



# (Re)thinking children's picturebooks as the mirror of contemporary society

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**ABSTRACT:** This study deals with all children's possibilities of meeting the multilingual society and aims to explore the norms regarding language and culture that are reflected in picturebooks in preschools. Previous research has shown how picturebooks can be used to develop literacy skills and intercultural understandings among children. A postcolonial lens is used to identify social locations and thereby unfold hidden power relations and social positionings of who is to be included and who is not (Spivak, 1988; Yuval-Davis, 2006). 35 picturebooks collected from preschools in Iceland, Norway and Sweden have been analysed by frequency and qualitative content analysis, eleven of which were found to contain multilingualism and/or multiculturalism. The results show a) a prevailing monolingual norm in which solely artefacts carry multilingual trails; b) a strong monocultural norm, which places people of diversity in a marginalised position; c) the English language holds an advanced position compared to majority languages, which situates other minority languages as anomalous. The educational significance of the research implicates a need for multilingual and multicultural diversity to be more observable in picturebooks used in preschool, to help children develop languages, and their own linguistic and cultural identity/-ies and, thus, their sense of belonging to a multilingual society.

**Keywords:** *picturebooks, belonging, multilingual society, early childhood education*

## Introduction

In the TED talk *The danger of a single story*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) discusses her own experiences of literature as a child, and the influence stories can have when individuals construct their understanding of the world and other people, especially as children.

I was also an early writer, and when I began to write, at about the age of seven, stories in pencil with crayon illustrations that my poor mother was obligated to read, I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading: All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples, ... and they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out. ... Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow, we ate mangoes, and we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to. My characters also drank a lot of ginger beer, because the characters in the British books I read drank ginger beer. Never mind that I had no idea what ginger beer was. ... What this demonstrates, I think, is how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children. Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify. (Adichie, 2009, p. 1.)

Taking this quote as a starting point, this article addresses the questions related to the role of picturebooks in children's lives and their importance to the development of a linguistic and cultural identity. Also, to their sense of belonging to a multilingual society.

In multilingual societies, people use several languages and translanguaging in their everyday life as a way for social justice (García & Leiva, 2014) and people's use of language/-es is embedded in society. Thus, the languaging of individuals and societies can be seen as interacting since they construct one another, and children are introduced into these societies (Bialystok, 2007). Consequently, developing a sense of belonging to a multilingual society entails a possibility for children to identify with and emotionally attach themselves to the community (Yuval-Davis, 2006). This relates, not only to bi-/multilingual or emergent bi-/multilingual children but applies to all children. Images in children's literature can contain underlying messages about social structures and these messages can unconsciously give children ideas about who are considered to be natural citizens in a society and who are not (Salmson & Ivarsson, 2015). Images also influence children's development of their identity, or identities, thereby influencing which identities could be developed (Sparrman, 2002). It is reasonable to assume that for all children to develop linguistic and cultural identities, and openness to other languages and cultures through picturebooks, the books available to all children in preschool needs to present and reflect the diversity of the multilingual society. Otherwise, children risk

getting a one-sided view of society and of who can be represented in books (cf. Adichie, 2009).

In this article, we understand a picturebook to be a book with both words and illustrations, with one or several illustrations on each page (Hallberg, 1982) and, for “younger children where the pictures are important to the content” (Swedish National Encyclopedia, 2023). Our understanding of the picturebook includes the relationship or interaction between text and picture, that is, the icono-text (Hallberg, 1982). Thus, “both the visual and the verbal aspects are both essential for full communication” (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000, p. 226). Investigating preschool practice, or parts of the preschool practice, such as picturebooks, through a postcolonial lens is something new (Carlsson & Lunneblad, 2013), and is so by seeing the preschool as a political project (Johansson, 2022; Raivio et al., 2022). This involves seeing how:

...belonging is made by children and adults in preschool everyday life, in recurring negotiations about boundaries – who and what gives the right to be part of different communities and where both the individual's emotional experiences and structural conditions and power are important (Johansson, 2022, p. 3).

Therefore, the study aims to investigate and contribute with knowledge about the norms regarding language and culture that are reflected in picturebooks in preschools in which children from Sweden, Norway and Iceland participate. A postcolonial lens has been used in the analysis to identify social positionings and thereby unfold hidden and unconscious power relations, and social positionings of who is to be included and who is not (Spivak, 1988; Yuval-Davis, 2006). The following research questions have guided our analysis: a) To what extent is multilingualism and multiculturalism present in the analysed picturebooks? b) In what ways are multilingualism and multiculturalism visualised in the analysed picturebooks?

