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Educators' narratives about belonging and diversity in northern Finland early childhood education

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Abstract

This study focuses on belonging and diversity in early childhood education (ECE) in northern Finland. The concept of belonging is understood as involving dynamic processes that are constructed in the multiple relations of everyday life (Juutinen, 2018; Yuval-Davis, 2011). The concept of cultural diversity can be seen through various factors, such as language, ethnicity, nationality, but also socioeconomic background, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age and ability. The study aims to deepen the understanding about belonging and diversity by asking this question: How do educators co-create the understanding about belonging and diversity in the northern ECE settings? The research material consists of peer interviews between 24 educators (Devotta et al., 2016). Each peer interview was recorded, where a pair of educators shared their experiences about belonging and diversity in ECE. The peer interviews were analysed using the three-sphere context model (Zilber, Tuval-Mashiach, and Lieblich, 2008). The findings indicated that educators approached their conceptual understanding by encountering others, intertwining various perspectives and mapping belonging and diversity. The study contributes to the scientific discussion on the conceptualisation of belonging and diversity in ECE. The ethical issues and researchers' roles are discussed.

Introduction

Our study aims to deepen the understanding about belonging and diversity in northern Finland's early childhood education (ECE, 1–6-year-old children). The northern part of Finland is a geographically wide area with an inherent cultural diversity. The effects of globalisation are also visible in the north, with the growing mobility of people from different reasons. These factors also increase the northern region's cultural diversity. These circumstances naturally have an influence on education and belonging, and there is a growing interest in exploring childhoods in various contexts, for example, in the Nordic and the arctic areas (see Garvis, Harju-Luukkainen, Sheridan and Williams, 2019; Rautio and Stenvall, 2019).

In this study, we approach the concept of belonging as involving dynamic processes that are constructed in culturally diverse contexts (Juutinen, 2018; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Both belonging and diversity are important principles in ECE in Finland (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014; 2018). Focusing on the conceptual understanding of the educators working in diverse educational settings in the north, this study is part of the Nordforsk-funded project, "Politics of belonging: promoting children's inclusion in educational settings across borders". We conducted peer interviews where 12 pairs of educators shared with each other their thoughts and experiences about belonging and diversity both from the personal and professional perspectives. By narrating, the educators not only shared their conceptual understanding but also opened their pedagogical perspectives at the level of everyday life in ECE. By applying Zilber, Tuval-Mashiach and Lieblich's (2008) three-sphere context model, we aim to obtain collectively constructed, narrated knowledge by asking this research question: How do educators co-create the understanding about belonging and diversity in northern early education?

Belonging and diversity as educational premise

In the research literature, the concept of belonging is often approached from two interrelated perspectives: the sense of belonging and the politics of belonging (see Yuval-Davies, 2011). The sense of belonging focuses on humans' personal, emotional attachment to other people, communities and places; as Nagel (2011, 110) expresses it, "belonging is partly a matter of the heart". The politics of belonging explores how belonging is constructed and produced in social, material, historical and political relations (Juutinen, 2018; Yuval-Davies, 2011). May (2013) elaborates on belonging as a process where people have a sense of identification with other people, cultures, material objects and places. Scholars across disciplines, such as sociology, psychology and social geography, highlight that is not only a personal feeling of belonging, but it is also a matter of how belonging is produced and operationalised in communities and nations (see Antonsich, 2010; Lähdesmäki *et al.*, 2016).

Our theoretical starting point is not to separate sense and politics or individual and collective perspectives, but to explore belonging holistically and strive to perceive it between rather than opposite, binary dimensions (see Juutinen, 2018). We have reached for theoretical discussions from the literature on the concepts of culture and diversity to widen our understanding about the complexity of belonging in the diverse northern context. According to Nieto (2017, 66), culture is a complex and intricate concept, defined as "the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationship and worldview created, shared and transformed by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors that can

include a common history, geographic location, language, social class and religion". In this article, we use the concept of diversity, which can be also defined as cultural diversity. The concept of cultural diversity includes several factors, such as language, ethnicity, nationality, but also socioeconomic background, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age and ability. By this definition, every group of children and every educational setting are culturally diverse (see Jokikokko and Järvelä, 2013). It is also important to notice the intersection – how different factors can intertwine and affect an individual's life and identity (e.g., Nieto, 2017; Paavola, 2018).

