



Social Sustainability in Swedish Multicultural Preschools

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Abstract

Although principals in Swedish preschools treasure cultural diversity and multilingualism, diversity also involves challenges to preschool staff. They may find themselves in a position where there is no way of cooperating with parents, as prescribed in the preschool curriculum, without counteracting preschools' fundamental values. These values concern promoting democracy, human rights, gender equality and diversity – fundamental social sustainability goals. The aim of this study is to identify and analyse dilemmas that may occur in Swedish multicultural preschools when teachers strive to live up to fundamental values in the preschool curriculum. In the study, 14 preschool principals were interviewed in focus groups. The results were analysed through the theoretical concept 'dilemmatic spaces' (Honig, 1996). Dilemmatic spaces suggest that dilemmas are ever-present in a particular setting, such as preschools, and that this shifts the responsibility for a challenging situation from the individual to a structural level. The framework has been further developed by Fransson and Grannäs (2013), who claim that it is particularly appropriate for analysing teachers' daily practise. This article presents dilemmas that may arise when preschool staff working in multicultural preschools strive to uphold fundamental values stipulated in the curriculum.

Keywords: *dilemmatic space; diversity; preschool; social sustainability*

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Introduction

In 2021, more than a fourth of all children in Swedish preschool ages, 1–5 years, were either born in another country or had parents born in another country. Another 14 per cent of the children had one parent born outside Sweden. Consequently, cultural diversity is a normality in everyday life in Swedish preschools, although differences between units, preschools and municipalities are large. The Swedish preschool curriculum (The Swedish National

Agency for Education, 2018) describes preschool as a social and cultural meeting place which should promote children's understanding of the value of diversity. Moreover, the preschool should make sure that different cultures are visible in education. When the Swedish preschool curriculum was revised in 2018, the concept of "sustainability" was incorporated in the text addressing the fundamental values for preschool. Education should lay the foundation "for a growing interest and responsibility among children for active participation in civic life and for sustainable development – not only economic but also social and environmental" (p. 5). Fundamental values in the curriculum also stipulate that preschool activities should rest upon democratic values, respect for human rights, the equal value of all people, and equality between women and men and girls and boys. The preschool should further reflect the values and rights expressed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC); children should therefore have the right to participate in decisions about education and activities.

Social sustainability seems to lack a clear and coherent definition, according to Boldermo and Ødegaard (2019). In general terms and in accordance with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the social dimension concerns a good and just foundation for a decent life for all people, with opportunities for everyone to influence their own lives (Boldermo, 2019). According to Grindheim et al. (2019), social and cultural sustainability points to a development that ensures safety, social rights, and good living conditions – equal rights for all. These concern class, gender, ethnicity, religion, and culture. Bergan et al. (2021) expand the concept by including social justice, equal rights, citizenship, participation, well-being, health, education, and safety for all people. In addition, social participation, participatory decision-making, and agency are important aspects of the social dimension of sustainability, according to Bergan et al.

In a literature review, Boldermo selected articles related to education for sustainability in early childhood, in order to investigate how the social dimension is conceptualised. Recurring topics related to the understandings of the social dimension in the articles were democracy and democratic values, children's rights, and children as active citizens. Other topics described as related to the social dimension were social participation, diversity, social and economic justice, human rights, equality, responsibility, and tolerance. An important conclusion of the review was that "a dominant route into social sustainability considers children as problem solvers" (p. 9), which, according to Boldermo reveals a view of the child as a competent child. This view is shared by Borg and Samuelsson (2022), who found that children are recognised as competent beings who can actively participate in and influence their learning in the revised preschool curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018). The authors also found that the curriculum explicitly introduced the concept of sustainability from a holistic perspective, integrating environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Early childhood education plays a key role in establishing the foundations for human development and lifelong learning opportunities (Khalfaoui et al.,

2021). The fourth UN Sustainable Development Goal states that quality education is the foundation for creating sustainable development aimed at achieving fairer and more supportive societies.

In this article, three dimensions of social sustainability in preschool are in focus. The analysis points to potential dilemmas in daily practice in multicultural preschools that concern gender equality, children's rights, and cultural diversity. Challenges that preschool teachers may face in fulfilling social sustainability goals in multicultural preschools are also examined. The research question is: What dilemmas occur in Swedish preschools when teachers strive to live up to the preschool curriculum in multicultural preschools?

