

# Diversity and Social Justice in Early Childhood Education



# Diversity and Social Justice in Early Childhood Education:

*Nordic Perspectives*

Edited by

Anette Hellman and Kirsten Lauritsen

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Edited by Anette Hellman and Kirsten Lauritsen

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# CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Anette Hellman and Kirsten Lauritsen	
Chapter One.....	11
Negotiating Perceptions on Worldview: Diversity in Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care	
Arniika Kuusisto	
Chapter Two.....	30
Changing Patterns of Communication for the Facilitation of Inclusion, Collaboration, and Democracy: A Review of a Praxis-Oriented Research Approach	
Anne Kultti and Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson	
Chapter Three.....	47
Language: A Matter of Inequality	
Charlotte Palludan	
Chapter Four.....	63
Communication and Respectability in Two Reykjavik Preschools: The Role of Children’s Literature and Popular Culture in Peer-Group Stratification	
Thordis Thordardottir	
Chapter Five.....	92
Children’s Notions about Inclusion, Exclusion, and Diversity	
Anette Hellman, Johannes Lunneblad and Ylva Odenbring	
Chapter Six.....	111
Children’s Social Play as a Pathway to Second Language Acquisition	
Sonja Kibsgaard	

Chapter Seven.....	130
Addressing Linguistic and Cultural Diversity in Icelandic Preschools: Creating Inclusive Learning Spaces Hanna Ragnarsdóttir, Fríða B. Jónsdóttir and Hildur Blöndal	
Chapter Eight.....	151
Included or Not? Factors Related to Successful Preschool Education in Multicultural Preschools from the Parents' Perspective Heini Paavola	
Chapter Nine.....	173
Challenge and Success: Norwegian Kindergartens as Learning Spaces for Cultural Inclusion and Social Justice Kirsten Lauritsen	

# INTRODUCTION

ANETTE HELLMAN AND KIRSTEN LAURITSEN

The tragic and fatal incidents in Paris and Copenhagen in 2015 have raised important debates over the conditions for democracy, freedom of speech, and political and religious extremism in today's Europe. Questions of social justice for an increasingly diverse population have become painfully relevant to the Nordic countries too, not least because of the massacre of young people in 2011 by a Norwegian extremist. Academics and politicians have since 2005 debated and struggled over the possible causes for such events and struggles. Elements pointed out as possible causes have been international conflicts, the heritage of European colonialism, and a society with increasing social differences. Even without pointing to simple answers, social marginalization and a feeling of not belonging may be painful for those that experience it and a dangerous mix for the society (Lindbäck et al. 2016). Research has pointed to the importance for early childhood education of addressing the increasingly complex, social, political, and economic challenges in order to build a socially just society, from supporting children who are the target of racial and economic discrimination to challenging those of privilege (Ramsey 2009). We do not intend to answer all these questions in this book. We do however claim that questions of belonging—of democracy, citizenship, and social justice for all—also affect the youngest in our societies, and that questions on how early childhood education may work for equity and social justice for all individuals and families must be investigated. In this book, we aim to investigate these issues with a particular focus on certain Nordic countries.

The importance of a Nordic focus in this book is partly due to the long history and shared values connected to the importance of early childhood education (ECE).<sup>1</sup> These institutions in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden significantly influenced the way the Nordic welfare systems were constructed and they are considered to play important roles in providing successful environments for social justice and equal

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<sup>1</sup> The term for early childhood education in the Nordic context varies from *preschool* or *kindergarten* to *nurseries*.

opportunities (Forsberg & Kröger 2010; Korsvold 2011). Our welfare societies would not have been the same without ECE, since full-time and high-quality day-care institutions opened up the labor market for all parents—a process former Swedish prime minister Olof Palme (2011) called “the quiet revolution.” The development toward increased gender equality through the expansion of ECE in the 1970s has also been crucial to social development in Nordic societies (Forsberg & Kröger 2010). The long history and shared values connected to the importance of preschool for society is also reflected in the current level of accessibility, where 90% of the children in these countries are included (SSB 2016). Hence, in combination with the children’s family life, contemporary childhoods in Nordic countries such as Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden are lived in ECE settings, often regarded as positive and good for children’s upbringing (Kjørholt 2012).

A central theme in this book is diversity and language. Working with language diversity, inclusion, and social justice is a central part of policy documents and practice in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. A common theme is also a focus on children’s influences and participation. However, research findings in all Nordic countries have revealed marginalization and exclusion of preschool children with an immigrant background (Horst & Gitz-Johansen 2010; Jónsdóttir & Ragnarsdóttir 2010; Ragnarsdóttir 2008). There are also some examples of individual preschool children and particular early childhood settings that succeed despite what could be expected given the cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic background of the children (Ragnarsdóttir & Schmidt 2014). How educators work with language and diversity are essential in understanding children’s access to education, play, and social relations with others (Alstad 2016; Lauritsen 2013). Some traditional ways of structuring education in ECE are also key factors for successful inclusive and socially just learning spaces in schools (Ragnarsdóttir et al. 2015), such as flexibility, working together with parents, and taking care and safety into account.

