Re-orienting and Re-acting (to) Diversity in Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care

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ABSTRACT: In Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC), the notion of diversity has come to signify ethnic and cultural difference. This notion stems from the understanding that diversity comes with migration to a relatively uniform and cohesive society. The growing cultural mix is increasingly perceived as threatening to social cohesion leading to tensions. I make two points in this paper. First, I make a case that the myth of a homogeneous society stands in the way of addressing the many diversities and forms of marginalization that exist in Finnish ECEC today and requires urgent attention. Second, I argue that we need to pay more attention to the including groups: daycare centers and Finnish society. This attention needs to be coupled with the creation of a culture in which diversity is seen as part of the daycare center's culture and the national society rather than a challenge. I discuss these points first in relation to academic research and then to the work of ECEC professionals. I call researchers and professionals to continuously scrutinize current relations and processes that are informed by the myth of a homogeneous society, and to make way for challenging and contesting norms that make and keep particular groups exceptional.

Keywords: diversity, homogeneous nation, researchers, professionals

*Short papers

Homogeneous Finland, diversity and ECEC

This paper gains momentum from the intensifying pressures and efforts in the field of early childhood education and care to address diversity. Often perceived as a problem, current public discussions about diversity in Finnish society show increasing tensions,

similarly to many places around the world. Migrants are assumed to bring difference to a relatively uniform Finnish nation, which belief Tervonen (2014) terms as the 'myth of a homogeneous nation'. Difference is presented internationally as a challenge to maintaining social cohesion and national unity, and therefore attempts are made to strictly control migration with walls or laws internationally. The recent attack on two mosques in Christchurch New Zealand killing 49 people is an extreme example of intolerance[1]. A more mundane example in the Finnish context is the result of a survey among high school students, which found a decline in openness to increased cultural diversity (FNAE, 2017)[2]. Students expressed fear or irritation at the growing cultural mix. Responses to the alleged sexual harassment of teenage girls in Oulu also signal growing intolerance in society[3]. Diversity brought about by migration is clearly taken as a problem, if not in the form of intolerance towards the cultural mix then as a problem of migrant integration into the fabric of society. While in the official rhetoric, integration is perceived as "a continuous two-way process in which society is changing,"[4] in the everyday life of daycare centers it is expected that arriving people take up the norms and values of the including society (e.g. Lappalainen, 2006b, Millei et al., 2019; Riitaoja, 2013).

Assuming the homogeneity of Finnish society also masks the many other differences leading to unequal life chances. For example, there is growing inequality in Finland, where the richest 10 percent owns half of the wealth in society[5]. At the same time, the realities of children living with poverty can easily be overlooked and explained by personal traits or abilities that individualized or differentiated pedagogy can address. Since individualized pedagogy forms an important part of the Nordic pedagogical approach to ECEC (Karila, 2012), an individual approach comes easily when difference needs to be addressed. The issue with this is that diversity can be easily evaluated as individual difference understood, for example, as cognitive abilities, masking economic inequality (Vandenbroeck, 2017). Difference in acquired skills, experiences and future prospects - as shaped by social background and linked to economic inequalities - thus become invisible (e.g. Layne & Dervin, 2016; Machart, Clark & Dervin, 2012). Individualized pedagogy consequently contributes in perpetuating the myth of a homogeneous society in which everyone is equal. Equality of fellow human beings is a strongly held ideal of the Nordic welfare state in which Finnish ECEC has been established (Heinämäki, 2008). In practice, to maintain the ideal of an equal and integrative community, difference between

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[1] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47578798

[2] https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/study_girls_in_finland_more_open_to_different_cultures_than_boys/10159479

[3] https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/oulu_police_probe_four_new_cases_of_suspected_under-age_sex_abuse/10593090

[4] https://tem.fi/en/integration-of-immigrants

[5] https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/wealth_gap_widens_as_richest_10_percent_owns_nearly_half_of_all_wealth_in_finland/10238555

children is often made tacitly utilizing a variety of legitimized discourses and practices (Vuorisalo, 2013, 2015), and to which I also bring some examples later in this text.