Previous research

In this section, previous research is presented under two themes: cultural diversity in preschool and social sustainability in preschool. There is a scarcity of research combining these two areas. This article may contribute knowledge to the intersection of the two fields.

Cultural diversity in preschool

The image of cultural diversity in Swedish preschools is paradoxical, according to Löfdahl and Hägglund (2012). At a structural level, the ambition is to defuse differences, while at a practice level differences are emphasised and upheld. In the former preschool curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 1998/2010), cultural diversity was seen as something positive, as a resource that enables children to broaden their insight into different cultures and habits. Yet, results from fieldwork including observations and informal conversations with children and preschool teachers point in a different direction. In their analyses, Löfdahl and Hägglund found preschool to be a homogenised institution where diversity is controlled and segregation is maintained. A conclusion was that Swedish preschools' settings were loaded with values and attitudes regarding diversity that differ from intentions formulated in the national curriculum.

Strategies used by educators in preschool regarding the reception of refugee children and their families can be categorised as either culturally reflexive, with flexible strategies aiming to empower, or as fostering strategies aiming to teach parents to adjust to routines and norms in the Swedish preschool (Lunneblad, 2017). In an ethnographic case study, the researcher visited three preschools in an immigrant-dense suburban area and gathered data through observations and interviews with the educators. The results disclosed an ambivalent attitude towards parents among preschool teachers. On the one hand, they expressed understanding of the difficulties parents may have adjusting to Swedish society in general and to preschool in particular. On the other hand, they argued that the parents must learn and accept the day-to-day routines of the preschool.

Cultural and religious differences may lead to dilemmas and conflicts in preschool between teachers, parents, and children (Stier & Sandström, 2018, 2020). In 14 focus group interviews, the researchers discussed preschool teachers' approaches to parents' dietary requests. Dilemmas and conflicts related to food were largely handled with avoidance strategies or efforts to change the parents' views. Intercultural or transcultural approaches were rare. The Swedish curriculum provides little guidance on how to handle difficult situations, according to the preschool teachers. Thus, they developed their own strategies to deal with children's and parents' expectations and demands, often using the children as intermediaries. Norberg and Törnsén (2013) examined dilemmas in Swedish early childhood education related to honour culture. Fifty-three principals who participated in an in-service program were asked about their experiences of honour-related dilemmas. The major findings illustrate that the principals dealt with honour-related issues in their daily practice, including parents' demands for restrictions affecting girls and boys, limiting their right to participate in all school subjects and activities and to live a life free of oppression.

Preschool staff's competence and attitudes are put forth by some scholars as important factors for creating a positive climate in intercultural settings. Self-efficacy for inclusion among preschool teachers and positive beliefs about multiculturalism were important aspects, as found by Kurucz et al. (2020). In their study, they explored teachers' perceptions of the engagement of immigrant parents in German preschools. Approximately 1,400 preschool teachers, from 203 preschools, participated in the survey. Teachers perceived engagement of immigrant parents more positively if the staff shared an understanding of cultural diversity, and if the director of the preschool had a multicultural mindset. Major challenges for parent cooperation and engagement were, however, found in socially disadvantaged areas. Mary and Young (2017) concluded that teachers' intercultural competence facilitated bilingual children's transition from home to school. Furthermore, teachers' intercultural competence fostered positive relationships with the parents, which in its turn favoured children's well-being, learning, and inclusion.

A mindful, deliberate introduction of cultural artefacts in the classroom allows children to learn in a manner consistent with their cultural background, according to Hennig and Kirova (2012). From a sociocultural perspective, materials are cultural objects within the social context. The authors argue that the presence of cultural artefacts in an early childhood setting allow children's home culture to emerge as central. Preschool teachers in Malaysia used a "tourist approach" in multicultural education (San Poon et al., 2013), teaching about festivals and religious celebrations or by arranging performing arts or food days. This way of adding ethnic content to the curriculum by focusing on peculiarities or manifestations of a culture contributes to reinforcing stereotypes, the researchers argued. They further concluded that it is important to ensure that preschool teachers develop critical understandings of multicultural education through teacher education training and programs.

Four different understandings and approaches to ethnic and cultural diversity among Swedish preschool teachers were discerned by Stier et al. (2012, p. 287): “instrumental, co-productive, facilitative proactive, and agitative proactive.” Ten teachers described their work with respect to cultural diversity, and the results suggested that, in order to be interculturally competent, preschool teachers need to work systematically with intercultural pedagogy, intercultural communication skills, and discursive awareness. Further, if preschool teachers fail to scrutinise their values and behaviour, they may sustain cultural stereotypes.

