



Diversity discourses in the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care

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ABSTRACT: The paper examines how diversity is constructed and considered in the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018) by employing critical multicultural theory with a focus on essentialist and non-essentialist views of diversity. The text is examined through critical discourse analysis using concepts such as culture, identity, diversity and equity and equality. The results mainly point to the use of non-essentialist discourse within the Core Curriculum; however, the ambiguity of some expressions nevertheless allows for a more essentialist interpretation. An effort has clearly been made to recognize children's diversity, and strong emphasis has been placed on the Non-Discrimination Act (1325/2014), which states that members of the community should be encountered and treated as equals, independently of personal characteristics. Despite this commendable aim, however, the complexities related to the language of diversity are not recognized. Consequently, the pedagogy that recognizes diversity is left for the individual teacher to interpret and implement.

Keywords: *diversity, culture, identity, equity and equality*

Introduction

The Finnish education and schooling system has been based on an overemphasized idea of cultural homogeneity. When immigration increased in Finland during the 1990s, concepts like culture and multicultural only referred to the immigrant population. (Lappalainen, 2007.) It was obvious that these concepts were not used to discuss the general population in Finland, which gave the impression that people born in Finland

were neither diverse nor multicultural or implied that they had no culture. For the most part, cultures other than 'Finnish culture' were interpreted as exotic, while 'Finnish culture' was considered normal and self-evident. Moreover, the concept of culture was viewed as solid and immutable, and was therefore generalized (Dervin, 2016). The same kind of thinking was also evident in different texts describing the curricula of that time, in which, 'Finnish culture' was interpreted as being identical for all those born and living in Finland, and which duly formed the basis of the education provided.

During the 1990s, or even early 2000s, it was rare to question what 'Finnish culture' meant, or whose culture it referred to. Moreover, when the prefix multi- was added, it always implied people born outside Finland – people who were nevertheless seen as identical to each other and who were placed in the position of the Other (Hahl & Löfström, 2016). As Millei (2019) observes, diversity that is seen as a result of migration is perceived as a problem, either as an unwanted cultural mix or as failed integration. Thus, the categories separating 'us' from 'them' remain and are also reproduced. As Riitaoja (2013) has shown, Finnish educational policies and curricula texts tended to regard 'multicultural' as referring exclusively to the 'Other', namely to certain categories of migrant pupils, such as refugees and asylum seekers, or those from the Middle-East or Africa with dark-skin and a Muslim background.

This unproblematic way of applying concepts has led to profound misunderstandings of multi-/interculturality and diversity. One of the most noticeable differences between the former National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health [STAKES], 2005) and the present curriculum text (Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2018) is that, in the latter, the notion of 'multicultural' as a concept has practically disappeared, receiving just one mention. The concept has been replaced by the term 'diversity', which, according to the text, takes into account that ethnic majority children and adults also represent diversity. Nonetheless, even though the concept of diversity is broadly used today, it still refers implicitly to certain ethnicities, nationalities and religions, in other words, to those who do not look like the imagined majority (Dervin, 2016; see also Burner et al., 2018). This kind of emphasis on diversity in curricula can result in children and families being even more frequently categorized based on home language, nationality, culture or ethnicity. Thus, the equal participation of all children and families becomes simply a question of fitting into the assumed norms (Millei, 2019).

This study analyses the Finnish Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (EDUFI, 2018) in order to reveal how diversity is constructed and considered in the document. This particular curriculum focuses on 0- to 5-year-olds in the Finnish early childhood education context. Hence, in relation to diversity, we investigate the kinds of concepts that are used, the way they are used, and the context in which they appear. The

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analysis includes the examination as well as discussion of the key concepts in relation to diversity. Based on the theoretical framework of critical multicultural theory utilized in this study, these concepts are culture, identity, equity and equality. Critical multicultural theory requires acknowledgement of the relations between knowledge, power and social change. According to Vavrus (2015, p. 5), critical pedagogy, as the basis of critical multicultural theory, demands identification and clarification of the ideologies and contradictions in discourses related to equality, as well as the power relations of class and gender, and 'imperialism embedded in the claim of equality'.