### **The Nordic context**

As Adichie grew up, she got to know authors and stories, with which she could identify, and she began to see and understand the different perspectives of literature and of the world:

But because of writers like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized. (Adichie, 2009, p. 2.)

This illustrates how important books are for children, but also how sensitive and vulnerable children are regarding the textual content and the illustrations that they are being exposed to. Furthermore, the quotes from Adichie show how important it is for children to be exposed to what is familiar and known, with which the child will identify,

and to the unknown, to develop abilities of understanding differences between beliefs, habits, and values, between cultures, what Bishop (1990) refers to as multicultural literacy. The books that Adichie read as a child in Nigeria were a consequence of colonialism and only books written by western authors were available to readers in her country. We now turn to the Nordic countries of Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, which are of relevance to the current study. In Norway (e.g., Todal, 1998) and Sweden (e.g., Hyltenstam et al., 1999), ethnic minorities have suffered from oppression from the majority in terms of forced assimilation, discrimination and repression from the government and the Church. An example of this oppression in Sweden is that during large parts of the 20th century, all education was offered in Swedish only (Hyltenstam et al. 1999; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008), and punishments were given if minority languages, such as Meänkieli, were being used (Persson, 2018). Iceland (e.g., Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010), in its turn, is historically described as a country with a homogenous linguistic and cultural population, partly due to its geographically isolated location (recently, Iceland is experiencing an increased linguistic and cultural diversity due to immigration). Thus, a consequence is that Nordic children have had access to books reflecting the same images and textual content as Adichie experienced when she was a child -children with white skin, blond hair and blue eyes who are playing in the snow-, even though the Nordic countries Sweden and Norway have always had a diversity of ethnicities, languages, and cultures in their countries (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008).

An increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in the Nordic countries (Frønes et al., 2020; Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson, 2010) is now pointing towards an education that will prepare all children to become members of multilingual societies. In the National curricula for the Swedish preschool (Swedish National Agency for Education [SNAE], 2018) it is stated that preschools should enable children to develop their own linguistic and cultural identity as well as developing an openness towards the languages and cultures of others. In this sense, the National curricula strives to prepare children for participation in an international society, which entails interactions within a multilingual society. The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011, p. 33) states how “Preschool activities should be based on equality, respect for human diversity and other cultures”. Moreover, policy makers are taking actions to revitalise national minority languages in Sweden and Norway. In Sweden, national minorities now enjoy strengthened rights in policies and laws concerning the promotion of their languages and cultures in preschools (SNAE, 2018). In Norway, propositions have been submitted to the Storting (the Norwegian parliament), for amendments to the Sami Act, to visualise and promote the Sami languages (Norwegian Government [NG], 2023) and an ordinance on contributions to the Kven language and on Kven and Norwegian-Finnish culture is established, to strengthen the language of children and teenagers (Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet, 2019). In Iceland, the Act

on Equal Treatment Irrespective of Race and Ethnic Origin (Icelandic Statute Book, No 85/2018) has been revised by mentioning more discrimination factors. These incentive actions, outlined above, point towards societies that are striving for to achieve increased equality. In this process, education for children and the books that are being offered to them are of importance.

## Previous research

When addressing children's ways of developing a sense of belonging to a society this is often associated with children's possibilities to identifying with and emotionally attaching themselves to the community (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Furthermore, children's sense of belonging to a multilingual society is linked to their possibilities of meeting and developing several languages, which are of importance to the individual child's development of a linguistic and cultural identity. Thus, children's development of languages is conditioned by the use of languages in the child's immediate surroundings and in their everyday life. Theories on how children acquire languages suggest that children need linguistic and comprehensible input (Krashen, 1989), linguistic output, such as speaking and writing (Swain, 1993) and in meaningful interactions (Fillmore, 1979). The books examined in this study were collected in preschools and not in the children's homes. This places special demands on the content that the books convey, since preschools are required to promote children's development and learning.

To promote children's own sense of belonging to a multilingual society and meet the tasks given in Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish preschools' governing documents concerning developing children's languages, understanding and respect for human equality and diversity, picturebooks can function as an educational tool. Children's picturebooks have repeatedly been presented as ideal pedagogical tools for the development of skills regarding language and literacy (Fleta, 2019; Grøver et al., 2020; Walsh, 2003) and to foster multilingual and intercultural awareness (Galda, 1998; Garces-Bacsal, 2022; Ibrahim, 2020; Martens et al. 2015) in children. This will enable children to experience and develop an understanding of other languages, cultural ways, traditions, and ways of living. Moreover, picturebooks have been shown to develop deeper understandings of cultural identity and cultural awareness in children, and that this awareness can lead children to act on understandings of change (Martens et al. 2015). Thus, through multilingual literature, the monolingual norm (the monolingual status quo) can be challenged (Ibrahim, 2020). However, for this to be possible, children need to experience themselves and their own lives, and while experiencing the lives of others through books (Bishop, 1990). For this reason, the books used in preschools should in some way address a diversity of languages and cultures.