Another theme in several chapters in this book revolves around diversity and ways of structuring inclusive and just learning spaces. Early childhood institutions are special in that they capture children at an age where they are very impressionable. The curriculum of preschools, nurseries, and kindergartens in the Nordic countries allows pedagogues a great deal of flexibility to support children’s development as whole human beings. ECE teachers meet parents on a daily basis, thus building relations that provide a unique opportunity to work with inclusion and social justice for children and their families. In a Nordic project about successful



learning spaces for inclusion and social justice,<sup>2</sup> ECE practitioners described their work within these close relations as a “bridge” between diverse families and society. The emphasis on care, play, and taking children’s perspectives into account when structuring successful inclusive and socially just learning spaces in ECE<sup>3</sup> also plays an important role (Ragnarsdóttir et al. 2015). The openness of the curriculum and a traditional focus on play, together with daily contact with parents, allow practitioners to mix methods in daily activities and use children’s daily lives and background experiences as platforms for working with diversity and social justice (Robinson & Jones Díaz 2006). However, as highlighted by some of the authors in this book, the recent international focus on assessment and testing, where learning often is promoted instead of care, has been a contradictory issue within the Nordic ECE, since one of the core values has been to take into account a holistic view of the child’s care, education, and instruction—as reflected in the notion of “educare” (Alasuutari et al. 2014).

Several of the articles in this volume investigate intersectional perspectives as well as children’s perspectives on diversity and social justice. Research has highlighted the need for intersectional perspectives and the way hierarchies of differences are manifested in particular ECE settings (Robinson & Jones Díaz 2006). Furthermore, it has been argued that young children are not innocent and passive, but that they actively (re)negotiate diversity and categories such as class, gender, age, and race. Age seems to be particularly important, since notions about children’s young age, on the one hand, have placed children in a passive category of childhood, innocent and free from prejudice about race or religion. On the other hand, research for a long time has counteracted these notions by showing that prejudice takes place also in young children’s everyday lives, internalized and repeated by children themselves (Robinson & Jones Díaz 2006). Studies have shown how children use markers of difference in line with dominant norms; but they also highlight the importance of recognizing how children make “mistakes” by performing norms in new and unexpected ways (Davies 2002; Hellman 2010). As discussed by

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<sup>2</sup> Learning spaces for inclusion and social justice, financed by NordForsk 2013–15. The aim of the project was to learn from individual immigrant students and schools that have succeeded despite social and linguistic challenges.

<sup>3</sup> The 48th session of the International Conference on Education (ICE) (2008) identified that inclusive education is an ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics, and learning expectations of students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination (UNESCO-IBE 2008, 3).

Biesta (2015), in safe spaces children sometimes tend to play with norms. Educators need to listen to children, recognize these negotiations, and take diverse children's perspectives into account if they wish to create democratic learning spaces.

## About the volume

For decades, researchers have shown how ECE as institutions work with cultural and linguistic integration, but we still need to learn more about the ways that perceptions and norms of diversity, inclusion, and exclusion manifest themselves in early education practice and policy documents (Björk 2010). What makes this book so special is that in sharing experiences from preschools working with a diverse group of children across the Nordic countries, it provides data and examples that may facilitate the development of both organizational and educational content in ECE. The idea of the volume originated from a Nordic research project in which researchers from Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden participated. Half the articles in this book were written by researchers from this project. To include research from outside the project group, we also invited researchers from the Nordic countries who have contributed to the international body of knowledge on cultural diversity in preschools. The book is organized in nine chapters, containing two chapters each from Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden and one chapter from Denmark.

In the first chapter, "Negotiating Perceptions of Worldview Diversity in Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care," **Arniika Kuusisto** argues that, to increase social justice and combat exclusive practices in Finnish early childhood education centers (ECEC), it is essential that the role of the teacher's sensitivity to diversity is better recognized as a part of professional skills, both in the pre-service phase and in in-service training. Kuusisto shows that in discussions on diversity in Finland, religions and worldviews are often disregarded. The layered, situated effects of "old" and "new" diversities have produced shifting patterns of prejudice, segregation, inequality, and conflict. Despite increasing pluralism and diversity among the children and staff at ECE, many customary practices have not been reassessed to fit better the changing needs of staff and children. Without rethinking these practices, they may cause harm to children's self-esteem and identity development through, for example, segregation and exclusion, even if the practices might be well-intended.

**Anne Kultti** and **Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson** focus on home-preschool collaboration during a settling-in period in "Changing Patterns of Communication for the Facilitation of Inclusion, Collaboration, and

Democracy: A Review of a Praxis-Oriented Research Approach.” The work emerged from the need to develop and share knowledge about collaboration in a context where parents have limited experience of the language used in the preschool. Developing tools for changing both one’s own actions and interaction when confronting something new is the main theme throughout the three interconnected phases, which are: exploring critical questions from the perspective of educators and parents; researching practice collaboration within two preschool settings; and documenting how developmental work in these settings ties in with everyday practice in preschool from the perspectives of educators and parents with different linguistic experiences and skills. A key contribution is showing how education is crucial in developing conditions for social and cultural sustainability, such as equality and democratic rights to participation in early childhood education.

**Charlotte Palludan** uses the current Danish context as the point of departure for her chapter “Language—a Matter of Inequality.” Children’s literacy development has attracted a growing amount of political attention in Denmark since the year 2000 and language assessments and language programs in Danish kindergartens have increased. In the current Danish literacy debate, it is stated that early language initiatives not only strengthen children’s literacy competences but also contribute to inclusion and equality. Palludan argues that, in order to discuss the impact of language in kindergartens and to understand how language is related to the production of cultural divisions and social status hierarchies, it is necessary to address continuous everyday dynamics and processes. She underlines that the issue of language cannot be reduced to the role of delimited literacy activities, language assessments, and programs, since these are always embedded in everyday language practices. Comparing data from ethnographic fieldwork in Denmark and Barcelona, her results reveal that verbalizing is a distinct dimension in kindergartens and plays a crucial role in the unequal distribution of respectability and recognition.