As we discuss further below, we wish to acknowledge what Ahmed (2012) refers to as the sense of uncertainty about what diversity 'is doing' and what we 'are doing' with diversity. Thus, we use critical discourse analysis to understand what diversity can do, and already does, as a performative concept. Since the curriculum is a binding document for ECEC staff, the concepts used in reference to diversities, as well as their context, ought to be clear. If they are ambiguous, or even incoherent, the quality of ECEC, especially concerning interaction might suffer, and, at worst, lead to othering and even discrimination.

The Finnish Early childhood education and care curriculum as a research context

In Finland, all children under school-age, meaning the age of seven, have a subjective right to early childhood education and care. Participation in ECEC is subject to a fee, which depends on family income and the number of children. Despite the fees being determined based on the income, the ECEC participation rate of children aged three to five was just 77% in 2019 (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2020), which is less than in the other Nordic countries, as well as lower than the OECD average, which was 87% in 2017(OECD, 2020). Preschool or pre-primary education is a compulsory part of early childhood education consisting of a one-year programme for six-year-olds. Pre-primary education has its own curriculum, which is also binding.

As Finland is a bilingual country, the official national languages are Finnish and Swedish. In addition to these languages, the Sami people, as an indigenous people, have the right to their own language and culture, which is protected under the Constitution of Finland (731/1999, 17 § 3 mom). The Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018, 8§) states that the municipality must ensure that early childhood education and care can be provided in the child's mother tongue if the language is Finnish, Swedish or Sami. When possible, children are also provided with opportunities to use and learn their other mother tongue(s), such as Romani, sign language and other foreign languages (EDUFI, 2018).

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The current National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care was published in 2016 and implemented in 2017. In 2018, the Finnish National Board of Education published a revised version in accordance with the new Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018). In 2018, for the first time, the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care became a binding document, whereas all previous curricula were only recommendations. After the reform, National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care has been implemented on three levels: the national core curriculum for early childhood education, local curricula for early childhood education, and children's individual early childhood education and care plans (EDUFI, 2018).

The aim of the new National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2018 is twofold: to create a better continuum from early childhood education to pre-primary education for 6- to 7-year-olds and to respond to societal changes, such as cultural, religious and linguistic diversity. The principle of inclusion guides the Finnish ECEC, meaning that all children, regardless of their need for support, disability or cultural background, can participate in early childhood education and care (EDUFI, 2018). The new curriculum also emphasizes that ECEC staff are responsible for engaging in work according to shared values, goals and content. Consequently, it represents an interesting research setting for analysing diversity discourses in curricula. Next, we move on to discussing the challenges connected to the concept of diversity in more depth.

The problematics of understanding and conceptualizing diversity

As this study aims to clarify the construction of diversity in the context of the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, it is important to attempt to clarify this contested concept, which is commonly used, yet controversial, in the field of multicultural education. In this study, the central starting point in determining diversity is the acknowledgement that it commonly points to the division between those included and those excluded. Diversity is thus dependent on the context (Dervin, 2016). Contested diversity centers on different interpretations of what constitutes a common culture (Vavrus, 2015), and differences from that common culture are often viewed as something negative which should be eliminated or diminished through the expulsion of the Other (Alemanji, 2016). According to Dervin (2016), diversity is a strong concept which is often used to stand for equality and equity. However, depending on the context, it may substitute, among others, for such terms as immigrant, people of color and Muslims. Since the assumption about Finnishness is still attached to whiteness, people who do not fit to this norm face exclusion on a daily basis. As such, racialization as discursive practice

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maintains the processes of differentiation. (Keskinen et al., 2015). Thus, it should be rather obvious, that traditional approaches to multicultural education and educational policies, where differences are emphasized (Dervin 2016), belong to the past. Hereby, in line with Dervin (2016), we also call for a critical approach to investigating diversity.

Thus, central to this study is not only the contested nature of the concept of diversity, but also acknowledgement of the uncertainty about what diversity is doing and what we are doing with diversity. In *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012), Ahmed focused on building an understanding of how diversity discourse operates on college campuses. She uses cases from universities to examine the institutional nature of diversity work. According to Ahmed (2012, p. 23), such work is often described “in terms of the language of integrating or embedding diversity into the ordinary work or daily routines of an organization.” However, including diversity as a concept in the institutional agendas does not automatically lead to commitment to diversity in terms of leadership, values or even enabling conversations related to injustices. Ahmed argues that including diversity in institutional policies, such as mission statements, or in national curriculums as in this study, recognition of the value of diversity is at times disregarded. This is because the term itself has become omnipresent, part of polite speech, and as such a routine description. (Ahmed, 2012, pp. 25–28, 53–58). For us, the questions Ahmed poses relate particularly to the language of diversity. Therefore, the basis of our investigation of the Finnish ECEC curriculum is examine what diversity implies to; what it becomes attached to and what kind of practices it is associated with.

