

Exploring the narrative of a Finnish early childhood education teacher on her professional intercultural learning

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ABSTRACT: Cultural diversity has been increasing in Finnish day care centres, implying the need for early childhood education teachers to learn how to meaningfully work with children and parents from different cultural backgrounds. This article focuses on describing the intercultural learning process as narrated by a Finnish early childhood education teacher, Tanja, who has worked for more than twenty years in a multicultural day care context. Tanja's narrative focuses on her intercultural professional learning experiences that take place in the workplace. Early childhood education teachers' intercultural learning processes have not been studied or theorized extensively. Therefore, there is a great need to research and discuss this topic, especially in the Finnish context. In Tanja's case it seems that through her work experiences she has learnt to appreciate diversity more, has become more confident and has gained many practical competences for encountering diversity in a positive way. However, it seems that as there has not been an opportunity to reflect her experiences formally, she lacks the conceptual tools and ability to critically analyse various practices and values of the day care centre.

Keywords: early childhood education teacher, intercultural learning, narrative research, professional learning

Introduction

Cultural diversity has been increasing in Finnish day care centres (Eerola-Pennanen, 2012; Halme & Vataja, 2011; Paavola & Talib, 2010; Sakaranaho, 2006), implying the need for early childhood education teachers to learn how to meaningfully work with children and parents from different cultural backgrounds. For early childhood educators, this means a learning process including a critical reflection on their own values and practices as well as those of day care centres and the wider society (Murrey & Urban, 2012).

The intercultural learning processes of early childhood education teachers have not been studied or theorized extensively. In Finland, there is some research into primary school teachers and their intercultural learning and competence (e.g. Jokikokko, 2010; Talib, 2005). Although there are some official documents and literature about multicultural education in Finnish Early childhood education (Eerola-Pennanen, 2012; Halme & Vataja, 2011; Kivijärvi, 2012; Paavola, 2007; Paavola & Talib, 2010; National core curriculum for pre-primary education, 2010; National Guidelines for Early Childhood education and care, 2005), there are only a few research from the early childhood teacher's perspective (Paavola, 2007; Paavola & Talib, 2010) and none about the teacher's intercultural learning process. Therefore, there is a great need to research and discuss this topic, especially in the Finnish context. This article analyses the intercultural learning process as narrated by a Finnish early childhood education teacher, Tanja¹, who has worked in a multicultural day care context for more than twenty years without any formal education on multicultural issues. Tanja's narrative focuses on those intercultural professional learning experiences that take place in the workplace.

Teachers' intercultural learning is a highly topical issue as European countries, including Finland, are experiencing one of the most significant influxes of migrants and refugees in its history. Teachers, also in day care centres are the key agents in supporting diverse students in finding their place in society. According to the recent statistics (2014), there are about 300,000 immigrants living in Finland, and out of all the under school-age children 6.2 % are immigrants (Tilastokeskus). However, at present the number of immigrants is increasing rapidly. Usually immigrant children go to day care centres before they start school. In official documents such as the National Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care (2005) and the National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary education (2010), the importance of supporting immigrant children's mother tongue and their own culture are emphasized. Furthermore, the significance of children integrating into Finnish society has been highlighted. Integration usually refers to an idea that an immigrant person achieves such knowledge and skills, that (s)he will be able to live meaningfully in Finnish society. A child's participation in early childhood education has been considered to be a central factor in his/her integration into a new society. The goal of the integration process is a bilingual and bicultural child, who has integrated into Finnish society and who is proud of his/her own cultural heritage. (Kivijärvi, 2012.)

¹ Tanja is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the participant

Although this article discusses diversity in day care centres by focusing on children with an immigrant background, it is very important to emphasise that immigrants are a very diverse and heterogeneous group. When discussing ‘immigrants’ as a group there is always the possibility of stereotyping. We definitely argue that every person and child needs to be seen and treated as an individual. However, in the case of Tanja, the emergence of immigrant children in the 1980s brought many new aspects to the practices of day care centres. In particular, the issues of language, religion and different home cultures brought new kind of challenges to the work of day care centres.