In “Communication and Respectability in Two Reykjavik Preschools: The Role of Children’s Literature and Popular Culture in Peer-Group Stratification,” **Thordis Thordardottir** examines children’s use of literature and popular culture in their conversations and play in two preschools in Iceland. Four- and five-year-old preschool children’s knowledge of literature and popular culture is related to their gender, ethnicity, and parents’ education; this kind of knowledge affects their social status and respectability within peer groups. The study relies on a holistic approach, reflecting the cultural context of childhood, preschools, and homes. The findings shed a light on how varied access to children’s

literature and popular culture at home, along with opportunities to express this knowledge at preschool, can contribute to the knowledge of gender and cultural stereotypes at the preschool level. Despite teachers' aspirations for social justice, the findings indicate that the cultural discrimination the children were exposed to in the preschools occurred in relation to what was considered appropriate knowledge of literature and popular culture in the classrooms.

With an analytic focus on intersections of power in children's everyday life, **Anette Hellman**, **Johannes Lunneblad**, and **Ylva Odenbring** discuss democracy and social justice from children's perspectives. The chapter "Children's Notions about Inclusion, Exclusion, and Diversity" shows how age and language became particularly important when children negotiated access to play as well as possible play roles. Friendship and the possibility of gaining access to peer relations in play were very important for children. However, these spaces were not open for all. Children could perform multiple actions to negotiate inclusion and influence in play, but children performing them were at risk of being marginalized if these actions were not recognized and understood (preferable for older children or adults). Successful actions performed to be included were solving disagreements through negotiations and humor or knowledge of how to play, such as communicating in "turns" in a spoken common language or through body language. Children generally like "fair, kind, and fun" teachers who participate in play. Teachers' participation in play as well as their ways of creating common projects across borders such as gender, age, ethnicity, and language were fruitful in achieving democratic learning spaces for all children in the group.

The chapter "Children's Social Play as a Pathway to Second Language Acquisition" is positioned within research related to ethnic minority children in *barnehager* (kindergartens) (ECE) in Norway. Three perspectives are explored by **Sonja Kibsgaard**: first, she argues that play constitutes an important arena for ethnic minority children who aim to be included and accepted by the ethnic majority group; second, access to play may facilitate inclusion; and, third, participation in play gives opportunities for learning a second language. Kibsgaard explores some aspects related to what it means for children from ethnic minorities to be included in a new child community in a *barnehage*. She goes on to investigate the effect of inclusion on these children's self-perceptions and their acquisition of the dominant language form used in their peers' play routines.

In "Addressing Linguistic and Cultural Diversity in Icelandic Preschools: Creating Inclusive Learning Spaces," **Hanna Ragnarsdóttir**, **Fríða B. Jónsdóttir**, and **Hildur Blöndal** introduce and discuss findings from case

studies in three Icelandic preschools. Research methods include interviews with principals, teachers, and parents with immigrant backgrounds as well as observations as supplementary data. The preschools participating in the research emphasize democracy, equality, and diversity in their daily practices and communication. Findings reveal that the three preschools are succeeding in creating a community where children and families feel welcome and included. Findings from interviews with teachers and principals in the preschools indicate that learning spaces are created in which the needs of all children are met and myriad educational and care practices are implemented to ensure a supportive educational and nurturing environment. Interviews with parents of immigrant backgrounds reveal that when preschools succeed in making them active partners in the preschool community they tend to view the preschool community as a gateway into the larger Icelandic society.

The chapter “Included or Not? Factors Related to Successful Preschool Education in Multicultural Preschools from the Parents’ Perspective” focuses on ECE in Finland. Taking as her starting point a small group of seven parents with immigrant as well as Finnish backgrounds, **Heini Paavola** describes and illustrates parents’ opinions of successful preschool education through their experiences of inclusion and social justice among their children in ECE. The most significant factors behind successful education and children’s success—that is, inclusion—were open and warm relationships between preschool staff and children. The parents found that the staff did not emphasize differences, whereas the children did—they are not color-blind. However, the position of the “multicultural” was strongly linked to immigrant children and language was the most significant issue discussed and demonstrated as “multicultural.”

In the last chapter “Challenge and Success: Norwegian Kindergartens as Learning Spaces for Cultural Inclusion and Social Justice,” **Kirsten Lauritsen** presents the results of a study in two kindergartens situated in minor Norwegian cities. The focus of the article is to understand how these kindergartens—each of which has a relatively long experience of cultural diversity—work to create inclusive learning spaces for all, with a particular focus on children from a minority language background. The findings reveal that the kindergartens’ intentions, attitudes, and activities support an inclusive and socially just linguistic and social education for minority language children. On the other hand, there is room for improvement in areas like the staff’s formal education on diversity and in a more systematic educational facilitation of a linguistic and social development that is particularly important to minority language children. This situation poses challenges not only to the kindergartens but also to

educational institutions where the formal education of teachers and leaders takes place—and where the education in many places still does not reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of our society.

The questions debated in this book have been studied at other school levels, too. On the background to research on immigrant students' performances at primary school level from Canada and Norway, one such example is a study by researchers Barth, Heimer, and Pfeiffer (2008). Their study identified six elements crucial for promoting the students' educational achievement and integration: language proficiency; responsible schools—viewing diversity among children and staff as a resource; partnerships with parents and others; parental support; monitoring of students' attainment; and the ability of the teaching staff to teach a diverse group of children. The studies from the kindergarten level in this book partly mirror but also widen the perspectives reflected in these authors' recommendations. We started this introduction with a kind of eagle-eye view—pointing to challenges at a global level. The presentations here are much more down-to-earth, sharing practical experiences as well as theoretical insight gathered from such experiences. What happens at an international level has real, practical consequences for local communities, kindergartens, staff, parents, and children. We believe that to meet these challenges we need to share experiences and methods that serve to promote diversity and social justice and that the research from the five Nordic countries presented in this book has something to offer—within each country as well as between them.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# NEGOTIATING PERCEPTIONS ON WORLDVIEW: DIVERSITY IN FINNISH EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