In the context of early childhood education, diversity has been studied from multiple perspectives. Research has focused, for example, on language, worldview, nationality, family and social class issues, as well as on the early childhood institutions incorporating these equality and equity issues into their policies and practices (Ramsey, 2015; Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2006). In terms of an anti-bias curriculum in early childhood education, Derman-Sparks (2008) has shown that addressing other diversities in tandem with cultural diversity can form the basis for inclusive education. Paavola’s study (2007) focused on the realization of multicultural education in a pre-school context where multicultural goals and the contents of the National Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education (EDUFI, 1996) were analysed as a part of the research. In addition, Kuusisto (2017) examined the ways in which perceptions of worldview diversity, inclusion, and exclusion are negotiated in Finnish ECEC. Furthermore, the representation of diversity in formal and informal learning material has also been studied (see e.g., Mendoza & Reese, 2001; Pesonen, 2019). Thus, multiple studies exist on the manifestation of diversities in curricula (see e.g., Garvis et al., 2018). However, the current Finnish National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (EDUFI, 2018) has yet to be examined in terms of equity, diversity or anti-racism.

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In steering documents such as curricula, diversity discourses are often linked to concepts like culture, (cultural, linguistic, religious) identity, and equality and equity (see, e.g., Paulsrud et al., 2017). This is also evident in the National Core Curriculum of Early Childhood Education and Care (EDUFI, 2018). In the curriculum, these concepts and the values connected to them are presented as universally accepted and put forward as promoting diversity (EDUFI, 2018). As we suggest next, the primary challenge is not the use of the concepts, but the contextualization of them in the curriculum.

Diversity and other associated terms reflect widely varying attitudes and actions. These concepts become familiar to teachers through the curriculum text, but the accuracy of such terms is seldom clear. Instead, teachers attribute meanings to diversity according to their knowledge, attitudes and impressions, and relate those meanings to daily activities with children. How teachers achieve this is dependent upon their understanding of these concepts and their attitudes towards diversity (Burner et al., 2018; Paavola, 2018; Vavrus, 2015; Vandebroek, 2011). As Tobin et al. (2013) and Yelland & Kilderry (2008) have argued, a teacher's negative attitudes and poor knowledge of diversity issues might unconsciously cause a child to become excluded or even othered. Repo et al. (2018) have also acknowledged, along similar lines, that teachers might reinforce stereotypes despite their good intentions concerning different cultural backgrounds. Thus, the discussion on the problematics of understanding and conceptualizing diversity ought also to take account of the Other and othering.

According to Dervin (2016), othering means creating a boundary between different and the same, between insiders and outsiders. Othering means turning the other into an Other, while simultaneously creating boundaries between insiders and outsiders (Dervin, 2016). Othering refers to differentiating discourses where one's own or one group's superiority is expressed in terms of 'us' and 'them'. Differences between the familiar and strange are not neutrally or equally defined; rather, a person or his/her culture has a position of less value, becoming the Other (Löytty, 2005).

The Other has always been identifiable or noticeable in different kinds of literature, not least in curricula texts. In the most recent Finnish curricula texts (EDUFI, 2014a; 2014b), the Other has been assigned different labels, including immigrant, foreigner, students who don't speak Finnish/Swedish as their native language, students whose religion is not Evangelical Lutheranism, and so on. Even though immigrants account for less than 7% of the whole population in Finland, diversity and multiculturalism have been constituted as a 'contentious issue' in the field of education. This occurred particularly after immigration increased in the 1990s, and again after 2015 when a large number of asylum seekers from Syria and Iraq arrived in Finland. These societal changes have already affected the pedagogy adopted in early childhood education, preschools and schools, and significant

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effort has been invested in pursuing equality, equity and social justice (e.g., Lipponen & Lastikka, 2016), but, as we suggest with our analysis, much remains to be done.