The new curricula both in early childhood and pre-primary education have larger stress on diversity than before. Emphasis on diversity in curricula leads to the more frequent categorizations of children and families based on 'home language', nationality, culture or ethnicity. These categorizations initiate particular practices of inclusion. Efforts are spent on making these children and families fit the assumed norms (learning the language, teaching how to act as expected etc.) to facilitate their equal participation. While these practices are highly commendable, efforts also need to be expended on the including center, those who are deemed as 'normal' (Finn, monolingual, etc.). To make this point, I first focus on some of the ways in which the myth of homogeneous society is maintained in Finnish ECEC, and then put forward some ways in which researchers and professionals could work differently. I acknowledge that many of these ideas on how to work with a diverse community are not new. However, understandings of and working with diversity are rarely connected to public assumptions about a homogenous Finnish society (see e.g. Lappalainen 2006a, 2006b as exemptions), and this is the point I would like to emphasize here.

Expanding the notion of diversity by troubling the notion of 'homogeneous society'

Historically, Finnish society has been understood as homogeneous, a view that has dominated the school system until the 1990s (Lappalainen, 2006b) and still predominates in ECEC today (Layne & Lipponen, 2016; Niemelä, 2015). Since the 1990s, increasing heterogeneity in the population has been recognized more widely in policy and public discourses in terms of linguistic and cultural difference and as mostly related to migration (Layne & Lipponen, 2016; Machart et al., 2012; Paavola, 2007; Riitaoja, 2013). In the new ECEC curriculum (Opetushallitus 2016), diversity is understood as cultural and linguistic difference besides a less prominent focus on gender equality (Opetushallitus, 2016). Municipalities adopting the national curriculum place their main focus on demonstrating how they include different cultures and languages. However, the adaptations in municipal curricula, according to a study performed by the National Education Evaluation Centre (Repo et al., 2018), either purvey tokenistic discourses about celebrating other cultures and recreate forms of othering or try to create commonalities based on equality discourses in order to erase perceived differences.

In everyday practice, identifying diversity among children is also mostly tied to language or ethnicity (Machart et al., 2012). Teachers perceive 'the other' arriving in Finland as different, while often failing to recognize multiple identities in groups of children living in

Finland (Dervin, 2014; Eerola-Pennanen, 2012; Forsman & Hummelstedt-Djedou, 2014; Jokikokko & Karikoski, 2016; Millei, Korkiamäki & Kaukko, 2019; Riitaoja, 2013). Teachers' efforts foreground the acquisition language and cultural skills as the key to full participation in daycares, putting the responsibility on arriving children and their families to make this a success. This emphasis and related practices do not adhere to the 'two-way' process of integration that official agendas set down[6]. Moreover, they fail to consider and continuously change the including group's culture in to which integration supposed to happen (as evidenced in Lappalainen, 2006b; Millei et al., 2019; Riitaoja, 2013).

The problem with this view is that Finnish society has always been and still is a dynamic space and its composition and culture have been constantly changing (Tervonen, 2014). Current shifts mark out possible movements, for example a possible change to a society that is hostile to difference (a desire represented by the far right of the political spectrum), or to a more tolerant one. This latter view, however, often comes with a qualification that those whom we tolerate need to bring some benefits to society. What unites these desires is that diversity is seen as working against a cohesive and well-functioning society and is something that presents a problem and therefore needs to do away with by making people more similar.