ARNIIKA KUUSISTO

### **Abstract**

Diversity is the new norm, but how are perceptions of diversity, inclusion, and exclusion negotiated (Rizvi 2009) in the “secular Lutheran” (Riitaoja et al. 2010) societal setting in Finland as regards worldview diversity in its early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings? In discussions on diversity in Finland, religions and worldviews are often disregarded. The layered, situated effects of “old” and “new” diversities have produced shifting patterns of prejudice, segregation, inequality, and conflict (Vertovec 2015). This applies both at a societal level—where for example Tatar and Jewish minorities and a number of Christian minorities have a long history in the construction of the “old” diversity—and, more recently, for example, through the Finns’ increasing interest in the new religious movements and the effects of global migration, which have brought new levels also to the religious landscape in Finland. “Old” and “new” diversities can also be examined in individual and family levels of the children’s everyday lives, for example in terms of a variety of worldviews present in the extended family and in increased media influences. Despite the increasing pluralism and diversity among the children and staff at ECEC, many customary practices have not been reassessed better to fit the changing needs of staff and children. Without a rethink, these can cause harm to children’s self-esteem and identity development through, for example, segregation and exclusion, even if the practices are the product of good intentions. Therefore, it is argued in this article that to increase social justice in Finnish ECEC, it is essential that the role of teachers’ sensitivity to diversity is better recognized as part of the professional skills

that ought to be better supported both in the pre-service phase and in in-service training.

## Introduction

In Europe, racism is not merely a question of skin color but also of religion. In many European countries, being a Muslim has become a race.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie<sup>1</sup>

While cultural diversity has always characterized human societies, many issues relating to diversity and education now need to be reconsidered with regard to the “new” societal diversities (Vertovec 2015; Rizvi 2011). Such diversity is the new norm, but how are perceptions of diversity, inclusion, and exclusion negotiated (Rizvi 2009) in the “secular Lutheran” (Riitaoja et al. 2010) societal setting in Finland as regards worldview diversity in its early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings? This article aims to bring forth an examination of this research question by drawing on previous literature as well as (a) the national policy documents guiding the Finnish ECEC and (b) some of the key findings of several previously reported empirical studies; further, it will look at these findings from a social justice perspective. The empirical studies used examine the multicultural, multi-faith Finnish ECEC settings, in particular the position of worldviews in these settings and educator sensitivity in relation to religions and worldviews (mixed methods approach, more on the data gathering and findings in Kuusisto 2010; Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2010a, 2010b, 2012; Kuusisto et al. 2014). Moreover, another data set examined survey data from an ECEC unit directors’ position in supporting worldview education (Lamminmäki-Vartia & Kuusisto 2015), and a third, mixed-method study looked at the development of intercultural and inter-religious competences and sensitivities of pre-service teachers during their university studies (Kuusisto et al. 2015; Rissanen et al., 2016).

In the present context of emergent transnationalism, increasingly many people feel they belong simultaneously to various countries and remain connected to individuals and groups across the globe (Vertovec 2009; Rizvi 2011). This also applies to many children whose families move repeatedly from one country to another (Benjamin & Kuusisto 2016a). Alongside national belonging, religious belonging and societal worldview landscapes have also altered considerably during the past decades. Indeed,

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<sup>1</sup> *Maaailman kuvalehti* 3/2015, Interview *Rakkaus sanoihin* with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie by T. Sipola, <https://www.maaailmankuvalehti.fi/2015/3/pitkat/rakkaus-sanoihin>.

a large religious mix in the bigger cities in particular is, and increasingly will be, the norm in twenty-first century Europe. In the history of Western Europe, as in many other settings, religion has been a principal source of ideology—and accordingly also a strong actor in the history of the development of educational and ECEC systems in settings such as Finland. Since then, slowly but surely, religion has become everyone's private matter, something that the state cannot prevent the individual from practicing—the liberal solution to a religio-political conflict (Modood 2007). However, this solution has several significant problems, for example, from the point of view of religious minority groups: for instance, according to which tradition's holy days should official public holidays be determined—and which should form part of the annual festivities celebrated in the ECEC? Are minority traditions recognized in the ECEC and, if so, how and from which perspective are these presented? The state—including its educational arenas such as the ECEC—is not a value-neutral actor; thus, the idea of a characterless, value-neutral public space is also incoherent (Kymlicka 1995; Modood 2007; Poulter et al. 2015; Kuusisto, Poulter, & Kallioniemi, 2016).

### Conceptual underpinnings

*Worldview* is here understood as an ontological, epistemological, and ethical orientation to the world, which functions as a philosophy of life decisive for providing satisfying meanings to reality. Worldview can refer to personal or group beliefs, or to wider systems of knowledge (epistemologies) that enclose ideas about what can be known and how the presentations of the self and the “other” are constructed; however, it recognizes the immense diversity within each group and tradition. Similarly, the related identities are by nature, open, flexible, and contextually changing ways of looking at the world (see also Dervin & Korpela 2013; Riitaoja & Dervin 2014; Benjamin & Kuusisto 2016b; Riitaoja et al. 2010; Poulter et al. 2016). Hence, everyone in the ECEC community, from the children to the educational professionals and support staff, holds a worldview, be it religious or non-religious.