We will begin this article with a theoretical framework focusing on how the intercultural learning process can be understood in the context of the work of early childhood education teachers. The methodological choices of the article are presented next, followed by the findings of Tanja’s narrative. Through Tanja’s narrative, we wish to illustrate what kind of intercultural professional learning can take place informally in the workplace. In the discussion section, we will critically analyse our findings. In the final chapter of this article we will also draw some conclusions on how intercultural contents in pre- and in-service early childhood teacher education could be developed so as to enable teachers to critically reflect and develop their work in order to better respond to the challenges of diversity, social justice and equity in early childhood education.

Theoretical framework: Intercultural learning in the context of early childhood teacher’s work

In the following sections we will approach intercultural learning in the context of early childhood education teacher’s work from three perspectives: what is known of intercultural learning as a learning process, how has intercultural learning been studied and discussed in the context of early childhood education, and what are the characteristics of intercultural learning as a workplace learning.

Theoretical aspects to intercultural learning process

In the educational field, the word ‘multicultural’ has been largely replaced by ‘intercultural’, especially in the European context (Coulby, 2006). This change of terminology has been justified by arguing that, while ‘multicultural’ refers simply to the reality of pluralism, the word ‘intercultural’ suggests actual interaction among people (Camilleri, 1992; Räsänen, 2007). We use the term ‘intercultural’ in this study, as we wish to emphasize the

importance of mutual and dialogical interaction. However, when referring to the nature of contexts in a descriptive way we also use the term 'multicultural' in this article.

Prior research has often viewed intercultural learning as a process which occurs when a person visits another country or moves to live or work in another country and encounters cultural differences (e.g. Bennett, 1993; Landis, Bennett, & Bennet, 2004; Taylor, 1994). There are various developmental models (Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Deardorff, 2006) based on the idea that intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills help an individual to progress toward effective and appropriate behaviour in intercultural situations. These models suggest that intercultural development begins with the foundational attitudes of respect, openness, and curiosity. An intercultural 'mindset' is then developed through increasing awareness, knowledge of one's own culture, and the ability to tolerate ambiguity.

The models describing intercultural learning can be criticized from different perspectives. They seem to be based on a rather problematic idea that belonging to a certain cultural group can predict behaviour (c.f. Sleeter, 2010; Nieto, 2002). They emphasise the significance of learning about cultural differences, although it has been pointed out that knowledge or understanding of 'cultural otherness' and difference does not necessarily ensure responsible engagement with the other, and can sometimes actually hinder such engagement (Andreotti, 2006). It has also been questioned whether intercultural learning really is such a linear process as the models suggest (Perry & Southwell, 2011). The development models can also be criticized for not really theorizing the learning process itself.

Thus, when approaching an early childhood education teacher's intercultural learning, instead of basing on the development models this article highlights intercultural learning as a lifelong process which is not necessarily linear. Furthermore, in the context of teachers' life and work intercultural learning includes various, mainly informal learning experiences, which are not only dilemmas or crises but can also be 'smaller' everyday life experiences that cumulatively affect teachers' intercultural learning (c.f. Jokikokko, 2010).

Taylor (1994, 1998, 2007) is among the few researchers who have clearly related intercultural learning to a learning theory that attempts to describe what happens in the learning process, and he has placed intercultural learning within the framework of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 2000, 2009). According to Taylor (1998) intercultural learning starts with a 'disorienting dilemma' when people face a situation that is somehow unfamiliar to them and this new experience cannot be explained in light of their pre-established meaning schemes and meaning perspectives. When intercultural events continue to unfold, the process of critical reflection begins, which is essential to perspective transformation, whereby people begin to challenge personal constructs built on prior experiences and knowledge. It is essential for people to develop a broader world view; not

only must they become aware of their long-standing and taken-for-granted meaning perspective (cultural and personal constructs), but they must also question their very validity through critical reflection. In addition, a person must begin the questioning of personal and social ideologies (Taylor, 1994). As Taylor points out critical reflection alone will not lead to a perspective transformation. Transformation needs to take place in conjunction with action and discourse. A person needs to explore and experiment with new roles in new intercultural situations and be in dialogue with others.