The Other and othering also require acknowledgement when examining diversity discourses because the mechanism of othering is closely related to the concept of identity. For those who differ from the majority, the position of the Other may be present every day. Thus, questions like 'Who are you?' and 'Where are you from?' are common. They may seem harmless, but the fact that such individuals must explain their identity time after time may have an impact on their identity formation. Moreover, these kinds of questions indicate that identities are considered stable and constant. Nevertheless, people possess and express different identities depending on time, location and the people with whom they are communicating (Dervin, 2016; Stråth, 2011). Consequently, being an Other is highly context dependent.

If children are accepted as individuals in their early childhood education groups, are not separated by any border markers, and do not become objects of othering, they may feel a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging proves to a child that they are a member of a group, and accepted, which not only affects their identity and self-image but, importantly, also influences their learning (Gay 2010). Similarly, Hellman et al. (2017), who investigated children's notions of inclusion, exclusion, and diversity in ECEC settings, demonstrated the importance of how each child is perceived and recognized by the group. What they also argued is that the way teachers listen to children's voices and expressions and work with diversity is crucial in preventing othering.

Materials and methods

In order to answer the question 'How is diversity constructed and considered?', this study explores the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (EDUFI, 2018), which focuses on 0- to 5-year-olds. The Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (EDUFI, 2018) comprises the following sections: 1) the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care and local curricula for early childhood education and care, 2) the mission and general goals of early childhood education and care, 3) the operational culture of early childhood education and care, 4) guidelines on planning and implementing pedagogical activity in early childhood education and care, 5) support for the child's development and learning, 6) early childhood education and care based on an alternative pedagogy or a particular worldview, 7) and evaluation and development of operations in early childhood education and care (62 pages).

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The National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (EDUFI, 2018) is examined through critical discourse analysis, using the concepts of culture, identity, equity and equality, and diversity. In the analysis, we have used the Finnish version of the National Core Curriculum, as we specifically wish to highlight the use of terminology. Such a decision was taken because the majority of ECEC staff in Finland utilize the Finnish version of the curriculum.

In the analysis, we utilize Jokinen's (1999) model of discourse analysis, which is particularly suited to the analysis of written documents, but we also draw on Fairclough's (1992) theorizing on discourses. Here, the focus is the conception of language as structuring areas of knowledge and social practices. Thus, discourse is also understood to be socially constitutive, both in the sense that it helps maintain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258). As discursive practices can produce and reproduce unequal power relations between social classes, genders, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities through the ways in which they represent things and position people (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258), the critical analysis of a binding document, such as the curriculum, is crucial.

In addition to examining concepts and expressions related to diversity, an important part of the analysis addresses the teachers for whom the curriculum is binding and also the question of the starting points for understanding diversity that are disclosed in the document. When Ahmed (2012, p. 52) discusses the language of diversity in institutions, she draws attention to descriptive and normative uses of diversity. Following Ahmed, we analyse discourses of diversity as institutional speech acts that not only can make claims about Finnish early childhood education, but also point to future action, such as committing Finnish ECEC to certain measures (see Ahmed, 2012, pp. 54–55).

The first step of the analysis involved searching for and tracking key concepts in the curriculum text. After the frequency of these key concepts had been identified, text excerpts where the concepts occurred were selected from the curriculum. After that, the key concepts were examined through critical multicultural theory and potential contradictions in the discourses were highlighted. The analysis focused on how the abovementioned key concepts of culture, identity, equity, equality and diversity were constructed in the text (see Gee, 2014). In the analysis phase, attention was paid to situated meanings or understandings, namely the assumptions or theories upon which the selected phrases or excerpts were based (see Jokinen, 1999).

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Diversity discourses in the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (2018)

As already discussed above, diversity discourses are examined by using the concepts of culture, identity, equity and equality. The curriculum text contains 19 instances of the concept of identity and 14 instances of the concepts of equality and equity. In addition to these, the concept of diversity also occurs as a separate concept in the curriculum text 19 times. More detailed analysis of the concepts is provided in subsequent sections of this study, where each concept will be discussed separately.

Out of the chosen main concepts, the concept of *culture* occurs more than any other and is used and referred to in various ways, with 88 instances in all. From these, 36 referred to operational culture. We nevertheless excluded such instances from our analysis to maintain the focus on concepts connected to diversity. Nonetheless, we are well aware that the values, attitudes and understanding of staff concerning diversity influence operational culture and so indirectly affect the methods by which diversity is taken into account in pedagogy.