As outlined above, in this article, picturebooks are understood as books with both words as well as illustrations on each page (Hallberg, 1982). Mourão (2015) argues that children spontaneously respond to picturebooks, especially pictures, and that these responses to picturebooks, can induce meaning making and language learning. Pictures in children's literature have also been shown to contain underlying messages about social structures (Salmson & Ivarsson, 2015). This makes visible the impact books can have on children based on what these messages contain and can also subconsciously give children ideas about who are the obvious citizens in a society and who are not (Salmson & Ivarsson, 2015). Images also affect children's development of identity and can thus have an impact on the identities that children will be able to develop (Sparrman, 2002). This highlights the importance of investigating both text and illustrations in children's picturebooks to see what they contain regarding different social structures, such as language and culture.

Picturebooks have also been shown to serve as a medium for developing desirable properties, such as good behaviour and social values in children (e.g., Akyol, 2021; Esquivel, 2019) and for transferring ideological and political agendas, such as making a difference in the world regarding pollution or global warming (e.g., Hermansson & Nordenstam, 2021; Martens et al. 2015). Furthermore, children's picturebooks have been shown to serve as possible ways for children to explore complicated concepts, such as adoption (Mattix & Crawford, 2011), or to show children's perceptions of, for example, shadows (Backman, 2020). Backman illustrated how children's experiences of the same phenomenon, the shadow, were varied, and depended on which book they read. This is interesting in relation to the current study. Children's perceptions of a book's content (in text and illustrations) of language and culture is likely to be varied, due to the individual child's previous experiences. Children's perception of language and culture are also likely to differ, depending on which picturebooks are available to them.

Examples of research in the field of postcolonial studies illustrate "how language and power are (still) embedded in a Eurocentric organisation of the world and on decentering the groups and languages that are in positions of power" (Bouchard, 2022, p. 1), and from a critical perspective how languages are represented. Some of these studies show how children's lives in colonised and settler societies are still shaped by previous colonialist interventions (Bouchard, 2022), how multilingualism is not valued and how language ideologies affect these societies inciting them to be monolingual (e.g., São Tomé Island in Bouchard, 2019). Other cultural and linguistic ideologies expressed in research are the privileged position of the English language in texts, superficial references to cultural artifacts, traditional female centred roles and that books are situated within a utopian society by authors (Braden & Rodriguez, 2016, p. 56). Thus, books available in preschools should be based on what Braden and Rodriguez describe as a critical approach to the content of text and illustrations and be supported by the curriculum.



Books are not neutral. Thus, they have the power to impact on how children think about themselves and others. Based on the limited literary review, we understand that picturebooks available for all children in preschools convey norms regarding languages and culture that can, based on their content, enable or obstruct children's own sense of belonging to a multilingual society. In relation to the increased diversity of languages and culture in the Nordic context, it is of critical importance to examine the cultural and linguistic norms conveyed through picturebooks in preschools.

## **Theoretical considerations**

### **Central concepts**

To investigate and contribute with knowledge about linguistic and cultural norms reflected in picturebooks, an understanding of how languages and culture interact and are entwined with the social context are of importance. In line with researchers who have tied language and culture together (Heath, 1983; Hymes, 1972; Saville-Troike, 1982), we adopt an understanding that children's development of language/-s, and sense of self and linguistic identity, and positive feelings of belonging in society, their peer groups, and ECE settings contribute to children's developing sense of agency and to their development, socialisation, and wellbeing. Viewing language and culture as entwined, also entails an understanding that, within communities, there are norms for communication (cf. Foucault, 2007): How to speak, who can speak and who cannot, and what to speak about, in the specific setting. In this light, current study takes as its point of departure Foucault's understanding of power and his conception of the norm as "a model of perfection that operates as a guide to action in any particular sphere of human activity, and normalisation correlatively as the movement by which people are brought under these norms" (Kelly, 2019, p. 2). Norms are never just reflections of power relations; it is through norms that power is produced and negotiated. Also, Foucault brings into focus the unequal access to the norm (somewhat used interchangeably to the 'rule' in *Discipline and Punish*; an optimal model that is constructed) in society and how education has developed as an institution to reproduce but also to transform norms and power relations (Foucault, 2007, p. 58).