Transformative learning theories have been claimed to be too individualistic and cognitive-centred, ignoring the emotional and social aspects of the learning process (Baumgartner, 2001; Taylor, 1998, 2007). Meaningful intercultural experiences are always emotionally charged, and thus there is an argument that emotions are inevitably present in intercultural learning processes; cognitive reflections are not enough if we really wish to change our thinking and action (Jokikokko, 2010; see also Zembylas, 2008). As Baumgartner and Johnson-Bailey (2008) point out, positive emotions can enhance the learning process, but even negative emotions can be a catalyst for delving deeper into the underlying assumptions. In addition to emotions, social interactions are crucial in the process of intercultural learning: we learn from the significant others and through participating in certain interactive relations (see Jokikokko, 2010).

Intercultural learning of early childhood education teachers: a literature review

When discussing intercultural learning in the context of early childhood education, the focus of research has mainly been on early childhood (or pre-school) training/education and its opportunities for promoting teacher students' awareness of multiculturalism or social justice (Keengwe, 2010; Kourti & Androussou, 2013; Shoorman, 2015) or developing culturally responsive educational settings or pedagogies (Durden, Escalante, & Blich, 2014; Espinosa, 2005; Gay, 2000; Cullen, Haworth, Simmons, Schimanski, McGarva et al., 2009; Ramsey, 2004). Early childhood education teachers' understanding of multicultural education has also been studied (Berthelsen & Karrupiah, 2011) as well as the policy initiatives to advance intercultural issues in early childhood education (Miller & Petriwskyj, 2013).

The need to improve teachers' abilities to respect and respond to diversity has been acknowledged, but the actual learning process of teachers have not been widely discussed. Chen, Nimmo and Fraser (2009) have proposed a self-study tool for early childhood educators that could help them to move toward greater efficacy in anti-biased, culturally relevant practices. The discussion of Han and Thomas (2010) about how to promote early childhood education teachers' multicultural responsiveness is similar to our

understanding of teachers' intercultural learning process. They argue that teachers' multicultural responsiveness is built on on-going, critical self-reflection of one's own beliefs, biases and assumptions (as also assumed in the theory of transformative learning described in the previous section of this article). They point out the importance of acquiring knowledge of children's cultural backgrounds as well as the commitment to build a caring classroom climate. They also highlight the importance of multiculturally responsive pedagogy where cultural diversity becomes a lens through which we view our teaching. Finally, they point out the significance of understanding the broader social, economic and political context of the educational system.

Intercultural learning as informal workplace learning

As this study discusses intercultural learning in the context of early childhood education teacher's work, it is relevant to discuss the relation between teachers' intercultural learning and teachers' professional (continuous workplace) learning. The phrase 'professional learning' is relatively new to early childhood education, and there are debates about what it means to be 'a professional' (Edwards & Nuttall, 2009). When defining early childhood education teachers' professionalism, the central question is how are we to understand the nature of early childhood education teachers' work? Is it a combination of skills in which certain didactic abilities play a central role? Or do we see teachers as autonomous, reflective professionals who constantly evaluate questions such as whose development, whose knowledge, whose beliefs and values are supported and enacted in early learning settings, professionals who continuously develop themselves and their work (Ball & Pence, 2000; Räsänen, 2007)?

It has been commonly agreed that teacher's professional learning does not only take place in formal teacher training and professional development programmes, but also through informal learning in the workplace (Eraut, 2004; Putnam & Borko, 2000). According to Matinheikki-Kokko (1999), teachers' intercultural professionalism develops best through experiences and by working with children from different cultural backgrounds. The informal learning through experiences in the workplace is characterized by being self-directed, independent, and interactive (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). It includes tacit knowledge that is learnt through repeated engagement and practice until it becomes implicit (Billett & Choy, 2013; Le Clus, 2011). It also includes integrating conceptual knowledge and practical experience which is the foundation for the development of expertise (Tynjälä, 2008). Workplace learning is often approached from the sociocultural perspective: it is viewed as a cultural (often collaborative) practice deeply imbedded in everyday professional practice. The idea of learning from experts is also often attached to discussions on workplace learning (Billett & Choy, 2013; Jurasaitė-Harbisson, 2009). However, it has also been pointed out that learning through everyday practice alone may be

insufficient to maintain one's professionalism: people may be not able to turn tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge or integrate conceptual knowledge and practical experience (Tynjälä, 2008). There is also evidence that workplace conditions can actually inhibit the learning and development of teachers (Bathmaker & Avis, 2005). Also when considering teachers' intercultural learning it needs to be acknowledged that learning in the workplace does not take place automatically: in order for intercultural learning to take place informally, fortunate incidents, influential others, openness, courage and sensitivity, as well as possibilities for reflection are needed.