Both concepts of belonging and diversity are part of the national core curriculum of Early Childhood Education and Care 2018 (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018) and the National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education 2014 (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014). Both legislative documents emphasise children's right to be members of their peer groups and have a sense of belonging to the educational settings. ECE in Finland promotes the democratic values of Finnish society, such as equal rights and diversity. Cultural diversity is perceived as a resource and a strength, and each child is unique and multicultural (see also Paavola, 2018). The documents recognise that in communities, the right to one's own language, culture and religious beliefs is a fundamental right. These viewpoints of belonging and diversity highlight the early educators' important role to foster children's belonging in diverse groups and communities, as well as the educators' awareness of different cultures and languages and their ability to understand multiple viewpoints and take up others' position (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018). In this study, we explore how these entangled and non-dichotomy premises, belonging and diversity are understood by the educators and how they become lived in the daily life of early education settings in the north.

The research process

We took time to listen the early educators' narratives about belonging and diversity as part of their daily lives in educational settings. In the narrative inquiry, the ontological and the epistemological underpinnings lie in the understanding that through narrating people make sense of the world around them (e.g., Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007). We follow Abbott's (2001, 16) argument concerning the concept of the narrative; it includes the story (the event or the action) and the narrative discourse (the way the story is represented). Sorsoli and Tolman (2008, 497) write, "It is in narratives that we move closer to a participant's perspective; the stories people tell reveal who they are in unique light, offering essential understanding about the reality they have constructed from their experiences". From the traditional way of interpreting people's life stories, the narrative inquiry has broadened to open the social discourses and contexts that frame people's stories (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007). In this present study, narrativity is shaped by the understanding that by listening to educators' personal narratives via peer interviews and shared discussions about belonging and diversity, we can also acquire better knowledge about the social and the cultural relations in northern ECE where the narratives are embedded.

The participants and the research material

We started our study in the autumn of 2017 by approaching the potential educators. We informed the educators about our interest and our study's aims and discussed these issues together with them. The

educators gave their voluntary and informed consent to participate in this study. Our research material consisted of peer interviews between 12 pairs of educators, conducted in several locations in northern Finland in March and September 2018 (see Devotta *et al.*, 2016). All these educators had worked in culturally and linguistically diverse education settings in northern Finland. The lengths of their work experience varied from a few months to over ten years. The educators already knew each other. For these reasons, we considered them each other's peers.

The peer interviews concerned conceptions of belonging and diversity from the educators' personal narratives, as well as their thoughts as early educators in the north. We started meetings together by discussing the peer interviews and the study. Then, the educators were divided into pairs by lots. The educators were given the following assignment: Discuss freely about the following topics and other issues that you relate to these topics. The topics were as follows: What does belonging mean to you personally and as an early educator? How is diversity part of your own life and work as an early educator? What issues do you think are important to consider when fostering belonging and diversity in early education? Each pair had their own quiet place for discussion. The peer interviews were audio-taped, and we researchers were in another room, available for questions. The 12 peer interviews lasted from 11 minutes to 32 minutes each. After the peer interviews, we had joint discussions where everyone had an opportunity to ask questions, for example, about the research topics, the research process, ethical issues and anonymity, as well as share their feelings about the peer interviews. The participants had the opportunity to withdraw from the research at any point. During the process, we wrote a research diary and took notes from the meetings with the educators and about issues related to the study.