Pluralism and a diversity of worldviews are closely connected with questions related to social justice. *Social justice* is here understood in line with Bell (2007), who sees it both as a process and a goal, where the goal is “full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (ibid., 1)—here in particular, reference is made to the full and equal participation of everyone in the ECEC community, whatever their personal worldview or possible official or

experienced affiliation to worldview traditions. According to Bell, social justice includes a vision of society where resources are distributed equitably and all individuals are both physically and psychologically safe and secure. Such a vision includes an idea of individuals as both self-determining (which Bell understands as being “able to develop their full capacities”) and interdependent (being “capable of interacting democratically with others”). Also the process of attaining social justice ought to be “democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working collaboratively to create change” (ibid., 1–2). This is also connected to the idea of societal educational settings acting as “safe spaces” for dialogue about worldviews, providing children with information about the diversity of worldviews with which they live and engage as well as a safe environment for dialogue (e.g., Jackson 2014).

From an educational policy perspective, the issues related to diversity, such as those tackled in this paper, have typically been addressed through the notion of multiculturalism (Rizvi 2011). However, *multicultural* or *intercultural* theories and educational practices have often disregarded the diversity of worldviews; or, when religion is included in public discussions related to multiculturalism or diversity, the “religion” often refers to Islam (e.g., Modood 2007). The Western discussion on religion holds its particular bias, in which some of the similarly value-laden stances or worldviews are perceived as neutral, while others—typically religious ones—are perceived as subjective and connected to “tradition” (King 2009; Mignolo 2009; Poulter et al. 2016). The secularized Finnish setting holds its particular blind spots and historical predispositions that influence its educational approach, which is secular yet culturally “marinated in Lutheran Protestantism,” as Berglund (2013) puts it when describing the Swedish setting. Moreover, Lappalainen (2006) has studied Finnish preschools and noted how Lutheranism was often seen as an inseparable part of Finnishness, contributing to the construction of the national self-concept that excludes “others.” An additional problem with such “secular Lutheranism” (Riitaoja et al. 2010) or “secular Christianity” (Poulter et al. 2015) is that such a combination as a hegemony is “othering” and marginalizing toward both the purely secular or exclusively Christian worldviews and the other non-Christian, non-secular worldviews (Poulter et al. 2015). Finally, as regards Finnish approaches to diversity in its educational settings, Dervin et al. (2012) have detected some specific problems related to this that can also be applied to ECEC. They pinpoint an unproblematized, essentialist understanding that assumes “culture” is something related to “the other”—“a non-white” characteristic of the

“colored others,” whereas the “majority” positions are not recognized and their normativity is not problematized (Dervin et al. 2012).

*Negotiation* in this article refers to the process of positioning and repositioning one’s values and ideals—such as those related to one’s perceptions on worldview diversity in the Finnish ECEC setting. Such “navigation” can be examined at different levels, as it can take place, for example, in individual pre-planning and continuous reflection on one’s own work, regarding different educational contents and emphases. These processes are closely connected to one’s values and worldview, be it religious or non-religious (e.g., Kuusisto 2011, 20–21). Teacher’s negotiations in ECEC could include, for example, the decision about whether to tell the children about the religious core substances that underlay the kindergarten’s traditional Christmas celebrations—and, if so, from which approach. Such negotiations can also be examined at a broader, macro level. For example, Rizvi (2014, 194) writes about hybridity and the “role of education in negotiating transnationalism as a space in which educational policy must learn to manage cultural uncertainties as it imagines and projects both the nation and the global condition,” and about “political spaces in which claims of inclusion and justice are now negotiated” (Rizvi 2011, 188).

## **Worldview diversity in Finland**

In the examination of changing worldviews in Finland, Vertovec’s (2015) differentiation between old and new diversities is useful. The old diversity in Finnish society includes a long history of, for example, Tatar and Jewish communities and several Christian minority groups. During the past decades, there has been an increase in new diversity due to increased migration, secularization, and a growing interest in new religious movements among Finns. Old and new diversities can also be examined at individual and family levels of Finnish children’s everyday lives, for example, in terms of the growing variety of worldviews and values present in their extended families and the increase in the importance of media influence in children’s lives. The increasing new diversity in ECEC children’s and staff-members’ home backgrounds has brought with it a new necessity to take into account the presence of religions and other worldviews in the kindergarten. Many ECEC staff members have found the new diversities to be challenging, for example, when it comes to the customary ways in which Christmas and Easter are celebrated in the kindergarten—even if for many years these have typically focused on non-Christian or vaguely Christian elements, such as Santa and his elves in the

preparation for Christmas in December or colorful crafts with chicks and witches at Easter (e.g., Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012). Beside these two annual periods of negotiating between the handling of the old and the new, the new diversities have also caused a lot of uncertainty on how—if at all—the religious and worldview education that is included in the national ECEC content guidelines should be organized. Finally, and perhaps most critically for social justice perspectives, there are still some exclusionary practices and othering that are based on worldview diversity among children and staff (Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012; Kuusisto et al. 2014).