Methodology of the study

This research lies within the framework of narrative research (Clandinin, 2007; Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 1993, 2002; Spector-Mersel, 2010; among others). In this study, narratives are seen as a natural way to organise experiences and construct and deconstruct identities. According to Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilbe (1998), narratives provide us with access to people's identity and personality. In the act of narrating, a teacher's identity is seen to be a result of constant negotiation and reflection, and is thus more like a fluid process than a fixed state.

We chose Tanja's narrative for this article because she is working in an environment that is extremely multicultural and diverse. Tanja graduated from the Kindergarten Teacher Training College at the end of 1980s, and since then she has been working as an early childhood education teacher at a public day care centre in Northern Finland. The day care centre where Tanja worked became a multicultural day care centre in the early 1990s which specialized in receiving immigrant children. This was a new situation for Tanja, working with children from different cultural backgrounds without any previous experience or multicultural studies. In her mixed day care group, most children were Finnish and some (the number varied from year to year) were children with immigrant backgrounds. Over the years she enhanced her work experience with children and families from Vietnam, Somalia, Sudan, Russia, Kosovo, Iraq, Egypt, Island, Norway and Canada.

Because our understanding of intercultural learning is based on the idea that it is a long and multidimensional process, we interviewed Tanja altogether three times in 2009, 2010 and 2013 in order to get a holistic understanding of her more than 20 year learning process at work. The themes of the interviews were: work history, everyday work, encountering diversity in the work, intercultural learning experiences, values and principles that lead the work, support that one gets in the work, and evaluating one's intercultural competence and professional learning.

We have analysed Tanja's interviews through holistic content analysis (Riessman, 1993; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilbert, 1998) and through the lens provided by the research question, which is:

How does Tanja describe her professional intercultural learning process?

After transcribing Tanja's narratives (three interviews) word by word, we concentrated on the content of each narrative interview as a whole and looked for those stories that were particularly relevant on the basis of the research question. On the basis of this analysis, we first examined the core pattern in each interview and then wrote a plotted summary of each of the interviews. We also looked for certain 'threads' in each interview, whether there were themes or ideas that appeared repeatedly in the interviews (Lieblich et al., 1998). We did this separately to see whether our interpretations were similar or different. Next we compared the three plotted summaries and discussed our interpretations. On the basis of this discussion, it was obvious that our main findings were rather similar. We then analysed the similarities and differences in each plotted summary. On the basis of this analysis, we found three interrelated 'threads' or themes in Tanja's narrative that describe the changes in her intercultural learning process. The first is related to her view of diversity, the second is about working with diversity and diverse children and the third concerns her narratives on diversifying the practices of the day care centre.

The citations in the following sections are translated from Finnish to English, some meaningless words are removed to improve the readability, and commas and dots are added.

Findings

From seeing diversity as a challenge to seeing it as an enriching and natural part of the work

Teachers' views on diversity play a crucial role in their intercultural learning. Although Tanja in all the three interviews imparts that children with immigrant backgrounds never felt 'weird' or 'strange' to her, she admits that in the beginning (when the first immigrant children came to the day care centre at the beginning of 1990s) she was a little concerned about how to deal with diverse children and their families. She says that her courage to meet diversity has gradually increased:

I don't think anymore that oh dear, how do I manage, if someone has a different skin colour or something. I think, when I was younger, I was more insecure. I have

become more courageous, and I understand that although we are different we can still interact in many different ways... I have become familiar with different cultures and religious cultures and I think they are interesting, and different families bring richness to the everyday life of day care.