The concept of culture

As the concept of culture appears in the curriculum more often than the other key concepts, we begin our analysis by discussing its connection to diversity discourses. As our analysis shows, in line with Dervin (2016), the concept of culture means many different things in different places and different languages and therefore covers too much ground to be easily understood or adapted. Dervin (2016) also claims that culture exists only as a concept, solely representing imaginaries and representations of itself. Thus, culture clearly cannot be explained with an unambiguous definition. In the Finnish ECEC curriculum, the concept of culture is associated with a wide variety of factors (e.g. background, heritage, competences, identity, own culture/Finnish culture). Thus, the danger is that a superficial understanding of culture becomes reinforced.

Interestingly, according to Paulsrud et al. (2017), in the Finnish Core Curriculum for Basic Education (EDUFI, 2014b), the concept of culture is dynamic and includes all students rather than simply immigrants. Such an understanding supports the idea that we all possess culture, rather than only those who differ from the dominant culture. This is also clearly seen in the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care text; nevertheless, it also contains some contradictory phrases, which we will highlight in the following analysis.

The main section, 'Mission and general goals of early childhood education and care', and more specifically one of the subsections, entitled 'Underlying values' (equity, equality and Paavola & Pesonen.

diversity), contains a declaration that expresses a central idea concerning the concept of Finnish culture: “Early childhood education and care is built on a *diverse* Finnish cultural heritage” (EDUFI, 2018, p. 21). In this same subsection, the cultures of each family are strongly emphasized as well as the right of children and families to maintain those cultures. Nevertheless, what is problematic for educators and teachers is that the term culture is neither explained nor opened up. Thus, the assumption is that the meaning of the term is self-evident. Because, in the curriculum text, the concept is mostly connected to mentions of languages, worldviews and religions, it can be easily comprehended in varying ways. Furthermore, the danger also exists that connecting culture to, for instance, languages and religions reinforces the division between ‘our culture’ and ‘their culture’. As a result, normative assumptions about homogenous Finnish culture might become reasserted (see also Millei, 2019).

Problematic use of the term culture can also be found in the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018, 8§), which states that a central aim of early childhood education is to ‘provide all children with equal opportunities for early childhood education and care, promote parity and gender equality, and help children develop their capacity to understand and respect the *general cultural heritage* and each other’s linguistic, cultural, religious and ideological background’. Here, no explanation for general cultural heritage is offered, and the term is used as if there were only one ‘general’, shared culture in Finland. This indicates a view of culture as static and unchanging (Phillips, 2007). Nevertheless, it should be noted that this is an excerpt from the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) and not the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (EDUFI, 2018) itself, which acknowledges and appreciates all cultures and cultural heritages.

In instances related to cultural background, the basic content is encapsulated in the following sentence: ‘Children must have an opportunity to develop their skills and make choices independently of reasons associated with, for instance, gender, origin, cultural background or other reasons related to the person’ (EDUFI, 2018, p. 21). The section entitled ‘The conception of learning’ emphasizes the importance of linking and connecting new knowledge and skills to children’s developing competences as well as to the world they experience and to their cultural backgrounds. This is a view that underlines the importance of children’s cultural background in their learning process (Gay, 2010). These ideas mainly stem from the Constitution of Finland (731/1999) and other legislation and international agreements which Finland has signed: The Non-Discrimination Act (1325/2014), the Act on Equality between Women and Men (609/1986), the European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe, 1990), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations [UN], 1989), and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations [UN], 2007).

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Another factor that is emphasized in relation to cultural background is active and effective interaction with all people, regardless of their cultural background and worldview. This requires familiarity with and respect for one's own cultural background and worldview as well as those of others (EDUFI, 2018). Such a recommendation echoes Schiro's (2012) curriculum ideology of social reconstruction, which aims at societal change. The idea of the ideology of social reconstruction centres on the resolution of societal problems (Schiro, 2012). Even though these aims suggest a non-essentialist starting point, the curriculum text again contains one excerpt that contradicts these premises: 'Children are encouraged to get to know other people, languages and cultures' (EDUFI, 2018, p. 25). Similar to the discussion above, the concept of culture is yet again neither explained nor defined. This leads to an essentialist understanding of culture as a bounded 'thing' not produced by humans (Phillips, 2007). Interestingly, the same section, just prior to the abovementioned sentence, contains a description of cultural competence as the ability to listen, identify and understand different perspectives as well as to reflect on one's own values and attitudes (EDUFI, 2018, p. 25). This definition includes the idea that there are no solid cultures; instead, people are described as interacting and creating new culture through dialog.