The analysis

The peer interviews were analysed using the three-sphere context model which includes three level of analysis: immediate intersubjective relationships, social field context and cultural meta-narratives (Zilber *et al.*, 2008; see also Tuval-Mashiach, 2014). Our aim was not to study educators' identities as such but to apply Zilber and colleagues' (2008) three-sphere context model to gain an understanding about belonging and diversity as created and narrated together, as shared knowledge. Zilber and colleagues (2008) write about "reading for context" as a means to gain insights into narratives. Tuval-Mashiach (2014) has further developed this analysis model and points out that it aims to open several contexts but highlights that "context is dynamic socially and politically embedded, and ever-evolving" (141). Our analysis in this study proceeded in three phases, which we discussed together. In the first phase, we listened to the audio recordings and read the transcripts of the 12 peer interviews several times. In the very beginning, we had the impression that the atmosphere in the peer interviews was something unique and challenging to describe and transcribe. For this reason, we listened to the recorded narratives of the educators several times. The second phase consisted of selecting six interviews for a deeper analysis because the contents of the discussions were rich in relation to belonging and diversity and included broader perspectives on ECE. These six discussions lasted from 18 minutes to 31 minutes each and were transcribed.

In the third phase, we applied the three-sphere context model (Zilber *et al.*, 2008). The first level of the three spheres includes the immediate intersubjective relationships in which a narrative is produced

(Zilber *et al.*, 2008, 1047). The intersubjective context contains the usage of language, pertaining to the moods, the intentions and the motivations when telling a narrative (Zilber *et al.*, 2008, 1051). The immediate intersubjective relations and the interactions were formed in this study not only through peer interviews but also between the educators and us, the researchers. This first level in our study dealt with encounters in the peer interviews, focusing on this question: What happens when the educators start to formulate shared knowledge about belonging and diversity? According to Zilber and colleagues' (2008, 1053) model, their second level, the social field context, relates to the surrounding social world, that is, the narrator's relations with others, and it is also defined by spatial and temporal components. The findings on this level emphasise the dimensions and the practices of belonging that are rooted in time, generations and places, as well as the cultural diversity that shapes everyday life in the north. The third level of the model, the cultural meta-narratives, opens insights into being an educator in the north and the interconnection between education and society in the northern communities.

Encountering the other

The educators seemed to have both personal and professional motives to narrate, not only as educators but also as private individuals. This would explain the importance of current topics at the individual and the community levels. Thus, in these peer interviews, the research topics were intensely discussed. The peer interviews resembled natural dialogues between two educators who were gently guided by the research questions to discuss the topics. Knowing the immediate context as essential for understanding the narrative (Zilber *et al.*, 2008). Thus, although we, the researchers, were not present in the peer interviews, we could sense the confident, open and pleasant atmosphere of the discussions in all the six recordings. We could hear the sounds and sense the moods, but we could not observe the nonverbal communication, the body language. When the educators discussed the concepts of belonging and diversity, they first began to understand these concepts at a personal level – their own world of experience in relation to belonging and diversity. The educators started from their own position – "who I am and where I belong":

> Peer 6: "Yes, belonging is quite important at a personal level, but it's also difficult to see myself doing this work if I don't feel that I belong in any way, although I think that I feel like an outsider quite easily, so somehow, I feel like I'm a little bit in the wrong place, so maybe some kind of sensitivity…"

> Peer 5: "Yes, but it's really interesting because I look at it from my perspective because I belong to the Sámi culture, and I feel that I belong strongly to it, and I was going to start making a difference in how much it's also seen as cultural collision, as others look from a Finnish point of view at the same preschool everyday life, while I look at it through Sámi glasses, so kind of how much it can create belonging…"

> Peer 6: "You are right..."

> Peer 5: "But at the same time, the differences between, but it's so great that you can look, and I hear from the other perspective of how you feel…"

The narrative illustrates the broadening of the narrator's own perspective when she had openly listened to another educator's narrative and wanted to know and learn more about the other's perspective and personal experiences. For example, the other educator personally felt that she belonged to another culture. Although she saw and experienced things from another perspective, she was still open to and genuinely interested in the other educator's narrative. What really matters in a peer interview is a true encounter – listening to the other and mutual respect. The peer interview continued as follows:

> Peer 6: "So maybe it's my personal stumbling block at work, that I like my work so much… but even so, I feel some kind of timidity, such as am I the right person to do this?…"

> Peer 5: "And for an encouragement, I want to say that I have it, too…"

Despite the educators' different positions and experiences in their personal and professional lives, they wanted to understand each other's point of view and encourage each other. The educators did not only respond to the research questions; they also created a new understanding of belonging and diversity at both personal and professional levels. They seemed to reach out to each other as they searched for a shared understanding. A peer interview is a dialogue in which both participants actively support the narrative forward by bringing their personal narratives together as a shared narrative. The dynamics of the interaction slightly varied between the pairs of educators; despite this, all the educators took an active role in the discussions (Zilber et al., 2008). For example, some educators were more verbal than others or asked challenging questions:

> Peer 7: "Diversity is like many diverse layers, and sometimes, it would be so easy when it would be just the normal everyday life."