In the previous quotations, Tanja mentions 'skin colour' and also more generally 'different cultures' and 'religious cultures' as those differences that made her insecure when she was younger. However, when 'becoming more familiar' with these differences, Tanja did not consider them as challenges anymore. The previous research has demonstrated that teachers often do experience some ambivalence toward minority and immigrant students (e.g. Sleeter, 2001). It has also been pointed out that negative attitudes towards cultural groups other than those of teachers own persist as they view diversity as a problem to be dealt with, or a condition to be fixed, rather than a resource (Valli, 1995). Also In some of the Finnish studies related to teaching immigrants, diversity is seen more as a deficiency, problem, challenge or burden (Miettinen, 2001; Talib, 1999) than a resource for mutual learning. It has also been discovered that, although teachers (including early childhood education teachers) consider diversity and multiculturalism mainly to be a positive phenomenon, they still think that it brings extra workload and causes confusion and contradictions (Paavola, 2007). Tanja very much emphasised diversity as 'richness' and repeated this many times during the interviews:

It is not how I dare, but it is richness. We have also had interns and chefs [in the day care centre] with different cultural backgrounds, and I think they all bring richness to everyday life here.

Tanja talks about the importance of knowing about different cultural traditions and practices, and she says that, especially in the beginning when the first children with immigrant backgrounds came to the day care centre, she read a lot of literature on different countries and cultures.

I have also studied myself, read a lot about different cultures and religions in order to understand better cultural differences.

Although Tanja mentions often the importance of knowing about cultural differences, on the other hand, she clearly acknowledges that each child and his/her family are different, and children cannot be categorised stereotypically on the basis of their belonging to a certain cultural group. 'Knowledge' about differences may rather easily turn to stereotypes (e.g. Andreotti, 2006). Researchers have shown that teachers tend to retain stereotypic beliefs about children from cultural, ethnic or socioeconomic minority group (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Sleeter, 2001). In the following example, Tanja, although talking categorically about 'an African boy', still describes how we cannot make any assumptions, for example, on children's abilities merely on the basis of their background:

We had an African boy who was really good at ice skating. And very talented in sports in general. Whenever he got the ice skates he just flew on the ice. And he was not the only one.

Tanja also describes in the interviews how diversity has become so natural for her that she does not even recognize differences anymore:

I can't even think anymore that this child is African or that one is Muslim and this is Finnish, they are all similar and I treat them in the same way; they all get comfort and are always welcomed onto my lap.

Although this type of discussion can be interpreted as 'colour blindness' (e.g. Boutte, Lopez-Robertson & Powers-Costello, 2011), which is considered to trivialize and sustain the possible social, ethnic and racial inequalities, we think that in Tanja's case the question is more about her unfamiliarity with theoretically problematizing these issues. In the interviews, Tanja actually gave many examples of how educational equality is not necessarily achieved by treating everyone in the same way. Examples of this are given in section three: Practices of the work: from problems to self-evidences.

From surviving to enjoying the mutual learning that working with diverse children and their families brings to the work

When discussing the competence needed in multicultural contexts, the focus often relies on intercultural communication – the interplay between culture and communication in human actions (Lustig & Koester, 1998; 2006; Lynch, 1992; Salo-Lee, 2007). Also, Tanja refers to this communication aspect rather often in all the interviews. When the first children with immigrant backgrounds came to the day care centre, language was one issue that Tanja first experienced as a particular challenge. Especially communication with parents was considered to be rather exciting and even frightening in the beginning:

When the first parents with immigrant backgrounds came to the day care centre and they did not speak Finnish and we had to use nonverbal communication, I remember that I was a bit desperate and thought: How can we ever have a proper discussion?

However, she learnt quickly that these situations are not as challenging as she first thought:

When there is no common language, you actually manage surprisingly well by using nonverbal communication, and I have noticed that when I have a warm and open attitude towards parents when we meet for the first time, it helps to build a good relationship. The first discussion and mutual respect are important

in order to discover the needs of the families and what they expect and hope from us.

In the previous example, it is noteworthy that Tanja emphasizes that it is important to know what parents expect and hope from day care, instead of focusing on what the day care centre expects from the parents.

Related to communication and language in particular, Tanja points out that her English skills have improved a lot when co-operating with culturally and linguistically different people in her work. Again, she highlights how her fear disappeared:

I have learnt so much English during these years, and speaking English is not scary at all anymore.