The concept of identity

The concept of identity (19 instances) can mostly be found in the main section, 'Mission and general goals of early childhood education', and its subsection 'Transversal competences', and in the section on 'Planning and implementing pedagogical activity in early childhood education and care'. These instances are associated with cultural, linguistic and ideological backgrounds.

The term cultural identity refers to all children, rather than simply to immigrant children or those who are categorized as members of a minority group. This is a rather significant development compared to the previous Early Childhood Education and Care curriculum (STAKES, 2005), where cultural identity referred solely to immigrant children. The same phenomenon is also visible in the other most recent Finnish curricula texts: the National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education (EDUFI, 2014a) and the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (EDUFI, 2014b).

Another clear development towards a non-essentialist approach is the understanding that identities are created depending on both the context and the people around oneself (Dervin, 2016; Sen, 2006). Hence reflection of self and one's identity is constructed through the eyes of others (Dervin, 2016). This process is affected by discourses, norms and rules which are present in particular contexts, which are not static but change constantly. This continuous change offers a chance for people to perform their plural identities in different situations. Thus, identities are performative, meaning that gender, Paavola & Pesonen.

ethnicity, and nationality among others, are enacted in discursive practices and thus produce what they name (e.g., Butler, 2006).

In the curriculum, the plural form – identities – is used in a number of expressions, such as in the subsection ‘Cultural competence, interaction and self-expression’, where the following statement appears: ‘Children are supported in building cultural *identities*’ (EDUFI, 2018, p. 25, emphasis added). Thus, identity becomes strongly linked to culture, which is seen as an important part of a child’s identity (EDUFI, 2018, p. 44). Such an expression suggests that one’s lifeworld is an essential part of identity, along with markers like language, religion or worldview, gender, social class, and so forth.

However, in the curriculum, the concept of identity is most often linked to languages. Languages are clearly highlighted, and it is emphasized that language development and learning, interaction and cooperation are important for a person’s identity-building and sense of belonging to society (EDUFI, 2018, p. 41). In the subsection on ‘Special perspectives on language and culture questions of some minor groups’, a statement arising from the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) indicates that mother tongue teaching is important for the development of identities. The municipality must ensure that early childhood education and care can be provided in the child’s mother tongue if the language is Finnish, Swedish or Sami. In the same subsection, questions concerning certain minority groups (e.g. Roma, children using sign language, foreign language speaking and plurilingual children) are discussed and their identity development is emphasized (EDUFI, 2018, p. 49).

Compared to the previous curriculum (STAKES, 2005), the current curriculum places greater emphasis on the role of staff in the development of a child’s identity. To this end, there is a clear requirement for staff to understand and acknowledge children’s different backgrounds, and staff members are expected to acquire the ability to recognize and view issues from many different perspectives and empathize with other people and their situations. Indeed, this statement resembles Gay’s (2010) ideas of culturally responsive teaching. In turn, the subsection on ‘Cultural diversity and language awareness’ emphasizes that ‘personnel understand the key importance of language for children’s developments and learning, interaction and cooperation and for the building of *identities*’ (EDUFI, 2018, p. 31, emphasis added). Such a statement places enormous weight on the expertise of staff. At the same time, it also creates pressure for them to contemplate their own values and attitudes towards diversity. Nevertheless, the curriculum, as such, does not provide teachers with the understanding that awareness of one’s own identity creates openness to the diversity of other identities.

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The concepts of equity and equality

To begin with, in both the Finnish curricula and legislative documents, the concept of equality (*tasa-arvo*) refers to gender equality, while equity (*yhdenvertaisuus*) refers to other equalities, such as equality between ethnicities, languages, religions, social classes, and nationalities.

In the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, most of the references to equity and equality (14 instances) occur in the main section, 'Mission and general goals of early childhood education and care', and especially in the subsection 'Underlying values'. There, Finnish ECEC is described as inclusive, with its stated aim being to find the means, and favourable learning spaces, to welcome and fully include children from different backgrounds (cf., Slee, 2011). The goal of inclusive education is to decrease discrimination against diversity related to social and ethnic backgrounds, religion, gender, and the abilities of students and their families, to reduce underachievement as well as to create an open school for all (Paavola, 2017). These aims can be clearly interpreted in the curriculum text, where early childhood education and care is seen as a service that promotes equality and equity among children and prevents their social exclusion (EDUFI, 2018, p.14). As Repo et al. (2018) observe, in terms of aims, equality and equity are clearly defined; however, staff fail to receive adequate support for either their implementation or evaluation.