There are also views that regard a cohesive society and diversity as not mutually exclusive (e.g. Matejskova & Antonsich, 2015; Modood, 2011). Proponents of this view see it possible to create a new society *in* diversity instead of pressing difference into the existing mold. This would mean the creation of an inclusive national image based on plurality in which all citizens could recognize themselves. This would mean replacing the homogenous and unified myth of nation with the ideal of 'unity in diversity' or 'diversity within unity' (Modood, 2011). We have seen historically that political and social forces can move identities in a large variety of ways to align with nation-states or with other sources of power. In line with the ideal of 'diversity in unity' in society, persons or groups to be included (including the so called locals) could change together with the society that is cohesive with diversity. In consequence, professionals, administrators and policy makers in ECEC could also consider how the cultures, norms and values, practices, notions of childhood and the child, as well as professional and personal identities need to change to make up to this new ideal: 'unity in diversity', thus, make settings more inclusive.

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[6] https://tem.fi/en/integration-of-immigrants

Researchers and diversity

The quest for inclusion on linguistic and cultural grounds dominates current research on diversity. For example, most current research focus on multi- and interculturalism (e.g. Jokikokko & Karikoski, 2016), bi- or multilingualism (e.g. Bergroth & Palviainen. 2016; Mård-Miettinen, Palojärvi & Palviainen, 2015) and worldview (related to religion) (e.g. Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia, 2012). The recognition of other forms of difference and the importance of identifying and working together with all, remain issues still requiring substantial research and practical implementation (Lappalainen, 2006a; Layne & Dervin, 2016; Layne & Lipponen, 2016; Ojala, 2010).

In current research, diversity in ECEC as related to the myth of a homogeneous national society is rarely examined (for exceptions see Lappalainen, 2006a, 2009; Millei et al., 2019; Riitaoja, 2013). Moreover, the very notion of diversity understood as linguistic and cultural difference informing policy-making, practice and research, while questioned, is only sporadically explored. How this conceptualization aligns with the myth of a homogeneous society, maintains the norms towards which integration needs to proceed, and operates as a yardstick against which difference is defined, is yet to be studied (for an exception see Riitaoja, 2013).

It also seems that research on diversity suffers from other problems. Policy makers, researchers and educators call for more research on diversity to understand how to include and treat equally or equitably particular groups in ECEC and education. In response, researchers select a particular group deemed as different from the outset of the research, thus they fix exceptionality from the start. Starting research by positing these groups as bound by some characteristics that distinguish them from others, risks essentializing and reifying the very perceived differences they aim to challenge or overcome (Brubaker, 2003). By focusing on the exceptional, researchers also fail to challenge the processes and norms by which the particular minority group is rendered exceptional (Riitaoja, 2013; Vandenbroeck, 2017; Watson, Millei & Petersen, 2015).

Research could more fruitfully explore the ways categorizations, identifications and differentiations take place in a situation and in a dynamic manner, since it is the situation rather than a pre-given category that creates conditions for an identity to be claimed. For example, a child might not claim or perform his or her cultural heritage and home language in daycare until the teacher asks the child to sing a song from her or his home culture for an international festival. For this child, her or his cultural identity was not an issue in the everyday running of the daycare so far, thus placing her in a specific cultural category is unhelpful. It was the teacher's request that mobilized this difference in the given situation and it might be that the child does not even see herself or himself within this category. Another example, in a group of culturally diverse children, claiming cultural

difference is rare between peers since children are all from different cultures and that is what makes this difference a taken for granted norm rather than an exception.

These examples show that arriving to research or practice with predefined categorizations of children compared to the perceived norm (homogeneous society), is less helpful in creating equal opportunities for them. Based on these examples, research could explore how self-identification with, resistance to, or the subversion of particular identities happen in different situations. By shifting attention towards these dynamic processes instead of fixed categories of difference, research could avoid essentializing forms of difference as pre-given or inherent to a group. Research could also highlight those processes that end up negating difference with the very intention of maintaining equality, universality and individualization but hereby reproducing dominant norms and values.

This kind of research could help debunking the myth of a homogenous society and identify, explore and challenge the various ways exceptionality is maintained. Research could make visible, for example, how the Finnish welfare state and its ideal of equality, the Nordic idea of universal and institutionalized ECEC services, and individualized pedagogy all play a part in maintaining particular values and norms that continue marginalizing certain children and families. By making visible these relations, processes, norms, and values, through which various differences are created and attended to, they could be thoroughly critiqued and deconstructed. This understanding could serve as a prerequisite for a change for more inclusive daycare centers and Finnish society.