Anderstaf et al. (2021) examined how Swedish preschool teachers negotiate tensions that may arise from perceived conflicts rooted in cultural value differences, and identified three themes. The first theme concerns assumptions and expectations by the teachers that preschool teachers should avoid tensions that can lead to conflicts. The second theme concerns how teachers resolved dilemmas by invoking culture to explain the parents’ actions. The third theme concerns the paradoxical way that the teachers came to see conflict as an important means of developing the preschool profession.

Although some studies suggest that diversity adds value to early childhood education (Hennig & Kirova, 2012; Mary & Young, 2017), some attention in the research is also paid to what is difficult (Norberg & Törnsén, 2013; Stier & Sandström, 2020).

Social sustainability in preschool

In previous research about early childhood education for sustainability, it is common to point the research interest towards outdoor life, learning about nature and environmental sustainability. According to Boldermo (2019), the research on education for sustainability in early childhood has been closely related to issues surrounding the environmental dimension, with an emphasis on the need to educate children to be environmentally responsible and to live sustainable lives. Children’s active participation and agency in everyday educational practices are frequently raised in such contexts (Borg & Samuelsson, 2022; Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2013). Borg and Gericke (2021) found that preschool teachers initially viewed sustainability from an environmental perspective. However, after participating in a school development project, they were able to acknowledge the social dimension of sustainability, such as caring for other people and caring for the world from a holistic perspective. The authors further concluded that it is important that teachers receive training to empower themselves and to be enabled to empower future generations. In a Norwegian study (Bergan et al., 2021), social and cultural aspects of sustainability related to foraging and gardening in kindergarten were examined. An aim was to explore how the activities could contribute to learning and agency for the social and cultural aspects of sustainability. The scope for social and cultural sustainability was narrowed to include participation, agency, collaboration, inclusion, belonging, and sustaining cultural heritage as related to foraging and gardening for food. Results revealed that both children and adults showed active participation and agency during the work. The researchers concluded that practical

foraging and gardening can contribute to learning and agency for both social and cultural sustainability.

Sadownik et al. (2021) attempted to trace understandings of social sustainability in early childhood education (ECE) in a number of European countries. A critical discourse analysis of ECE policy documents aimed to demonstrate how social sustainability is addressed in the documents. The intention was also to analyse how social sustainability relates to the sense of belonging, local place, diversity, and difference, as well as to collaboration with parents and caregivers. Some dilemmas related to the dynamics of multiple belongings and issues of cultural identity were raised. Although the inclusion of parents' cultural knowledge in ECE content and practices is of great importance, according to the authors, it must be done without prescribing a particular cultural heritage to a particular child, but by using it as a resource for the whole group. A similar study was performed by Weldemariam et al. (2017), who analysed curricula in Sweden, Norway, the United States (US), England, and Australia. At that point, only the curricula for ECE in Norway and Australia explicitly included sustainability goals. The authors also explored views of the child in the different curricula. In Sweden, they found an image of a competent, active and responsible child with possibilities for influencing everyday routines, learning and the pre-school environment. Similarly, the children in Australian curricula for ECE were pictured as active learners, critical thinkers, and problem-solvers, although not applied directly to sustainability issues. The Norwegian curricula stressed children's uniqueness and abilities to express their views. In curricula from England and the US, Weldemariam et al. found images of children in need of help and support from adults.

With reference to the fourth of the Sustainable Development Goals, Samuelsson and Park (2017) highlight the need for lifelong learning to already start in ECE. Further pre-conditions for involving children in sustainability education are well-educated staff and curriculum plans that include sustainability goals. Moreover, Samuelsson and Park argue that parental involvement is important, as cooperation between the home and preschool is critical for long-term benefits. Finally, the authors argue that children need not only be taught about their individual rights but also about their responsibilities to others.

Citizenship and belonging are concepts frequently emphasised in contemporary education for sustainability, according to Boldermo (2019). To maintain a socially sustainable society for all, migrant children's experiences of belonging are becoming increasingly important. Yet, migrant children may encounter challenges to experiencing belonging in ECE contexts, due to language differences as well as different socio-cultural values between the home and preschool. Boldermo and Ødegaard (2019) investigated research articles related to sustainability in early childhood, in order to describe how the social dimension is conceptualised in education for sustainability. Even if the social dimension were conceptualised as strongly related to social justice and citizenship, few articles investigated diversity, multicultural perspectives, or migrant children's situations in the context of ECE for sustainability.