Culturally responsive teachers are expected to continually challenge themselves and re-evaluate their practice (e.g. Chen, Nimmo & Fraser, 2009). Tanja's story also mediates the idea that intercultural learning is a constant negotiation and learning process; she describes several cases when she needed to question her own action especially when discussing how to deal with challenging children:

We again learnt an important lesson a couple of years ago. We received a very active and energetic boy [from an immigrant background]; it was very difficult for him to stay still, and one adult was needed to accompany him all the time. The first sentence that he learnt in Finnish was EI SAA [you MUST NOT do that]. That was a really good lesson for us; we really had to stop and think how we talk to children.

In the previous example, Tanja describes how a child taught a lesson to the staff and made teachers critically reflect their practice. In general, Tanja spoke very warmly about the children with different cultural background. On the basis of the interviews, it can be seen that these children often became especially important and close for her:

It was lovely to see this child [with an immigrant background] after many years; he remembered me immediately and came to hug me. Looked into my eyes.

In the previous example, the emotional aspect is present ("it was lovely to see this child"). Several authors have acknowledged the power of positive emotions such as love for transformation and learning (Hooks, 2000; Daniels, 2012; Freire, 2004; Lanas & Zembylas, 2014; Liston & Garrison, 2000). Researchers have pointed out that cultivating emotions such as excitement, love, caring and compassion can begin to inspire teachers and provide them with an alternative 'paradigm' of fighting for more equal practices in school and society (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2008; Lanas & Zembylas, 2014).

In general, Tanja saw children and their parents as an important source of everyday intercultural learning:

There is lot of mutual learning, and I often have to reconsider my thoughts. My work is full of surprises.

To conclude this section, it can be argued that it is clearly visible in Tanja's interviews that she considers her intercultural learning to be a life-long process. As intercultural situations are always complex and contextual, we can never be fully interculturally competent (e.g. Deardorff, 2006; Jokikokko, 2010). Tanja seems to enjoy the unpredictability that the multicultural context brings to her work, and considers challenges brought by diversity to be the meaningful learning experiences for her.

Practices of the work: from problems to self-evidences

In general, all the three of Tanja's interviews are very much focused on the everyday practices of the day care centre. The day care centre as an organisation lives by certain traditions and habits that may be difficult to change (c.f. Kelchtermans & Ballett, 2002). Also, Tanja describes that at first it seemed challenging or even problematic to change the practicalities of day care to better meet the needs of diverse students:

In the beginning for example, girls wearing headscarves in physical education classes and going to the toilet by themselves was experienced as a problem [by day care staff] and also the fact that they did not speak Finnish. Luckily we got some interpreters to help us.

As teacher educators, we have noticed that early childhood education students are often worried about these types of practical issues: what to do when there is a child (or parent) whose behaviour or thinking does not 'fit' into the everyday practices of day care (c.f. Fendler, 2001). However, it was remarkable in Tanja's narrative that, despite the difficulties in the beginning, considering different cultural aspects did not seem to be an extra burden for a long time, but they very soon became just a natural way of doing and approaching things. She very much emphasized that different practices are not problems anymore:

There is no problem; we discuss with each of the family in the very beginning when a new child comes to day care, and arrange things so that everyone is happy. We do the integration plan and ask an interpreter to help us if needed. Sensitivity is important when talking about these issues. We talk about all the practicalities, for example if there is food that a child cannot eat because of their religion or other conviction, and for example with different religions there are no problems; we just arrange things so that children who do not attend religious activities [Lutheran activities in which most Finnish children attend to] go to

play to another group. They go with a familiar teacher there and we want to emphasise that it is fun for them.

As can be concluded on the basis of the final sentence of the previous extract, Tanja seems to be aware of the possible negative consequences that may follow when some children are excluded from the activities of day care. She emphasizes the importance of all children having an equal opportunity to participate in various (non-religious) activities of the day care centre:

If there is an event or a theme day in the day care centre, I think it is very important that no child feels excluded. We need to consider how we can help a child to understand and how we can demonstrate certain things so that they can also be included into activities. We have used, for example, hand puppets to demonstrate things for those whose language skills are not that good.