> Peer 8: "But who defines what is 'normal' and 'everyday life'?"

> Peer 7: "Well, yeah..."

> Peer 8: "Where does it come from?"

> Peer 7: "But, well..."

> Peer 8: "And I personally think that diversity is richness, a tremendous amount of wealth, so even on the basis that everyone is different as a human being, there are no two identical people, so that is richness. The more diverse the people are, the greater the wealth is, which applies to both adults and children."

> Peer 7: "Mmm, you are right. I have been thinking recently that it is also diversity when the other children are more sensitive than the others..."

> Peer 8: "Yes..."

It seemed that the more the educators reflected on diversity and belonging in their personal lives or as educators, the more complex and in-depth their understanding of these concepts became. Additionally, their personal experiences of the differences, being outsiders and otherness helped them understand

the other's narrative and take the position of the other. The moments in the peer interviews offered educators' a safe place for opening their realities and experiences and also move towards other's perspectives and cultural diversity (see Sorsoli and Tolman, 2008). ECE is part of a culturally changing and diverse society. To appreciate the diversity of the surrounding community, educators are required to be aware of and understand different cultures and views, as well as to position themselves in many ways (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018). In summary, educators need the ability to encounter diversity in their work. Developing educators' intercultural competence is a lifelong, both individual and communal process (Jokikokko and Järvelä, 2013).

Intertwining various perspectives

In the second (the social field) level of Zilber and colleagues' (2008) model, the focus is not only on early educators' pedagogical practices when fostering children's belonging, but it also highlights the connection with the environment and time that shapes northern education. The educators defined belonging as being enacted in many different dimensions, as illustrated in the following part of peer interview:

> Peer 3: "(As an educator), when I think about belonging in a group of children, I think of belonging to your own culture and language environment; that is the first thought. Of course, it is about children's feeling of belonging to that specific group in an ECE setting; that group feels united, and it is also about the staff members' feeling of being part of the setting. Then I think that there is belonging to the ECE as a whole, at the level of the institutionalised activity. Belonging has multiple dimensions, I think."

When discussing belonging, the educators seemed to connect it with cultures and languages, as well as at the levels of a group of children and ECE as an institution. It was important to have a sense of belonging to others, not only among the children, but also the educators themselves having a sense of membership with the staff working in the ECE setting (see also Juutinen, 2018). Another educator continued with the same theme:

> Peer 2: "For me, it is really important; it is like a matter of the heart that children experience being part of the group. They are encountered and listened to in their ECE group. I feel like it is a basis for well-being that you are part of something."

The northern diverse context also challenged the educators in their pedagogical work. The following narratives emphasised long distances and small villages shaping belonging:

> Peer 4: "Here we have long distances to places and small villages..."

> Peer 3: "When thinking about belonging, I think that all kinds of events are good, where lots of people, Sámi people, gather together. They are very good for children to see and meet diverse people and various dressing styles, people of different ages."

> Peer 4: "Exactly. Often, there are many generations invited; actually, it is rare to have an event only for children. Usually, everyone is invited. When something is organised

in the small villages, it is open for all even though it is organised by an ECE institution setting or school or something else. So all members of the village are invited and perhaps the passers-by, too."

Educational institutions were considered important parts of the communities; they were meeting places for many generations. The peer interviews were shaped by temporality and spatiality (Zilber et al., 2008). According to the educators, belonging extended reached out from the ECE setting or the school; the children were connected to the environments and the people around them. These important viewpoints are also part of the Plan for Sámi Early Childhood Education and Care, which complements the national curricula. It aims to support the quality and the development of the content of ECE, both in the Sámi homeland region and elsewhere in Finland (Sámi Parliament, 2009; see also Laiti, 2018).