Theoretical framework

Preschool teachers have extensive responsibility for children's learning and well-being. They are expected to fulfil their professional duties according to laws, policy documents, and guidelines and to consider the children's and parents' expectations. Inevitably, preschool teachers will occasionally find themselves in dilemmatic situations. Fransson and Grannäs (2013) suggest "dilemmatic spaces" (p. 4) as a conceptual framework in educational settings. The concept was introduced by Honig (1996), who defined a dilemma as a situation "in which values, obligations, or commitments conflict and there is no right thing to do" (1996, p. 258). According to Honig, we ought not to think of dilemmas as single events but in terms of dilemmatic spaces that "form the terrain of our existence" (1994, p. 568). Dilemmas may occur as events, yet, according to Honig, they are outbursts of value conflicts that are already there. This may make dilemmas less dramatic and shift the responsibility from the individual teacher to a general level (Fransson & Grannäs, 2013). Dilemmatic spaces form teachers' professional identities, according to Fransson and Grannäs (2013), in relation to stakeholders such as children, parents, and policy-makers, and in relation to specific perspectives, such as multiculturalism.

Dilemmatic spaces have, again according to Fransson and Grannäs (2013), "a potential to elucidate and deepen the understanding of the complexity of teachers' everyday work practices" (p. 5). As a conceptual frame, dilemmatic spaces make it possible to analyse teachers' practices concerning societal changes. A dilemmatic space does not include a typical beginning and end; rather, dilemmas are construed in the setting – the space – wherein a person participates. Menning (2018) introduced the concept of dilemmatic axes. In an ethnographic study, Menning explored the notion of curiosity as a gateway to value dilemmas in early childhood education and care practices and presented his results in terms of a number of dilemmatic axes. Drawing on Menning's results, Olsson (2022) suggested that several dilemmatic axes exist, related to multicultural preschools. This article explores dilemmas that arise when preschool teachers strive to uphold fundamental values articulated in the preschool curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018) while simultaneously communicating and cooperating with families and inviting migrant children and parents to participate in preschool activities, also stipulated by the curriculum.

Methodology

This article explores preschool principals' shared understandings of dilemmas related to multicultural preschools in a Swedish context. An appropriate theoretical approach for studying shared understandings is social representations theory (SRT), first introduced by Moscovici (2001). SRT addresses how groups of people construct, negotiate, and maintain

understandings and common knowledge about phenomena relevant to the group. In contrast to social cognitive approaches, it presupposes that an object is social not due to some immanent characteristics but through the way in which people relate to it (Wagner et al., 1999). SRT investigates how ideological concepts become common knowledge in everyday life (Passini & Emiliani, 2009). A subset of social representations is professional representations (Piasser et al., 2011) relating to phenomena in a specific professional environment and shared by people in the same profession. Interest is pointed towards how professionals, in this study preschool principals, express shared views and values about multicultural preschools.

In focus group interviews, the researchers attempt to position themselves as moderators, trying to accomplish a supportive climate that encourages all participants to share views and facilitate interaction among members (Wibeck, 2010). An ideal interview may resemble an ordinary conversation, which is why it was considered an appropriate method of producing empirical material for the research. In the research, 14 preschool principals were interviewed in four focus groups. Eleven principals represented public preschools while three represented private preschools, and the preschools were situated in four different municipalities. The preschool principals manage on average 2–3 preschools with 4–6 units each. There are usually 15–20 children and 2–4 staff in a preschool unit. Thus, the participants' experiences are based on managing around 500 preschool teachers and 3,000 children yearly.

The participants were informed verbally and in writing about the aim of the research and that participation was voluntary, following ethical guidelines (Swedish Research Council, 2017). They were also informed about confidentiality in the research and that they could choose to withdraw their participation at any time. The interviews lasted for approximately 90 minutes. An interview guide was constructed with a few themes related to multiculturalism and cultural diversity, but the ambition was to follow up on topics and issues brought up by the participants themselves. The conversations were recorded and transcribed, and analysis was undertaken in order to identify essential possibilities and challenges in the everyday practices in preschools. The analysis was performed using an abductive approach. After an initial coding and organisation, the framework of dilemmatic space was found to be useful to structure and analyse the empiric material.