Paavola (2007) has studied multicultural education in a multicultural day care centre pre-school group in Finland. She concludes that, on the basis of her research, multicultural education is seen as something meant for immigrants only. According to early childhood education teachers, the aim of multicultural education is rapid integration of the immigrant children with the majority population. Tanja's narrative is different in the sense that she clearly points out that she thinks that multicultural education is for all. She describes how she, together with the staff in the day care centre have consciously aimed at promoting comfortable and empathetic interactions with people from diverse backgrounds:

We adults have helped children to understand diversity and reduce prejudices; we have invited immigrant parents to tell us things about their background and teach us, for example, songs and fairy tales from their own countries. And immigrant parents have also invited us to visit their homes. We have also had different events in the day care where we have become familiar with different food cultures and religions. With older children, we have studied the map and children's home countries and some children have wanted to bring some artefacts from their home countries...in the beginning, Finnish children were asking why immigrant children look different and have a different skin colour and curly hair, and they were wondering if they can play with them. Nowadays, all children play together and nobody asks anymore about the skin colour or anything.

The above-mentioned examples illustrate how Tanja has attempted to develop her own ways of culturally responsive teaching, which according to Gay (2000) involves connecting classroom experiences and learning to children's home experiences and native language. Although the actions that Tanja describes in the previous example seem to be more like a 'theme day' type of activity than part of the everyday curriculum of the day care, the aim is clearly to create a respectful atmosphere. When considering James Banks' (2006)

five dimensions of multicultural education (content integration, knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy and empowering school culture and social structures), some characteristics of content integration, prejudice reduction and equity pedagogy can be identified from Tanja's interview as shown in the extracts of this section.

Discussion

Tanja's narrative on her professional intercultural learning in a day care context illustrates how a teacher's thinking and action can change when working in a multicultural environment. On the basis of the analysis of Tanja's interviews, we identified changes in her views on diversity, working with diverse children and families and the everyday practices of day care.

Tanja's fears, worries and uncertainty related to diversity in the beginning could be interpreted as 'disorienting dilemmas' that trigger the intercultural learning process (Taylor, 1994). However, on the basis of Tanja's narratives, her professional intercultural learning seems more like a gradual transformative process affected by various experiences in her workplace than a process caused by major crises (as assumed in the theory of transformative learning). Social relationships and emotions also play an important role in Tanja's intercultural learning process (e.g. Zembylas, 2008). The most important 'significant others' that have affected Tanja's intercultural learning seem to be the diverse children and their families: her (mainly positive) experiences, emotions and contacts with them have increased her self-confidence and professional competence to positively encounter diversity (c.f. Jokikokko, 2010).

Tanja's learning process also includes the characteristics of informal workplace learning (e.g. Le Clus, 2011; Eraut, 2004): her learning was self-directed as she actively aimed at acquiring knowledge of children's cultural backgrounds, and she definitely worked actively for building a caring classroom climate for all her students (c.f. Han & Thomas, 2010). If thinking of the collaborative aspect of workplace learning such as learning together or learning from the experts, this dimension is rather marginal in Tanja's narrative, although at some points she talks about 'we' (referring to other adults in the day care centre) when discussing e.g. the practices of the day care.

Tanja's narrative clearly shows that intercultural learning can take place informally in a workplace. However, this type of learning lacks the possibility to formally reflect the experiences and conceptualise various phenomena. This is visible in Tanja's narrative: she does not have that many conceptual tools with which to elaborate and understand her

experiences or critically examine the practices of the day care centre. Thus, from the perspective of workplace learning, integrating practical knowledge with conceptual knowledge does not seem to occur (Tynjälä, 2008). Tanja has developed her 'culturally responsive practices' on the basis of her own practical experience without theoretical basis and views. Her professional intercultural learning in general focuses more on didactic aspects than critical reflection.

As mentioned in the theoretical framework of this article, the process of intercultural learning involves reflecting our own possible biases and cultural assumptions. In Tanja's narrative, there were some examples of critical reflection (e.g. the reflection of practices and changing the practices). Tanja also talked about being curious and open to different cultures, but she really did not discuss her cultural beliefs and assumptions and how these affect her thinking and behaviour.