The section on 'Mission and general goals of early childhood education and care' also includes a reference to the Non-Discrimination Act (1325/2014), according to which one of the aims of early childhood education and care is to 'provide all children with equal opportunities for early childhood education and care and promote gender equality' (EDUFI, 2018, p. 16). This statement is complemented in the subsection 'Participation, equality and equity' with the phrase '[m]embers of the community are encountered and treated as equals independently of personal characteristics'. Nevertheless, equity does not imply sameness, as each person is viewed as an individual (EDUFI, 2018, p. 30). The concepts of equity and equality are also linked to learning environments in the sense that the latter are designed and developed to strengthen equity and gender equality (EDUFI, 2018, p. 33).

The concept of diversity

Expressions including the term diversity (19 instances) are mostly found in two sections, 'Mission and general goals of early childhood education and care', and especially the subsection 'Underlying values', and in the section on 'The operational culture of early childhood education and care', especially the sub-section 'Cultural diversity and language awareness'. Interestingly, the concept of diversity has been translated in two different

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ways in Finnish (*moninaisuus, monimuotoisuus*), but it is unclear why these two Finnish concepts were chosen. In general, they can be, and are, used synonymously, and in this study we have interpreted them as one and the same concept. In the curriculum, diversity is, for the most part, associated with cultures, languages, and worldviews. Very few expressions concern human diversity, gender diversity, diverse societies or families. This, again, as in the context of identity discourses and culture discourses discussed above, strongly connects specifically the social categorizations of language and religion to diversity. This suggests a traditional view of diversity with a strong categorization between groups. Moreover, it fails to acknowledge differences among people within the same group (Dervin, 2016). Vandenbroeck (2017) broadens diversity definition by using the concept of super-diversity. With this term he refers to situations, in which no clear majorities exist anymore, but various minorities have become the majority. He refers to Janssens (2016) examples related to big European cities, such as Brussel, in which 50% of the families are multilingual, and the variety of languages in general is enormous. As Vandenbroeck (2017) emphasizes, it is time to re-evaluate our thinking on diversity and realize that also these diversities have become more diverse.

According to the curriculum, Finnish cultural heritage and national languages as well as cultural and linguistic diversity are appreciated. The intent is positive but ought to be examined and discussed critically. This is because when teaching children about each other's cultures there is a high risk of deterioration into a tourist curriculum that tends to teach about different cultures through celebrations and artifacts, such as food and traditional clothing. These 'multicultural' activities are special events distinct from the ongoing daily curriculum. A tourist curriculum trivializes matters and emphasizes the 'exotic' differences between cultures (Derman-Sparks, 2008). Such an approach, intended or not, avoids dealing with everyday life among diverse people and fails to realize the aim that each person should be seen as an individual rather than as a member of her/his culture (see also Repo et al., 2018).

Cultural diversity, together with language awareness, has been chosen as one of the guiding principles in the development of the operational culture in early childhood education and care. According to the curriculum, cultural diversity is perceived as a resource, and the community should recognize each member's fundamental right to their own language, culture, religion, and worldview (EDUFI, 2018, p. 31). In turn, language awareness is seen as a sign of an interculturally competent teacher. Such teachers understand how supporting multilingualism reveals the diverse community. Moreover, according to the curriculum, this would support children's development in a culturally diverse world. Nevertheless, Vandenbroeck (2017), referring to Sierens and Van Avenaet (2016), states critically that many bilingual education models used in Europe actually aim to facilitate the dominant language rather than multilingualism, and thus support homogeneity. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate whether the diversity of cultural Paavola & Pesonen.

repertoires (e.g., languages) is dismissed or even ignored in early childhood education in spite of the good intentions and demands of the curriculum. As Vandebroek (2017) asks, is the 'mission' of early childhood education ultimately only to produce school-ready children whose diversities are erased and who do not differ from each other in competences, language (dominant language) and skills?

As discussed above, based on the report by Repo et al. (2018), teachers require a more profound understanding of the means to include diversity in their pedagogy.