Results

In this study, the participants frequently express the richness of cultural diversity and multilingualism. Some of them also emphasised that most migrant families expressed great appreciation towards preschool staff and tried their best to adapt to rules and policies. Furthermore, it is important to stress that the quotes in this section do not serve to draw

any generalised conclusions about all migrant families, or families with particular ethnic backgrounds. Nonetheless, preschool staff regularly face dilemmatic situations related to cultural differences. These dilemmas occasionally place preschool staff in situations where they find there are no right or wrong ways to act. In the following sections, dilemmas related to gender equality, children's rights and cultural diversity are addressed.

Gender equality

According to the preschool curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018), all activities in preschool should rest upon the fundamental values expressed in the curriculum, where equality between the genders is an essential aspect.

The preschool should actively and consciously promote equal rights and opportunities for all children, regardless of gender. The preschool also has a responsibility to combat gender patterns that limit children's development, choices and learning. How the preschool organises education, how children are treated and what demands and expectations are made of children all contribute to shaping their perceptions of what is female and what is male. The preschool should therefore organise education so that children mix, play and learn together, and test and develop their abilities and interests, with the same opportunities and on equal terms, regardless of gender. (p. 7)

This paragraph from the curriculum deserves attentive reading. Not only should preschools provide equal rights and opportunities for all children regardless of gender, but they should also combat gender patterns, and ensure that children mix, play, and learn together. This is challenging regardless of children's origin. Some of the preschool principals had experiences of parents opposing children playing particular games. Examples were given of parents not agreeing with their sons playing "girly" games:

He had dressed up in costumes but quit one day after his father had arrived to pick him up. It hurt inside to see that. He was six and about to go to primary school, and he struggled... It felt so wrong when he stopped playing but there was nothing we could do. It felt like a failure. We really tried to discuss with his father, but with no result. The message was clear; the boy could absolutely not play in costumes.

In this case, the teachers would sometimes let the boy play, but make sure that costumes were removed before his father arrived. Eventually, the boy himself chose not to participate in role-playing. A similar situation was experienced at another preschool when a migrant mother was outraged when she found her son in a pink dress at pick-up time. Other gender-related issues raised by the principals concerned male caregivers who will not shake hands with or who will reject information and material from female staff. A similar situation concerned a male preschool student doing his practicum: "I don't remember his origin; he

refused to shake women's hands. 'Yes but in this place we...' Well, he chose to quit right away." A question was asked regarding whether fathers of migrant children were as involved in their child's education and care as Swedish fathers often are:

Well, it is of course different as we have families with so many different origins and languages, but I feel things are changing. That many parents realise that parents to some extent share responsibilities in Sweden. Still, quite often the father comes to the first meeting since he is the one who speaks some Swedish. After that, they send their wives to deal with the rest.

One of the principals had the experience that if there was a complaint about something, the mother of a child tells her husband what is not working, and then he calls and complains about the situation. Parents' complaints sometimes concern male preschool teachers, and then teachers need to explain that Sweden supports male preschool teachers, and would prefer more men in preschool. "They make good role models! You need to have the discussion and make them understand." Some parents would oppose male staff changing their child's diapers:

That is something that happens a lot! To us, that is really an insult. Then you need to have a conversation, "this is how it works here." Of course, you have to try to understand their point of view, but you also have to try to explain. Sometimes it works, sometimes not so well.

Occasionally, also the children would express gender prejudice. For example, a boy might refuse to sit next to or play together with a girl, and the older boys may tell their younger friends about games boys are not supposed to play, or activities where they should not participate. If asked, a girl may claim that her father is not able to cook dinner or braid her hair because he is "a boy." "You do notice that there is a difference at home about who does what in the household and it reflects in preschool," one of the principals commented.

Children's participation and agency

The image of the competent child is deeply rooted in the Swedish preschool (Olsson, 2019), in contrast to earlier images of the child as needy and fragile. The ideal of the competent child signals that children are active, creative and responsible people and members of society. Moreover, children's agency and their right to have their voices heard are essential values. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has, since 2020, been incorporated into Swedish law. Already in 2018, the preschool curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018) declared that the preschool should reflect the values and rights expressed in the UNCRC and that children have the right to participation and influence. In a wider sense, and from the perspective of the sociology of childhood,

children's rights are not only about the UNCRC, but about acknowledging children as full citizens and right holders in the present (Cohen, 2005; Hart, 2009; Jans, 2004).