The educators recognised cultural diversity and various languages as fundamental aspects of education, as shown in the following narratives:

> Peer 2: "All of the daily practices need to be based on the idea not to divide anybody. I think that as early educators, we can influence a lot what kind of impression children have on diversity."

> Peer 1: "Especially, we play a significant role in forwarding awareness and knowledge. Fortunately, nowadays, we have a new curriculum, and it is normative. And it defines diversity as something that needs to be seen in daily life, and it needs to be recognised."

The educators often referred to the future; ECE has the responsibility to foster important values that frame children's lives in different environments in their future. The curricula and other legislative documents were experienced as guides for defining both their pedagogical practices and their values. Diversity is one of the significant perspectives in ECE and practices towards equality, as formulated by an educator:

> Peer 8: "I think that then, we are talking about cultural diversity, and we have to understand that families live in very diverse cultures, and it needs to be appreciated, and we have to consider it in the right manner."

In their peer interviews, the educators described that respecting diversity began from children and families on a daily basis. Children's relations with their families and relatives are supported, and each child should feel that his or her family is valuable (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014; 2018). When the educators discussed their understanding of belonging and diversity, they also challenged each other to critically think whether their pedagogical practices were equal, as illustrated in the following narrative:

> Peer 9: "From time to time, I think that it is good to consider what my values are. Like if I want to be equal in my pedagogical work, it reflects diversity, and what do these mean? I can say that I treat all children equally, but do I really? How is it shown in my ECE group that there is a child with a different native language, and do I really encounter him/her in an equal manner? Does his/her native language have a part in

the group of children's daily life in the same way as the Finnish language? Do we really take this into account?"

The educators added more concepts when they were co-creating their understanding about belonging and diversity in ECE settings. The concept of equality was emphasised in many peer interviews. As summarised by Paavola (2018), a child experiencing participation in and belonging to the group is connected to the value of equality. Northern early education framed the peer interviews at the level of the social field, and the educators shared their knowledge, from the conceptual level to daily life. As described by an educator, "Diversity and belonging start exactly from those small actions of everyday life" (Peer 4).

Mapping belonging and diversity

When moving towards the cultural meta-narratives, the educators' narratives echoed the complexity of being an educator in the north. The ethical dimension of the teacher profession was clearly considered, and the next narrative opened this issue in the following way:

> Peer 4: "Do you agree that in these small villages, you are always the educator, too, always and everywhere you go."
>
> Peer 3: "Yes, you cannot divide your roles; you are the same adult."
>
> Peer 4: "And particularly in the eyes of the child. I think that many don't see the amount of the responsibility we have in the field of ECE."
>
> Peer 3: "And in the minorities, the responsibility is even greater because the majority of the population is pretty strong, and they have support. But smaller groups don't have common or public support, so a lot of things rely on the individual educator."
>
> Peer 4: "In the small communities, each member of the community has a meaning, and when thinking of a small ECE group or unit, there could be one educator who carries the huge responsibility of what kinds of values are highlighted there."

Being educators in the small villages challenged them to broaden their perspectives about their responsibilities towards individual children, but they considered themselves responsible for emphasising the community around them. Fostering belonging within the diverse community was understood as a significant part of education on a daily basis. The places' historical and cultural features are respected and understood as starting points of education; as described by Estola and Erkkilä (2007), a strong relation to places, together with the feeling of belonging, can strengthen participation in the communities. This matter leads to another cultural meta-narrative that describes the interconnection between education and society, where belonging is understood as a central concept. The narrative of the educators continued to open this issue:

> Peer 3: "A little while ago, there was a tendency of highlighting individualism and individuals, of wanting to be different individuals. I see it as opposite, at some level, to this belonging. I would not support this idea very much."

> Peer 4: "Me neither, the kind of me-thinking. Life is still… like… compromising and doing together."

> Peer 3: "Yes, no one survives alone."