The national discussion about multiculturalism and diversity in Finland only properly started in recent decades; it has mainly focused on questions related to ethnicity, culture, and language (Paavola & Talib 2010). The share of residents with immigrant backgrounds is still among the lowest in Europe, and the intensity of new diversities is notably higher in bigger cities, particularly the area including the capital, Helsinki. The layered, situated effects of the old and new diversities have also previously been seen to produce shifting patterns of prejudice, segregation, inequality, and conflict (Vertovec 2015). Also, in Finland attitudes to different minority groups are connected with historical power positions and include diverse histories of encounters between nations. Finland also has links to colonialism through research, culture, and missionary work, which also colors the attitudinal climate (Rastas 2007). Polarized interpretations of the confrontations of the Cold War era are still one of the underlying factors in attitudes toward residents with backgrounds in socialist countries (Keskinen & Vuori 2012, 8). The discussion about multiculturalism is, in fact, a discussion about tolerance, racism, otherness, and nationality, and the nature of multiculturalism is simultaneously related to processes both global and local. As a part of that, it is important to contemplate, first, what the nature of relationships between different “cultures” within a diverse society is, and, second, how “culture” as a notion is understood—in this article, culture is seen as fluid and continuously altering. Essential questions to ponder are, why, when, and how difference becomes “otherness” and how these perceived differences construct the relationships between the familiar and the unknown, the norm and the exception. Otherness as a notion can be useful in making visible power hierarchies at various societal levels and in deconstructing these (Huttunen, Löytty, & Rastas 2005; Kuusisto et al. 2014). Diverse educational settings require revised policies, pedagogies, and practices for addressing social justice in education in order to combat different forms of oppression, such as those related to worldviews. This demands that

teachers hold a pedagogical approach that is sensitive to worldview differences, actively fostering social justice and anti-oppressive practices in ECEC (see also Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012; Rissanen et al, 2016).

In Finland religion is generally regarded as a private matter, and the presence of religious elements is not generally accepted in societal institutions such as ECEC settings. An exception to this is formed by the elements that are perceived as connected to national, cultural heritage (Poulter 2013, 165; Kääriäinen, Niemelä, & Ketola 2005, 114, 168). These include, for example, elements from Christian tradition that have traditionally been included in ECEC Christmas festivities or spring concerts, such as particular hymns, the inclusion of which in societal educational settings does occasionally cause rather polarized societal debates. Also Christianity can be an unfamiliar “other” to many, in particular when it comes to understanding the personal meaningfulness of religiosity in someone’s life. Thus, it may sometimes be difficult to create sufficient “touching ground” for understanding difference in the ECEC staff community or among the children and their families. Our previous study on multicultural kindergartens (Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012) in the Helsinki area shows that sometimes ECEC communities may be somewhat exclusive in their habitual practices—justifying practices through the way in which “we” have “always” dealt with something. Such ways of thinking or acting were also sometimes justified through their “Finnishness,” as a part of constructing a particular, sometimes somewhat narrowly understood way of nation making. Within the hectic everyday running of the ECEC, reflective and critical discussion about the value basis behind operational cultures may easily be lacking (Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012; Lappalainen 2006). Pluralistic working communities where staff members from different backgrounds work together and cooperate have worked toward increasing the ECEC professionals’ intercultural understanding, for example, in terms of different educational traditions. Colleagues’ perspectives can help in the continuous development of one’s own work, for example, through enabling a reflection on and re-evaluation of habitual policies, and the seeking of different alternatives for these (Honkasalo, Souto, & Suurpää 2007, 26–28). Many municipalities have also realized the need for in-service training of their ECEC staff in relation to these issues. Still, the support for intercultural and inter-religious sensitivities in both in-service training and in the teacher training programs of different universities varies a lot depending on geographical location and the municipality or institution in question (e.g., Rissanen et al., 2016).

## **Position of worldviews in national document guidelines for ECEC and preschool in Finland**

The Finnish ECEC is based on the *educare* ideology, which aims to combine care, education, and teaching as integral parts of the operational whole in kindergartens (the Finnish word *päiväkoti* literally means “day home”). Finnish kindergarten teachers are trained at universities, where their qualification is gained through a BA-level degree program in early childhood education, including studies in the didactics of the various content areas, including worldview education. However, at present, there is a contested interpretation of multi-professionalism in the Finnish ECEC setting. According to national regulations, at least every third staff member is required to have a kindergarten teacher qualification (or equivalent), and the remaining staff are required to be trained as practical nurses or nursery nurses. This has led to the situation where trained kindergarten teachers presently form the smallest occupational group in Finnish ECEC, while the majority of the ECEC staff are social work or health care professionals. Additionally, there have been different interpretations of a democratic division of labor between staff members in the educational teams that are each responsible for a group of children (Onnismaa & Kalliala 2010).

Finnish ECEC targets the age group 0–5 and the succeeding six-year-old age group, which participates in a year of pre-primary education, preschool, which was only recently made compulsory for the whole age group. The preschool groups typically function as a part of the same premises with the ECEC for the younger age groups, and such preschools thus form an integral part of the kindergartens’ operational environment. The pedagogical aims and contents for the education provided within it are set by the National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland (Heikkilä et al. 2004) for the ages 0–5 and the National Curriculum Guidelines for Preschool (*Esiopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2014*) for the six-year-olds.<sup>2</sup> These documents serve as a basis for the municipal and unit-specific curriculum documents as well as the actual, implemented practices. The document guidelines on the position of religions and other worldviews in ECEC and preschool are briefly presented below.

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<sup>2</sup> The preschool guidelines have recently been renewed and the new guidelines are to be taken into practice by August 2016. Hence, the official English language translations were not yet available at the time of writing and the included quotations are translated by the author from Finnish.