Children's needs and interests should shape the planning of their education, according to the preschool curriculum. Further, it is assumed that children can take responsibility for their own actions and that they have the capacity as well as rights to participate in decision-making. Some parents may find these images of children unfamiliar and question the need for listening to children's views and opinions: "When it comes to democracy, I sometimes meet attitudes that children do not need to participate in decisions. That is to say, parents may question why the children should be involved in, for example, deciding activities." In addition, some parents may react with surprise when the child participates in development dialogues. According to the principals, young migrant children were sometimes not held responsible for their actions; for example, they were not to blame for destroying toys or expected to tidy up after play by their parents. On occasion children themselves would argue that they were too young to be held responsible.

Another aspect of the image of the competent child is that children are assumed to be "robust" rather than fragile. The environment in preschool should, according to the curriculum, inspire children to explore the world around them, and challenge them to broaden their abilities. In play, children's motoric skills, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving can develop. Two of the principals had noticed that many migrant families usually carried their children or put them in strollers, and also that they usually put jackets on and buttoned up their children without letting them try for themselves. Preschool staff consider it good practice for children to try to put on their own clothes. In addition, it is considered motoric training and development when small children are put on the floor, while some parents expect staff to always carry them around. "Then we need to explain that the floor is not dirty and that we think it is good training for the children to crawl around."

There is a Nordic tradition to emphasise outdoor play in early childhood education, which is also a keystone in Swedish preschools. Preschool children play outdoors more or less every day, and often more than once a day, no matter the season or the weather. Some preschools even spend the entire day outdoors. Some parents would question the necessity of the children playing outdoor in rainy weather or cold temperatures. They may find the climate to be extremely chilly and fear that their child will be sick or suffer from getting wet or cold. Some parents also appeared to consider outdoor life and excursions to be too hard or even dangerous for the children. Examples were also given of parents who hesitated to let their child go into the woods because of dangers such as wild animals.

Multiculturalism

As mentioned previously, preschool should make sure that different cultures are visible in education. When asked, the principals mentioned several examples of activities and

artefacts originating from cultures other than Swedish. The most prominent element was the multitude of different languages: in one preschool alone, 37 different languages were spoken, in another about 80 per cent of the children had a migrant background. In some but not all preschools, “first language teachers” participated in preschool activities on a weekly basis. Furthermore, the preschool principals mentioned books, songs, maps, flags, food, and traditions from other cultures. “We try to involve parents to share their traditions and celebrations. The idea is to enrich activities by sharing each other’s traditions.” One of the principals had experiences of sensitive issues regarding flags and languages and concluded that her staff had changed their strategy and invited children and families to share what was important to them.

The preschool’s task also includes “transferring and developing a cultural heritage – values, traditions and history, language and knowledge” (p. 9). Implicitly, the sentence refers to Swedish cultural heritage. Celebrating Swedish holidays and traditions may involve both challenges and opportunities: “Our staff frequently ask for guidance about what to celebrate, when and in what cultural context.” This principal also talked about children from other cultural backgrounds who were not allowed to participate in rehearsals to celebrate Lucia, a Swedish midwinter tradition where children dress in white robes, carry candles, and sing traditional Lucia songs. Some families kept their children at home on Lucia day (December 13), causing some consternation among the staff:

Some of them discussed whether it was a Christian or a pagan tradition and whether we were allowed to celebrate it in preschool. We checked with the National Agency for Education, and it was OK. So now we know. I think we mustn’t be afraid to celebrate our traditions. It is part of our Swedish cultural heritage.

Thus, on occasion, preschool staff face challenges in fulfilling the curriculum goal that states that they should support children in developing their cultural identity and interest in different cultures, and “an understanding of the value of living in a society characterised by diversity, as well as an interest in local culture” (p. 15).

