



Brief

The Child's (un)free Wonder. Curricular Conditions for Children to Explore Religious and Existential Questions in Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish Kindergartens and Pre-schools

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The article is a comparative study of curricular conditions in Finland, Norway, and Sweden regarding children's existential and religious questions in early childhood education and care. The three Nordic countries are involved in a wide-ranging process that are *both* secularizing and religiously vitalizing, and they diverge in how they deal with the new role of religion and the relation between cultural diversity, cultural heritage, and fundamental values.

An important difference is to what degree a secular ideal has moved religious themes from daily activities in ECEC into a private sphere. In both Finland and Norway, the kindergarten and pre-school teachers are obligated to explore religious questions together with the children, while in Sweden early childhood education is by regulation non-confessional, and the concept of religion is not used in national policy documents. This has consequences for the traditional role of Christianity in shaping the identities of citizens, and by extension also affects the legitimacy of identity processes informed by other religions.

Values, principles, and ideas in the curricula of Finland, Norway, and Sweden both reduce and make possible children's right to explore existential and religious questions, thereby creating a dynamic field of tensions that is incorporated into social institutions. This is the case both at the national level and in concrete situations within ECEC institutions. However, when values and principles counteract each other, the space for religious wonder becomes paradoxical both for children and staff.

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