural diversity. Negotiations and change were expected to take place inside the communities of families and children simply because they were the ones who differed from the norm of the hegemonic community. Our findings both support and expand on Tillett and Wong (2018), from whom we learned how educators connect culture with difference. Further, Puroila et al. (under review) illuminated how educators foregrounded ethnic, cultural, and individual-needs-based differences when differentiating between children. These findings indicate an ethnocentric orientation where culturally different people are positioned as others and where one's own understandings are not seen as culturally based (Bennet, 1993).

Different values

From our study, we have learned that the politics of belonging, including processes of inclusion and exclusion, concern values of importance to migrant families and families that follow religious traditions that differ from those of the hegemonic community. The community of migrant families, the community of migrant children, and faith communities appear to all be different. Their differences present dilemmas to children and educators. Educators want to be loyal to the preschool community, but they also empathise with children caught between their families and the preschool community. They are eager to respect the families, even if they find the issue complex.

Our study also implies how categorisations of children and parents appear to be naturalised and unexamined because of the overarching and well-intentioned goal educators strive towards: including children and their parents in the hegemonic preschool community. There is, however, a risk that localisation and categorisation processes may contribute to exclusion and othering rather than supporting belonging and inclusion. From previous research (Puroila et al., under review), we have learned how educators frequently categorise children without being aware of it. Juutinen and Kess (2019) put forward a similar idea when it comes to belonging: even if educators support children's belonging, it is not their conscious intent to do so.

Our study supports and expands on previous research by showing what the categorisations are about, i.e., differences between values. What seems especially difficult are differences related to religion and faith, which our participants described as impossible to talk about and as dimensions that simply have to be respected. Perhaps these issues are especially difficult because they are considered personal and private, and avoiding discussion of them may also avoid confrontation. However, placing religion and faith in the personal sphere and outside the realm of education can give the false impression that the preschool community is objective and neutral (Poulter, Riitaoja, & Kuusisto, 2016; Riitaoja, Poulter & Kuusisto, 2010). In our data, we found an unexamined dominance of Christian values in daily preschool life. This presents the risk that when majority values are taken for granted and dominate preschool communities, differing values in children's families are neglected or silenced. There is also a risk of overlooking the internal diversity of values and their intersectionality (Poulter et al., 2016).

In our study, participants intended to help all children join the community. However, this occurred without their being aware of the power dynamics at stake, how family values may be silenced, and how children may be subject to othering. Probyn (2001) warned of harmful effects hidden in our good intentions and that we try to create harmony between

cultures instead of admitting that cultural relations in diverse societies *are* asymmetric; still, it is possible to challenge social structures that create injustice and exclusion in preschool.

The challenge for educators is recognising the various ideological, cultural, and religious values of children and families and at the same time being aware of their own ideological, cultural, and religious thinking (Rissanen, Kuusisto, & Kuusisto, 2016).

Different values cause dilemmas

When analysing the interview data, certain difficulties and dilemmas were noted. Participants said that dilemmas caused pressure for children caught between the preschool's values and those of their families.

For children, the nature of the dilemma involves finding a way to balance the contradictory rules and norms of two different and contradicting communities. Where do they belong? Which rules should they follow? Is it possible to be fully included in both communities?

This study's participants also described dilemmas related to their duties, which require them to work in partnership with the child's parents, meet every child's need for care and respect, and ensure that every child is included in the preschool community (Ministry of Education and Research 2017, p. 7).

Participants strove to enhance the transgression of borders between different communities, support and protect children from confusion while caught between two communities. However, the bridging seemed mainly concerned with moving the children from a minority culture to the majority culture. Regardless of their position as bridge builders, participants ended up caught between the conflicting values of families, the preschool, and children.

These dilemmas shed light on educators' multifaceted responsibility to take into consideration the individual child, the family, and the preschool community. Under what circumstances is it appropriate to support the individual child at the cost of the community, or seen the other way, when is the community to be taken into consideration at the expense of the individual child?

Conclusion: The politics of belonging and their implication for practice.

Our study offers many useful findings. Our suggestion for teacher education and pedagogical practice refers to both critical self-reflection as well as knowledge of processes of belonging and othering and the role of values in such processes.

Values - drive othering

Our findings reveal how educators' descriptions of children can be connected to everyday bordering and othering in what Yuval-Davis (2019) described as everyday processes of constructing 'us' and 'them' linked to political boundary-making. The findings are to be regarded in terms of learning from the specific rather than the generalisable yet being applicable for preschool-teacher education and practice. The study brings new insights into processes for belonging and exclusion because it illuminates how unreflected values may drive othering processes in preschools.

Identifying how communities create borders around membership is also novel in this kind of research. It calls for teacher education and practice to critically reflect and analyse how borders and memberships are constituted in practice and what educators may be doing to uphold them. The challenge for teacher education and practice is recognising multiple value perspectives, including the ones embedded in preschool policy and practice. As noted by Rissanen et al. (2016, p. 454), awareness of the cultural, ideological, and religious roots of the values that shape pedagogical practices is essential in teacher education programs that strive for social justice.

Majority values are taken for granted

In this study, we have foregrounded participants' descriptions of the politics of belonging in preschool. Their views may have differed from those of parents and children; future studies could focus on the latter two. Based on participants' descriptions in this study, it appears that the construction of 'us' is to a large extent based on majority values and the construction of 'them' is related to minority values. Power is assigned to the hegemonic preschool community, and this community is taken for granted as a centre into which all children (and their families) are to be included. In these processes of bordering, children are caught between communities, which means they have to manoeuvre between different and conflicting values, rules and expectations.

These findings challenge teacher education and early childhood practice to critically examine how processes related to values, othering, and belonging may play out in various communities in early years settings. There is a need for theoretical knowledge on various cultures, religions, diversities, and the values they imbue. Correspondingly, there is a need for a dialogic process in which reflections on theoretical knowledge account for experiences of belonging and exclusion (Rissanen et al., 2016; Lauritzen, 2017). Such analyses must be built on critical self-reflection that scrutinises values and attitudes.

The politics of belonging: Conceptual contribution

This study's methodology was built on assumptions that the politics of belonging is a relational and power-loaded phenomenon entangled with ideologies, politics, ethical values, and the social locations and positions that people occupy or relate to in their daily lives. This theoretical position helped us focus on certain aspects of belonging in preschool. We learned how children's belonging and constructions of 'we' and 'them' are important concerns for educators as they care for children and seek to include them and their parents in the preschool community.

However, educators face a challenge in that they must be aware of and relate to these multiple and subtle processes of inclusion and exclusion as pedagogical matters relevant for enhancing belonging in preschool. To resolve this challenge, Yuval-Davis's facets can support questions applicable in teacher education and practice and related to what kind of communities children, families, and educators create in preschool, what kind of identifications and values are important, and how social locations and positionings among children, parents, and educators influence opportunities to belong. Through this kind of professional analysis, work enhancing children's belonging can be supported even as dilemmas and pressures related to being caught between communities are encountered.

Preventing children's exclusion and enhancing their belonging are complex matters. Those require knowledge and awareness of the hegemonic community, belonging, and the handling of power positions in relation to diverse communities. It is always the hegemonic

position that defines the other. The challenge for students and educators is developing skills to analyse how categories, distinctions, and othering are constituted and developing their ability to reflect on the epistemologies and values behind these perspectives. This necessitates a pedagogy that guides children in becoming aware of the multiple diversities, positions, and identities in their classrooms and communities. To do so, a gaze focused on preconceptions and values is essential.

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