National Values in ECEC: Perspectives to Inclusion and Exclusion

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This Special Issue focuses on the issues related to national values in the societal Early Childhood Education and Care, especially the critically interrelated questions of inclusion and exclusion. Societal education holds a key role in maintaining social cohesion and integration within a nation. The socialization of the individual child with the community, also ECEC both as such a community itself as well as a means to socialize the children into membership within the broader society, proceeds through a complex trajectory. The elements building this include the experienced social and psychological sense of belonging, the practical dimension of adopting the codes of conduct, and learning the particular interpretation of symbols in a similar way than other group members (e.g., Habermas 1987). In the core of social integration and community cohesion is commitment to its core values that separate a particular group from others, also creating the foundation for the moral codes for behaviour (e.g., Habermas 1987; Rogoff et al. 2007). Globally, the political and demographic developments related to expanding right-wing nationalism and ideologically motivated attacks of terrorism have created severe societal tensions in many countries. The increase of polarization has created pressure for societies to enhance their inner cohesion. Related to these developments, many policy guidelines highlight the importance of educational institutions as a central means for 'preventing' and 'countering' the negative developments, even including their extremes such as radicalisation and extremism (e.g., Ghosh et al., 2017). In many countries, governments have reacted to these perceived and actual threats by drafting policies where educational institutions have gained growing importance as platforms for different kinds of protocols or strategies. However, notably less attention has been paid on the consistencies of values between the aims of such educational strategies and the core functions of education in fostering individual and societal well-being and growth. (Niemi et al., 2018.)

Still, there has been an increasing tendency for spelling out clearly the national values also in curriculum documents. For example, van Krieken Robson (2019a, 2019b) notes how in the British context, early childhood practitioners are required to mediate specific politically set national values and how their response is complex and multi-layered. Through so called performative values education, practitioners are to mediate specific values through their pedagogical practice, "moral pedagogies", which in her view would necessitate a critical stance from the teachers to consider their epistemic beliefs about how children learn (van Krieken Robson 2019a, 2019b). This is also in line with the previous work on the necessity for the teachers to reflect on their own value positions and positioning of children within pedagogical relationships (e.g., Lamminmäki-Vartia, et al., 2020; Rissanen et al., 2016; Rissanen et al., 2020). From the perspective of the young children attending ECEC, inclusion is an urgent matter of democracy, equality, social justice (Kuusisto, 2017) and Human Rights (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 1989; Poulter et al, 2016). Although there is a growing body of literature on migration more generally,

surprisingly little is known about these intersectional influences on the intertwined minority positions of migration and religion, especially in educational settings, even more so in ECEC contexts. The sociohistorical status of minorities in a particular national setting is also influenced by complex societal and historical features such as national policies and ideological hegemonies. (Kuusisto et al., 2021.) Previous research in this topic is scarce, especially as regards the role of national values and what it means in terms of inclusion and exclusion in the ECEC practice. With national values, we here refer to the expressions or descriptions of particular national and societal aims, preferences or priorities that education is supposed to bring forth as regards either the ECEC societal or community context or the educational contents that the teaching, education and care are to possess or transmit in the ECEC. Through socialization, individuals are bounded to certain civic virtues that are also manifested as normative in national curriculum (Bondeson, 2003; Kuusisto, 2011). National values are embedded in concepts such as cultural heritage, which relates to the collective history, norms and habits but also orients to preserve and modify the inherited values, objects, and practices (Laine, 2019; Kuusisto et al., 2021).

Immigration has intensified rapidly in many countries during the past decades. What this has meant in the level of ECEC practices and policies, however, differs somewhat across the national settings. For instance, some countries have installed elements in their curricula for supporting the variety of home languages and cultural minority identities. For many immigrant children and families, participating in the early childhood education and care is their first encounter with a societal educational institution and members of the new home country and society. The introduction into preschool can also have a decisive impact on children's later success in school and the full integration of families longitudinally within the society. As such, preschool staff play an important role in the families' long-term integration (Angel & Hjern, 2004). This also suggests that early childhood services need to develop understandings about different values and cultures when working with children from diverse backgrounds.

Countries as well as broader regions across national settings, such as the Nordic region, where several of the studies of this Special Issue are completed, to an extent hold shared heritage, culture and ideals (e.g. Wagner 2008; Wagner & Einarsdottir 2006), including that of an ideal of *good childhood*, comprising a pervasive understanding of child-centredness, solidarity with *Nordicness* or connecting with *Nordic heritage* through continuous enactment of the distinct cultural traditions (Wagner, 2008; Kristjansson, 2006). Previous studies emphasize a shared cultural heritage and ideological basis as one of the two central aspects defining 'Nordic childhoods', that is, the Nordic welfare model, emphasizing social inclusion, and the child-centeredness, emphasizing, alongside with other values, and "solidarity with Nordicness" (Wagner & Einarsdottir, 2008; Einarsdottir et al., 2015). Furthermore, the long history of the Lutheran church in the Nordic countries is also entwined with the ideas of nation construction (for example, Lappalainen, 2006; 2009; Linde, 2001), even if the societies are now increasingly secularized and the role of this Secular Lutheran (Poulter et al., 2016; Riitaoja et al., 2010) tradition in the ECEC is presently more cultural than religious. In the Nordic region, like other countries, early childhood education has become a prioritised field for social policy (Klinkhammer & Riedel, 2018), based on the importance of 'social investment discourse' and insights from neuroscience and developmental Psychology. Preschool is also internationally seen as a key factor for creating equality educational and social opportunities (Lazzati & Vandenbroeck, 2012).