The National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland (2004) pinpoints the national value basis of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which became a legislative act in Finland in 1991. The founding values transferred from the convention into the Finnish ECEC guidelines include each child's right to non-discrimination and equal treatment. Furthermore, the value basis also draws from Finnish basic rights and other legal documents, which state, among other things, children's rights to their own culture, language, religion, and beliefs—in line with the national Freedom of Religion Act (updated 2003) that emphasizes the individual's positive right to religion and worldview. The ECEC content orientations include a religious-philosophical orientation, which is non-confessional in nature. Societal change and also the “new” diversity reflected in the landscape of religions and other worldviews in society are echoed in these documents: previously, the aims and contents of worldview education emphasized learning about religion to gradually increase commitment to one's “own” religion.<sup>3</sup> However, today the focus of the content area is in the impact of worldviews on child development. Furthermore, the document highlights the recognition of worldviews by stating: “Insights are gained into the customs of various religions and beliefs close to the child.” It is also notable that this content orientation includes an element requiring educational partnership between ECEC staff and the home: the precise contents are to be “agreed on” with each child's parents (Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012). More precisely, for this content orientation it is stated:

The core of the religious-philosophical orientation is formed by religious, spiritual and philosophical issues and phenomena. Interest is taken in the traditions, customs and practices of the child's own religion or beliefs. The child is offered an opportunity to experience silence and wonder, to ask questions and ponder over issues. The child's sensitivity and ability to understand the non-verbal and symbolic are respected, supported and strengthened. Insights are gained into the customs of various religions and beliefs close to the child. The content of the religious-philosophical orientation is agreed on with each child's parents in drawing up the individual ECEC plan. (National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland 2004, 26)

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<sup>3</sup> The nature of the child's “own” religion can be problematized, as it is dependent on the formal affiliation of the child, and/or one or both parents, or parental choice. The nature of ownership experienced to the particular tradition by the child may be vague (Kuusisto & Kallioniemi, forthcoming; Poulter, Kuusisto, Matilainen, & Kallioniemi, forthcoming).

Furthermore, the ECEC guidelines include an ethical orientation focusing on values and norms, which state that in ECEC the children's daily life events are to be examined from the viewpoint of questions of right and wrong, and, for instance, that questions of justice, equality, respect, and freedom are to be dealt with and discussed in a safe environment.

When it comes to the six-year-old age group, the pre-primary or preschool content, the Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education in Finland (2014, 13) takes the following approach in section 2.1, "Requirements for organizing pre-primary instruction":

In pre-primary education, children's different backgrounds related to languages, cultures, worldviews and religions are taken into account in a positive way. Children's opinions are listened to and the development of their identities is supported.

In other words, this document clearly states the requirement of taking worldviews and religions into account in a positive way, as well as highlighting listening to the children's own views and supporting their identities—which may also include strong linkages to religious elements, and would at least require a non-exclusive treatment of all traditions in the ECEC. Later (p. 15), regarding the value basis for Finnish pre-primary education, it is stated: "Every child has a right to be heard, seen, recognized and understood as an individual and as a member of his/her community." And, referring to governmental regulations, there is also a requirement for a "respectful approach" toward worldviews and religions, among other matters:<sup>4</sup>

Open and respectful approach of the pre-primary staff toward different families and the different worldviews, religions, traditions, and educational perspectives of the homes is a foundation to constructive interaction and instruction.

Furthermore, regarding supporting equality, and in relation to opinions—and all religious and worldview education in the Finnish system is to be non-confessional in nature, which can also be seen here—the document includes a reference to the Non-Discrimination Act (6 § 1 mom. 21/2004) when stating:

Pre-primary education as an operational environment supports equality between children. This includes for instance the equality between opinions and genders. Pre-primary education advocates children's opportunities to

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<sup>4</sup> *Valtioneuvoston asetus* (422/2012) 2 §.

develop their skills and to make choices without gender-related presumptions. Intentions for equality are complemented by extensive principle of non-discrimination. Instruction does not commit the children in relation to politics, religions, and worldviews.

It needs to be noted, however, that the nature of the implementation of these two documents is different. Where the ECEC guidelines for the age group 0–5 are more of a guiding nature, the preschool curriculum for teaching the six-year-olds is more binding. Thereby, the national ECEC guidelines may get somewhat different interpretations at the municipal level. For instance, the Helsinki ECEC guidelines (*Helsingin varhaiskasvatussuunnitelma* 2013) have included religious contents “in the manner agreed with the parents” in line with the national level, but rather than “gaining insights into”—or, learning about—the customs of various religions and beliefs, the local ECEC guidelines merely emphasize the guidance of children toward respecting different views, namely:

In Early Childhood Education the child is familiarized with religious questions in the manner agreed with the parents. The children are guided toward respecting other’s confession and culture. In multicultural Helsinki, where there are many religions, worldviews, and customs, the main emphasis is on ethics education.

Naturally, many ECEC units in Helsinki also include some education on different worldviews in their educational contents. However, as the municipal-level guidelines do not require this and somewhat dilute the national-level contents regarding the support of children’s literacy on worldviews, there is more variance between the practical-level content matters between units and teachers than there would be if the guidelines also supported worldview literacy at the municipal document level. Rather than regarding pluralism as a reason for not teaching children about worldviews in the most diverse area of the country, the ECEC could support the children’s understanding of different worldviews in their growing-up context. At present, many children are not aware of their “own” religious belonging, either. In my kindergarten study (Kuusisto 2010), I was told about preschoolers from secular Lutheran homes asking their parents, “Am I also a Muslim like my friends are?”

### **Worldview sensitivity in a teacher’s pedagogical toolkit**

The connections between the national guideline document’s aims and the actual development of “insights” or “respect” toward worldview diversity

in ECEC can be examined at multiple levels. One of the perhaps more recognized matters that the ECEC community members are confronted with is peer group exclusion, racism, and bullying. This is carried out in numerous forms and takes place also “within” and “between” minorities. Sometimes peer group exclusion is open, even physical, and other times it is more subtle and may go unnoticed by staff and also thereby go without adult intervention. Our kindergarten study (Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012) includes, for instance, an example of a discussion between two six-year-old preschoolers from different families. The parents of these two girls had negotiated different solutions to a question of whether their children would attend a Christmas vesper at a local Lutheran church with the ECEC group: one family had decided that their daughter would attend, whereas the other had made a different decision. The daughter of the latter mentioned family then said to her friend, “You are not a *real* Muslim if you go there.” According to the staff’s impression on the matter, the conflict originated in that the other girl also wanted to attend the Christmas vesper, so her feeling of exclusion was originally behind what she said.