Although Tanja clearly expressed her view that belonging to a certain cultural group does not predict our behaviour, she did not problematize the concept of diversity otherwise. She did not discuss e.g. diversity among Finnish students (e.g. different social classes, religious backgrounds or gender issues), even though she was encouraged to talk about these in the interviews. This may be due to a general discourse of multiculturalism in Finland. Diversity is often understood to refer only to immigrants (Holm & Londer, 2010) and, furthermore, immigrants are often discussed as one group (even though immigrants in Finland and everywhere else represent an extremely heterogeneous group of individuals).

From the perspective of critical pedagogy (e.g. Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2002), intercultural education should be about reworking existing power arrangements and not just about the benevolent presentation and celebration of cultural diversity. Tanja emphasized the dialogical relationship as well as caring for all the children, which definitely is important in a day care context and should be part of every teacher's professionalism. It can be argued that Tanja's intercultural learning is rather focused on the area of the teacher-child relationship (and teacher-parent relationship). This is understandable, as an early childhood educator's work is mostly about working with children and their families. However, from the perspective of critical pedagogy, a teacher's intercultural learning should involve becoming aware of power structures and attempting to change unequal procedures of education.

Sirpa Lappalainen (2006) has studied the deconstructions of nationality, ethnicity and gender in a preschool context. She concludes that, although cultural diversity is recognized, it still operates in a way that reserves agency for the hegemonic majority, and immigrant children have to deal with experiences of marginality. This is something that

Tanja does not really elaborate on in her narrative: Who has the power to define the goals, norms and practices of early childhood education; on whose terms is the day care system functioning?

The lack of deeper reflections of structural and power issues is not a surprising result. As teacher educators, we have acknowledged that, when discussing intercultural education, the students often expect us to provide them with specific methods or 'tools' for dealing with differences in day care centres and schools; they assume that there is a right way to 'do' intercultural education, even a toolbox with lists of 'dos and don'ts' (c.f. Di Angelo & Sensoy, 2010). Early childhood education is traditionally viewed through a very practical and didactic lens (Cannella, 2005), which is also visible in Tanja's interviews. As there are only one or a few courses in the teacher education that deal with diversity and multiculturalism, it is very difficult to develop a 'deeper intercultural professionalism' including the ability to reflect on issues on various levels. That is why it is important to integrate multicultural issues into different courses in early childhood teacher education. Instead of adding separate courses on multiculturalism, multicultural issues and global aspects of education could be discussed in relation to existing courses, e.g. educational psychology, educational philosophy and educational sociology.

However, preservice early childhood education students also definitely need practical experiences of working with diverse children and their families. Finnish early childhood education students may have had little personal contacts with cultures different from their own. In multicultural day care centres, teachers and children do not necessarily share similar cultural, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds. This cultural discontinuity between teachers and children can lead to action that does not match the communication or learning styles of the children (and their parents) and does not draw upon or support children's cultural knowledge (Kidd, Sanchez, & Thorp, 2008). The practical experiences of working with diverse children could be offered during early childhood teacher education, e.g. in the form of internships. It is particularly important that students' experiences of working in multicultural contexts are followed by a theoretical reflection in teacher education.

It has been pointed out that maintaining currency and relevance in early childhood education requires a continual engagement with critical issues (such as ethical considerations of practice, the cultural ramifications of practice and the consideration of equity in education) as well as finding new ways to adapt to changing educational circumstances (Yelland, & Kilderry, 2005). We should try to encourage early childhood education students to learn to speak of questions and possibilities rather than givens and necessities. This also applies to discussing multicultural issues. It is essential to make students aware that there are choices to be made between possibilities, that the usual way of proceeding is not

self-evident, that there is no one 'best practice' or standard of quality' to be found (since such concepts are always value-laden and relative), and that there may be more than one possible answer to any question (Edwards & Nuttal, 2009). This is essential also in early childhood education teachers' and teacher students' intercultural learning. Instead of asking "what is the right way of encountering diverse children and their families in a day care centre" we should encourage the students to think of various ways and their ethical justifications as well as their implications for educational equity and justice. Acknowledging and accepting that there are no "tricks" to be learnt in order to become an intercultural early childhood education teacher is a big step in the life-long intercultural learning process.

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