Summary of results

Conclusions drawn of the result are not primary about Swedish culture clashing with all or any other culture, but about situations when different goals in the Swedish preschool curriculum collide. The framework of dilemmatic spaces allows one to observe dilemmas in multicultural preschools in the light of fundamental values in the preschool curriculum. On the one hand, the curriculum stipulates that preschools should develop forms of collaboration with parents and create opportunities for parents to have an influence over their child’s well-being, development, and learning. On the other hand, the curriculum stipulates that preschools should safeguard fundamental values such as

gender equality and children's rights and agency and establish respect for fundamental democratic values while counteracting discrimination on the grounds of ethnic origin. The results presented in this article concern situations where parents, for example, disapprove of letting boys play in costume, disagree with children participating in decisions, or with children being held responsible for their actions. Another example is when parents do not approve of their children participating in Swedish traditions. In such situations, preschool staff find themselves facing dilemmas where there are no solutions. These situations may appear as single events, though they should rather be understood as outbursts of value conflicts that are already there (Honig, 1996), conflicts that spring from the preschool curriculum.

Discussion

As previously mentioned, there is no clear and coherent definition of social sustainability (Boldermo & Ødegaard, 2019). When asked about the newly integrated policy regarding sustainable development in the preschool curriculum, one of the principals commented that they had been working with sustainability development for a long time, long before the revised curriculum, and especially with social sustainability. I asked how they interpreted the concept, and the principal replied:

It is about norms and values. How we treat one another, to show consideration and respect to all humans and all living things. To work towards the equal value of all people and against discrimination and abusive treatment. Respecting cultural diversity. It is about our fundamental values, plain and simple.

The results of this study have revealed that the demand that preschools meet and respect parents' views and opinions regarding their child's education and care sometimes counteracts education for social sustainability. As in Norberg and Törnsén's (2013) research, parents' demands for restrictions may narrow girls' and boys' opportunities to test and develop their abilities and interests on equal terms, and limit children's development, choices, and learning by denying them the possibility to participate in all preschool activities. On the other hand, parental involvement and cooperation between the home and preschool is critical for long-term benefits in sustainability education, according to Samuelsson and Park (2017). Sadownik et al., (2021) suggest that families' cultural knowledge should be used as a resource for the whole group of children in social sustainability education in preschools.

Swedish preschools have a mission to make different cultures visible in education, a mission that may bring about dilemmatic situations. Some researchers highlight the

importance of culturally relevant material in preschools (Hennig & Kirova, 2012; Sanders et al., 2019). Sanders et al. (2019) argue that teachers of young children should ensure that materials are representative of the children's cultural experiences. Hennig and Kirova suggest a mindful, deliberate introduction of cultural artefacts in the classroom. One of the preschool principals in this study spoke about her staff changing strategies over the years in their efforts to make different cultures visible in education. Reasons for this were that they have had unfortunate experiences of lapses when, for example, nailing flags to the wall, or using Google to translate "hello" into different languages. The preschool staff had realised that issues around cultural differences must be handled with respect and sensitivity, and chose to invite children and parents to share what was relevant and important to them. Similarly, San Phoon et al. (2013) caution against adding ethnic artefacts and content to education and activities, as it may place focus on peculiarities of a culture, which at worst contributes to reinforcing stereotypes.

The image of the competent child is fundamental in Swedish preschools (Olsson, 2019; Weldemariam et al., 2017). Competent children are active and responsible and they have abilities to participate in decisions, yet Boldermo (2020) found that the situations for children with migrant backgrounds appear to be invisible in a research context. For preschools to support social sustainability, democracy, equal rights, and gender equality in society, it appears crucial to include children with migrant backgrounds part of the image of the competent child, citizens in the present (Cohen, 2005; Hart, 2009; Jans, 2004), and "agents of change" (Bergan, 2021, p. 4).

Lunneblad (2017) suggests that preschool staffs' strategies in the reception of migrant children and their families can be categorised as either culturally reflexive strategies, aiming to empower, or fostering strategies, aiming to teach parents to adjust to routines and norms. On the premise that multicultural preschools are dilemmatic spaces, it seems reasonable that preschool staff do their best to balance these two strategies.

Research in the field of cultural diversity in preschools stress the importance of well-educated staff (Lash et al., 2020; San Phoon et al., 2013; Stier et al., 2012). So does research regarding sustainability education in preschool settings (Borg & Gericke, 2021; Samuelsson & Park, 2017). Although professional confidence needs to develop gradually, this study implies that preschool teacher education and further training need to address issues related to cultural diversity and social sustainability, emphasising migrant children's education, care, and well-being. Further implications are that education and training, rather than providing artefacts and methods for sustainable education in multicultural preschools, should arrange for discussion and critical self-reflection of views, attitudes, and values concerning cultural diversity. A suggested starting point for such discussions is the different dilemmas that pre-service and preschool teachers may encounter in multicultural preschools.

Author biography

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