Some studies have began to be 'inward gazing' and critique current national values and attitudes in regards to early childhood education. For example, Emilson and Johansson (2018) have examined values in Nordic ECEC from the perspective of democracy and the child's perspective, bringing

forth a new understanding of democracy linked with shared life and pluralism, with an emphasis on communication, noting that the change has also meant that ambiguity and even conflicting ideas seem to be accepted as a basis for the new ways of seeing democracy. Analysis of Nordic constructs of 'family' and 'gender' can also be found in the research. Research has discussed that there is a danger that gender roles and understandings of nuclear families operating in teachers home environment, might transgress to their work in preschool, especially in situations where teachers level of self - reflection is low (Hellman, 2010). Children in preschool have different family backgrounds. However, there is a risk that certain family ideals and family backgrounds often are put forward and hereby normalized, even if there exist an ambition to show a diversity of families.

This Special Issue explores these and related issues with articles examining national values, inclusion and exclusion in the ECEC practice, policy and curriculum levels. The aim is to create a space and platform to consider the concept of national values in relation to societal diversity and how this is handled in the field of early childhood education and care. The aim is also to explore tensions and exclusion of values and diversity within early childhood education and care in different settings, also attending to the significance of how children, families and teachers encounter different cultural, religious, ideological or worldview perspectives and how diversity is support in early childhood settings. The articles included in the Special Issue are presented in some more detail the following.

In the first article *Suppliers or demanders? Participants' identities in rural ECEC services from the perspective of the supply-side structural reform in China*, Kuan-Ling Lin utilizes the concept of China's recent policy, *Supply-side Structural Reform* in education. Lin explores the identities of different stake holders in the early childhood education and care in rural China, utilizing Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory in analysing the data from preschool teachers and caregivers (microsystems) and local communities (macrosystems). Lin's findings illustrate that the participants' positive identities facilitate their empowerment, and that through establishing an educational foundation in the rural ECEC adjusted the traditional Supply-side Structural Reform way of thinking, and successfully became an alternative educational supplier. Thereby, Lin suggests that in order to improve the quality of the rural ECEC service, the structural reform of rural ECEC should consider exchanging the roles of suppliers and demanders. With a flexible consideration of the participants' diverse identities as both ECEC suppliers and demanders, both the policies and legal guidelines can be developed for the revitalization of rural ECEC in China.

In the second article *The Politics of Belonging: Educators' Interpretations of Communities, Positions, and Borders in Preschool,* Anita Berge and Eva Johansson and examine the processes of belonging—as the construction and negotiation of borders for various communities and who is regarded as inside or outside these borders—in early years settings in Norway. They emphasise that as diversity in classrooms increases, so do the concerns about children's experiences of belonging and feeling 'at home' (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 10). As a result, there is a growing concern about children's exclusion, especially for those with individual needs and minority cultural and linguistic backgrounds. They write that prevention of children's exclusion and enhancing their sense of belonging have become major policy agendas around the world (Armstrong et al., 2011; Sumsion & Wong, 2011), and that there is a broad agreement that every child has a right to experience belonging, be valued equally, and be treated with respect. Berge and Johansson highlight that preventing children's exclusion and enhancing their belonging have become major policy agendas worldwide, and that there is an increased need to understand how early childhood educators teach to and about diversity. Berge's and Johansson's study examined how ECEC educators experience and interpret the politics of belonging in their educational setting. They interviewed ECEC educators in small groups in order

to examine the experiences of processes for belonging, inclusion and exclusion in diverse educational settings. Their findings illustrate how educators encountered various dilemmas when addressing issues of belonging and exclusion in preschool, and conclude with highlighting that such findings hold implications for educational policy and practice, including teacher education programs.

The third article looks into national values, inclusion and exclusion in the ECEC curriculum level, through an international comparative approach. With their article entitled *Worldviews and National Values in Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care Curricula*, Arniika Kuusisto, Saila Poulter and Heidi Harju-Luukkainen examine how worldviews and national values are displayed in the national ECEC curricula of Sweden, Finland and Norway, and what similarities and differences there are between these three ECEC curricula as regards the position of religions and other worldviews. They note that ECEC is often the first societal arena for children to enter and to negotiate their personal values, worldviews, and memberships in relation to the values represented in the surrounding social context. Countries employ different policies for dealing with diversity; for example, home languages are often supported, whereas for home cultures and worldviews the policies and practices are more context dependent. Using content analysis inspired by curricular analysis as well as working theory as methodological tools, this study compares the educational ECEC framework in each country context highlighting the displayed national value preferences connected to worldviews. The study shows that these three Nordic countries have both similarities but also significant differences in the ways in which they approach the inter-relatedness of the aims of national values and worldview.

Finally, the fourth article in this Special Issue, *I sámifize it..." Preschool in the Centre of South Sámi Language and Culture Learning in Norway*, Heidi Harju-Luukkainen, Karianne Berg and Asbjørn Kolberg emphasize that for an Indigenous population there is a need of an inclusive educational space from the language and culture revitalization perspective. They highlight a special importance for this during the early years, when the basics of the language are formed alongside with cultural knowledge. This paper takes a closer look at a South Sámi preschool language learning environment through the lenses of teachers. The South Sámi (South Saami) is the southernmost Sámi population, frequently described as a minority within the minority. The estimation for South Sámi speakers in Norway is around 300 (Ethnologue database, 2022), which makes the language severely endangered by UNESCO (Cocq, 2012) The aim of this paper is to take a closer look at how early childhood education teachers describe the South Sámi language learning space in their preschool environment. For this study in total three preschool teachers from a South Sámi preschool were interviewed. This textual data was analysed with content analysis. According to the results the early childhood education in South Sámi context was seen as an important inclusive language and culture revitalizing space with a clear societal responsibility.

We also realise that the world has changed since COVID-19. Children, families, education and life has all changed. During this time, we would like to thank all contributors and reviewers who were still able to give generous time to this project. Thank you!

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Guest Editors

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