However, the current narrow public understanding of diversity presents a challenge to social cohesion and accentuates the need to integrate difference into a homogeneous culture and society. By making visible the processes of categorization, identification, differentiation, grouping and self-understanding that works to create difference against the normal (which it seeks to maintain), the including center's norms and uniformity could be challenged to reveal new spaces for alternative discourses, norms, relations and strategies (Vandenbroeck, 2017). Making these visible might help in creating a plurality of norms and values within a cohesive daycare center and society, and hopefully replace or transform existing ones utilizing an either/or logic when diversity and cohesion are presented. New narratives could draw on notions of social cohesion that includes various diversities – 'diversity within unity' (Etzioni, 2011), where commonality is established on what brings people together, such as in the above example of a diverse group of children, and how all is accepted and how one can recognize oneself in this unity (Brubaker, 2001; Matejskova & Antonsich, 2015; Modood 2007). I will explain this idea further with the examples below.

Professionals and diversity

In a similar vein, professionals working in ECEC could aspire to suspend categorizing and differentiating a child or family based on a particular identity marker, such as nationality, language, religion, ethnicity, gender and so on. This could create spaces to learn about the child and the family otherwise than what we might know, for example, from stereotypes or ossified knowledge about foreign cultures. Professionals could be also more reflexive on how individualized pedagogy steps in to reframe difference in to individual ability making the child more similar to others, or be more reflexive on attempts that seek to diminish difference by drawing on notions of equality. Professionals could also focus on identifying the very processes, discourses, norms and values that making difference draws on and to trouble and subvert those. This could also include turning the gaze more towards the including center instead of the child to be 'integrated' (to conform). A couple of examples might help in imagining what I am proposing here.

In her exploration of Finnish preschool culture, Lappalainen (2006b, p. 103) reveals how governance of time is an important part of mundane 'national pedagogy' to shape migrant parents' behaviour. Keeping time and demanding punctuality appeared as an everyday struggle between professionals and families in the center she worked with. The ability to follow timetables and "promptness became defined as a Finnish national virtue" or norm and value against which families were judged (Lappalainen 2006b, p. 104). This taken for granted norm was used to categorize families and identify some as exceptional. To this exceptionality, a negative value was also assigned. Turning the gaze towards the center and reflecting on the processes taking place that make this categorization possible, a more flexible arrival time could have been introduced to create an inclusive culture. Allowing families to arrive with children between certain hours, thus having different arrival times, could turn different arrival times into the norm.

Vuorisalo (personal discussion) offers another example of a family who upheld the value of dependence in caring for their children and each other. The mother explained to the researcher that the child was fed by the adults at home and received help in most tasks. In contrast, the daycare center required independence from the child in dressing up and looking after one's own belonging and so on. The mother initially felt that her son was deemed exceptional because he was not able to understand and perform of what was required of him even though he quickly got used to the routines. Moreover, her parenting was also evaluated as not in line with the expected norms. The mother decided to uphold her caring style at home and to support the center's pedagogical norm of independence as well. She claimed that her son can do both, being independent and dependent at different times and places. However, the mother felt that her family's value of dependence was not supported by the center. It seemed that the child and parent have been

categorized based on the norm of independence. They were made exceptional in a negative way. If we turn the gaze towards the including center instead of the child (to be included) and include dependence as well as independence in ECEC pedagogy by reconsidering how care is understood, both independence and dependence can become the norm. For example, care understood as including both giving and receiving would allow to highlight the importance and value of being able to receive help in addition to not being reliant of help, that is, being independent.