Although many teachers are very sensitive and competent in dealing with worldview diversity, and most ECEC units hold an inclusive operational culture, educators may sometimes also unintentionally transmit their fears and prejudices to the children.

Anne [a teacher] adds veggie balls to her plate. She sits at the same table with the children. Suddenly, Nelli [a child] starts to laugh and bursts out into singing in a loud voice, “Anne is a Muslim, Anne is a Muslim!” pointing to the food on the teacher’s plate with her finger. “No, I definitely am not!” responds Anne. (Data 1/SL-V/observation, Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012, emphasis added to transcribed data, reproduced with minor emendations)

The ECEC staff members would need a lot of support from their educational institutions, in-service training, and the director of the ECEC unit if continuous reflection on their own work were to be implemented. Such training could support recognizing and working on one’s values and construction of an educational approach that would support inclusion and social justice in the ECEC. Without streamlined practices for tackling these matters in the diverse and continuously altering settings, teachers are left very much on their own in handling such matters, which may also lead, although often quite unintendedly, into exclusive practices:

A puppet mouse peeks out from a doorway and asks children one-by-one to the other room. In the middle of the process, the educator seems to

remember that the Muslim boy is not allowed to participate in the Christmas calendar activity: “Oh, Mohamed is not allowed to participate in this. Mohamed, you can stay on this side and play.” The mouse puppet continues asking other children to follow him. (Data extract from fieldwork diary of Silja Lamminmäki-Vartia; in Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2010)

Our previous studies (e.g. Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia 2012, 2010a, 2010b; Lamminmäki-Vartia & Kuusisto 2015) illustrate that, in particular, religious worldviews are often seen through negation; that is, they are perceived through limitations to accustomed everyday practices in the kindergartens. With the increase in new diversities, there are many families that do not want their children to take part in particular practices that are seen to contradict family worldviews, be these religious or non-religious. In some ECEC units, this has led to what Kalliala (2005) has called the “culture of cutting off.” That is, the elements that one or several of the children are not “allowed” to see, hear, or participate in are left out from the educational contents and practices. Unfortunately, if these contents are not replaced by other carefully planned educational activities, such a procedure narrows and shallows the educational contents for the whole group. And, at the same time, the necessity for the children to understand the multitude of worldviews in their everyday environment is highlighted by the new diversities. Furthermore, the opportunities for the diversity of worldviews could alternatively lead to a completely different direction and provide more of everything for the whole group through the many-sided, layered fabric of perspectives inherently present in the kindergarten community. Many teachers do utilize this; however, what happens in each group regarding worldview education and how the presence of worldview diversity is handled is at present highly dependent on each individual teacher and the educational team working in the group.

There is still rather a lot of ambiguity on the way in which the national, municipal, and unit-level guidelines should be implemented. The uncertainty could be significantly reduced by providing additional support to the ECEC staff. Beside the need for the ECEC unit director to support the individual teachers and educational teams in implementing worldview education (Lamminmäki-Vartia & Kuusisto 2015), the directors also need more support in handling the new diversities and the sometimes colliding educational ideals of the parents, the staff, and the document level. It all comes down to how the aims are perceived: what are the skills and competences needed in the changing societal settings, and what kind of educational approach would best support the children’s development in this direction (e.g., Kallioniemi, Honkasalo, & Kuusisto, 2016)?

## **Negotiating perceptions on worldview diversity in Finnish ECEC**

This article aimed to examine the ways in which perceptions of worldview diversity, inclusion, and exclusion are negotiated in the Finnish ECEC. Looking at literature on the field, policy documents, and empirical findings, it seems that much has been done already, in particular in the national-level policy documents. Furthermore, as noted above, many ECEC teachers, according to our data also, are doing a superb job as regards these issues. However, the problem seems to be the wide variety in practices: some ECEC settings do have well-defined values, are dedicated to inclusive practices, and support children's literacy and competences in a multitude of ways. However, there is still too much uncertainty and ambiguity in the field, as well as exclusive and segregating practices. One reason for this may be the lack of qualified kindergarten teachers in the units; although multi-professionalism is a strength in the educational teams in many ways, the idea of sharing the tasks democratically may not always work toward ensuring educational equality for all children if the teaching staff have not studied similar contents in their professional training.

Furthermore, there is still a lot more to work on in supporting ECEC staff. First of all, the perceptions of worldview diversity, inclusion, and exclusion should be renegotiated and put into practice at national as well as municipal and ECEC unit level. Second, the teachers need continuous support in the practical application of the guideline level aims, and in opportunities for critical reflection related to their perceptions of worldview diversity, inclusion, and exclusion as a part of their degree studies as well as their continuous professional development.

In terms of educational contents and activities, recent developments in Finland include a multi-faith festive calendar, which is also published as a freely downloadable e-publication.<sup>5</sup> Such material can contribute toward supporting ECEC staff in providing recognition of worldview diversity in positive ways. Many kindergartens presently use the calendar, for example, by choosing a few festivals per year as theme weeks, and working on related thematic areas from the perspective of different ECEC content orientations. It needs to be noted, though, that the way in which the various traditions are presented in the kindergarten needs to be properly considered to not create or strengthen stereotypes, exoticize, or overly simplify "other" traditions into merely "cooking" or "drumming" (see, e.g., Tuori 2007).

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<sup>5</sup> Link to the Swedish-language edition: <http://festkalendern.fi/>.