Overall, the educators narrated that their role was to support children's collaboration and sharing in everyday life. Education emphasising individuality was perceived as opposite to belonging. In the light of this narrative, the concept of belonging was experienced tightly connected with participation in the communities and society. In early education, on one hand, it is recognised that cultural values and habits are shaped and regenerated by education. On the other hand, the aim of education is to transfer cultural heritage, important values and traditions to the next generations (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014; 2018). These viewpoints describe the reciprocity of the education, culture communities and wider society, all entangled together in everyday life of ECE, as well as conceptual level.

Conclusion

This study offers insights into the conceptualisation of belonging and diversity as lived and narrated by educators working in northern Finland. Our aim was to explore how educators co-create the understanding about belonging and diversity in northern early education. From the findings, we conclude that the educators approached their conceptual understanding by encountering others, intertwining various perspectives and mapping belonging and diversity. For our concluding remarks, we wish to emphasise two perspectives from this study. First, the educators' narratives reveal that belonging and diversity need to be approached from multiple entries – from personal to societal and from the past to the future – although rooted in places, communities and cultures. In addition to a person's sense of belonging it is important to recognise one's own roots and diversity in oneself; it enables a better understanding of others and encountering diversity around oneself (see also Paavola, 2007). Second, this study contributes to the scientific discussion about conceptualising the complexity of belonging and diversity in early education. Based on educator's narratives, belonging and diversity are tightly intertwined and closely connected with the concept of participation and equality in early education. We argue that if aiming to capture a more holistic view, we need to be open to manifold perspectives on conceptualising belonging and diversity (see also Lähdesmäki et al., 2016; Nieto, 2017). Also, we want to highlight the entanglement with the concepts nearly connected, such as participation and equality, and all these concepts are culture bound.

For further research, it is significant to explore phenomena at various levels, locally and globally. This study challenges to explore belonging and diversity as lived phenomenon in everyday life in ECE, but also part of the societal structure, curricula and legislative documents. We emphasize the awareness of these concepts as fundamental values of being a professional educator. Our study suggest that pedagogical practices should be considered from the perspectives of supporting each child's belonging and being sensitivity to cultural diversity.

This study was conducted as a shared process; producing the research material, transcribing, analysing and writing were undertaken together through discussions. By choosing the peer interview as our

method, we reached for a different kind of knowledge that we could not have acquired, such as the deep narratives in the peer interviews, if we ourselves had acted as the interviewers (Devotta et al., 2016). As researchers, we exposed ourselves to the knowledge by listening, wondering and interpreting, at the same time strongly realising that the knowledge co-created in the encounter was more than the spoken words of the educators.

We applied the analysis model (Zilber et al., 2018) with great respect and found it useful with the research material that we had. Although the levels of the model are clear, we perceive them as overlapping and entangled. It is worth remembering that the explication of different contexts depends on the type of narrative; some narratives are richly embedded in one context but supply very little data in another (Tuval-Mashiach, 2014). The narratives were very personal and emotional – as educators, we could relate to them, and they echoed the everyday life of ECE. The trust between the educators and us increased through our discussions with all the participants during the process. As researchers, we have not only power but also the responsibility to use that power with consideration. How does our research benefit the participants and the communities, and how can we protect those who have shared their narratives with us (see also Hyry-Beihammer, Estola and Syrjälä, 2013)?

We have discussed our own position, and our experience from both an insider and an outsider status has changed during the research process (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). The boundaries between these two positions are not that clearly delineated (Merriam et al., 2001). As northern educators, we have much in common with our participants – for example, the same educational background and work experience from the field and belonging to the working-age population. At the same time, we are outsiders because we are researchers and we all are cultural diverse. This is an important point of view, when researching belonging and diversity, that we hear the diverse voices. We have listened to the educators in their places, in their social, cultural and historical contexts (see Hyry-Beihammer et al., 2013), while being aware that we draw our interpretations from our own, sometimes outsider, positions. These issues have forced us to consider the ethical perspective thoroughly. Research is about being in relations – it affects our professional identities and helps us understand who we are as researchers (Hyry-Beihammer et al., 2013).

We thank the educators who participated, co-created the understanding about belonging and diversity in northern Finland's ECE settings and allowed their narratives to be further shared.

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