In the next scenario from Siippainen's study (2018), the child is categorized based on her skin color and then excluded based on the accepted view that if one lacks competency in physical activity one cannot be allowed to play in certain areas. Siippainen observed several times that the educators did not allow the child to play in the rough and tumble play area, which was one of the rooms where children were quite often on their own. The educators justified this by arguing that they did not want this child to hurt herself again as it happened when she was playing there with other children. The child's mother had mentioned this accident to the educator and it was concluded that the child needs to be prevented from further accidents. At the end of the six months long data collection, this child had never been seen in the rough and tumble play room, which other children used every week. The small accident turned into the child's personal incompetence and because of that the educators kept her under their eyes without considering that they have excluded her from play and socializing with her peers.

In this situation, educators could have explored the reasons behind the child's mother mentioning this incidence to the teacher. However, to gain the trust of parents who think that their child is hurt in the center would require prolonged discussion and careful listening. It would also need a change in considering the parent as complementing the educators' knowledge and expertise rather than only supporting it, just as in the previous case. Listening carefully to parents' narratives and acknowledging that parents react in complex and multiple ways on their child's involvement in the center could bring a more dialogical culture about and in which difference in views would be respected as the mover of change and as the norm (see more in Hughes & MacNaughton 2000).

These examples made visible how difference is not only made on linguistic and ethnic grounds or on differing worldviews, or on some surface differences in cultures, such as food or dressing. Difference is made by using categorizations present in the everyday running of preschools, such as routines, or on discourses and practices of Nordic pedagogy. These categorizations are well accepted in practice and some even underpinned by scientific evidence or pedagogic approaches. Assisted by these strong supporting frames, they powerfully legitimate differentiation on accepted grounds, but at the end still do the work of marginalizing particular groups deemed as different. Valuing diversity in ways of changing routines or incorporating values brought by different

families would lead to changes in the culture of the daycare center and the creation of new norms. With new norms, the community could gain more cohesiveness since every child and parent would find her or his values in its operation and could identify herself or himself with the diversity brought together there and feel belonging. Commonality could be also found, for example, in the value of care and caring for children that each family upholds. After all, care is a truly universal experience, a norm and practice that help bind people and societies together (Held, 2006).

Concluding comment

With this paper, I wish to start a discussion among academics and professionals about diversity and how to rethink and re-act (to) diversity in Finnish ECEC. I acknowledge that many important conversations about, and research and practice in relation to diversity have been already started, some of which I also drew on in this paper. However, I would like to extend these discussions by considering more seriously and challenging the myth of a homogeneous society that still presents strongly in public view. I stress the need to turn more attention to the including society and daycare center and their norms overshadowed by this myth. I recognize that doing this work requires to debunk researchers' and professionals' beliefs and biases and necessitates courage to accept that they are part and parcel of doing diversity in Finland in productive or unproductive ways but with the best of intentions.

Researchers and professionals, as everyone else (including me), participate in making (often too quick) categorizations, identifications, exclusions and inclusions. These quick decisions may give the feeling and confidence of 'knowing' how to act, but at the same time, they may lock children in to unnecessary, discriminatory and unproductive categories. Tremendous possibilities can arise when one can extend 'not knowing', but at the same time 'not knowing' presents great challenges. Professionals and researchers are usually expected to 'know'. Moreover, they are also ethically responsible to engage in this work based on the values the curriculum uphold: "early childhood education and care is a service that promotes equality and equity among children and prevents their social exclusion" (Opetushallitus 2016, p. 16).

I suggest that instead of taking diversity as a problem that needs to be dealt with to ensure equality and equity among children, we take diversity as a resource that teaches different ways the world can be understood and lived. Diverse views and values might be challenging. Their acceptance requires continuous negotiations of rules, norms, ideals and values, but that is what it takes to integrate two-ways, to change the culture of the daycare center and society instead of only seeking to change the child and family to fit in. Taking diversity as a resource requires lots of unlearning of the 'known' and openness and

courage to the uncertainty of the 'not known'. It requires researchers and professionals to reassess their identities and to include those characteristics, values and skills in to their professional identities that allow for openness and readiness for continuous negotiation in light of the 'not known'.

Acknowledgement

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