Discussion

As we have shown in our analysis, the Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care curriculum (EDUFI, 2018) mainly presents non-essentialist discourses of diversity. However, there are a few exceptions. For instance, the use of the concept of culture is partly incoherent, and some references indicate an understanding of culture as a static phenomenon, which might resonate with the understanding that culture is mainly something possessed by minorities, especially immigrants. This contrasts clearly with the concept of identity, especially cultural identity, which is used to refer to all children rather than simply immigrants or those categorized as members of a minority group. In terms of the essentialist and non-essentialist conception of identities, it is crucial that people are seen to have multiple identities that are in constant change (see Dervin, 2016).

Our analysis of the concepts of equity and equality, as well as diversity, in the Finnish national Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care reveals an ambition for the equal treatment of all children as well as the eradication of discrimination. It reflects the idea of inclusive education, which is understood as a process guaranteeing the right to education for all.

However, as Ahmed (2012) suggests, a sense of uncertainty about what diversity 'is doing' is also clearly evident in our results. We have demonstrated and discussed the difficulty of manifesting of a clear understanding of diversity in the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care. As our results show, diversity as a concept is used in a variety of different relations, as well as connections. The concept seems to have become somewhat self-evident value, as the meaning is not discussed nor critically explained. Yet, the concept of diversity also becomes often attached to ethnicity, language, and nationality. Thus, what Ahmed (2012, p. 53) suggests in terms of institutional language of diversity disguising the continuation of systematic inequalities within education systems ought to be acknowledged also in relation to Finnish National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care.

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We have suggested that in order to meet the curriculum objectives and ensure the quality of pedagogy in early childhood education, teachers require various skills and knowledge related to equity and equality. Consequently, a major question also concerns teachers' intercultural competence (e.g., Jokikokko, 2010). If teachers were better equipped to recognize and respond to children as multifaceted individuals with different skills and complex needs, this would certainly increase a child's sense of belonging and the feeling of being an important member of the group rather than an outsider and thus the Other (see Bae, 2009). Fear of exclusion is a reality, especially for migrant parents (Paavola, 2017; Van Laere & Vandebroek, 2017), but, according to a study by Van Laere & Vandebroek (2017), teachers do not fully recognize this issue in early childhood education. Consequently, teachers play a key role in the process of inclusion. Therefore, of central importance is how early childhood teachers interpret the curriculum and how they apply non-essentialist perspectives in their pedagogy.

According to Vandebroek (2011) and Van Laere & Vandebroek (2017), respect for diversity is a crucial dimension, as children can only learn and fully develop in settings that are highly contextualized and that take account of their family values, beliefs, and living conditions. The way teaching is related to daily activities is, however, completely dependent upon teachers' understanding of these concepts and their attitudes towards diversity (Paavola, 2018). Our results indicate that significant responsibility remains with ECEC personnel to interpret and practise a pedagogy that acknowledges the power relations in society and in education. This is especially important in local-level curriculum work, which requires joint reflections and interpretations concerning the curriculum and operational culture. Even though Finnish teacher education is highly valued and praised, it has also been shown to emphasize the values and norms of the majority culture (see e.g., Layne & Lipponen, 2014).

Children, like all humans, differ from one another linguistically, ethnically, and socioeconomically. This means that subjects or themes in the curriculum should be presented from multiple perspectives, and educational materials, both formal and informal, should embrace diverse voices and viewpoints (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Pesonen, 2019). According to Schoorman (2011), the discourse on early childhood education is dominated by a 'one-size-fits-all approach', which means that the diverse perspectives of children and their families are dismissed. In such a monoculture-oriented environment, children from minorities (especially ethnic minorities) are often seen as creating a new set of problems and challenges for early childhood education staff (Lauritsen, 2014). In addition, Vandebroek (2007) highlights failures to take sufficient account of the societal context and power relations, leading education to be conducted as if it were outside society. If only the knowledge and skills of the majority are accepted and respected, a child's success at school may be negatively impacted. Furthermore, it can lead to bullying and discrimination (Tobin et al., 2013; Yelland & Kilderry, 2008). Schoorman Paavola & Pesonen.

(2011) emphasizes the importance of moving towards early childhood education that is grounded in social justice and characterized by critical awareness. As curriculums play a central role as the basis of teaching, their content should be formulated to ensure the inclusion of all children. Such inclusiveness also necessitates critical awareness of othering.

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