In the current study children's picturebooks are understood as cultural artefacts and as visual aspects of the cultural meaning-bearing systems that people use in their everyday lives (Lahdenperä, 2000). Moreover, cultural processes entail that traditions, norms, and ways of life are passed on and transferred through books from one generation to the next (Hecht et al., 2006) and from this perspective, it is important to analyse the norms that are constructed as legitimate, especially in relation to multilingualism which

characterises the twenty-first century. To investigate norms regarding languages and culture that are reflected in picturebooks we will make use of postcolonial theory, which will be outlined below.

### **Postcolonial theory**

In this article, we use postcolonial theory and the concepts of belonging and the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006) to investigate norms regarding languages and culture that are reflected in picturebooks. Postcolonial theory has its roots in the criticism of the west world's physical occupation, cultural, linguistic, and normative dominations, and material exploitation of countries in different continents outside Europe (cf. Fanon, 1963,1967; Loomba, 2005; Said, 1979; Spivak, 1988; Young, 2020). Postcolonial theory's critics focus on both what happened in the past and the lingering impact of colonialism on the former colonies and in the diaspora (Loomba, 2005). The critics include power relations at present, historical, economic, political, social, cultural, and linguistic as well as other visible and invisible normative and symbolic dominations (Young, 2020). The criticism of language domination, while expressed from a historical perspective, also includes the cultural and normative dominations that are closely related to language, in which the east/orient is described as the "Other" (Said, 1979). The criticism could be considered even contemporary as the former colonies are still using the languages of their former colonisers as lingua franca and are under cultural and normative domination of them (Young, 2020) and the exclusion of the colonised subjects from any development taking place in the west (Spivak, 1988). By using postcolonial theory, we can understand power relations, within a contemporary Nordic context, that are expressed through the books that sustain empirical power, where culture and language, just as gender, ethnicity, skin colour, and religion, are seen as social categories that influence each other (Spivak, 1988; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Children's picturebooks have been analysed through a postcolonial lens, using concepts of belonging and the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006), to make visible norms regarding languages and cultures and power relations in between them. Belonging is understood as emotional attachment, the feeling of belonging, "about feeling 'at home'" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 197). The politics of belonging is described in the following way:

The politics of belonging comprises specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways to particular collectivities that are, at the same time, themselves being constructed by these projects in very particular ways (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 197).

Thus, children's processes of constructing belonging in preschool, are in this article understood as a political project (Yuval-Davis, 2006), because the individual child's process is shaped by children's emotional attachments and social and structural conditions within the preschool (cf. Johansson, 2022; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

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One point of departure is children's own feelings of belonging and their possibilities to identify themselves and other people in picturebooks they read in preschool. According to international statements, such as Agenda 2030 (United Nations, 2015) and the Salamanca declaration (Unesco, 1994), inclusive education is outlined as an education for all children and is seen to meet the goals for equality and equity. However, inclusive education, in these policy documents and in literature, is still often defined as being about physical placement, physical inclusion. With the politics of belonging, we can find a perspective that considers the perspective of the individual child and his/her own sense of belonging, experienced through picturebooks.

The framework comprises three facets for analysing people's belonging. The first facet is an individual's social locations and positioning that is constructed in many varying ways, such as woman, gay, bilingual, Swede, Greek, old, young etcetera. The second facet is about an individual's identification and emotional attachments to different communities and groups. The third facet is ethical and political value systems with which people assess their own and others belonging. To place this study, we can imagine how children who come to preschool already identify with different social locations, and positioning themselves for example as a Norwegian, boy, and bilingual. In preschool, the child uses these locations and emotionally attaches him-/herself to the child group and preschool community. The third facet is about how children's different, individual, social locations are valued in preschool, and in this study, in children's picturebooks. In picturebooks, the child will meet attitudes and political ideologies that he/she will use to assess his/her own and other children's belonging to the preschool community and the multilingual society. In the analysis, social locations are used to identify aspects of language and culture conveyed through picturebooks, to investigate how multilingualism and multiculturalism are visualised and thereby make visible norms regarding language and culture.

## **Method and material**

This research project was carried out within a larger project initiated by the research group LADINECE – Language and Diversity in Nordic Early Childhood Education, at the University of Borås, Sweden. The aim of the larger project was to explore the picturebooks read in Swedish, Norwegian, and Icelandic preschools. During a semester, student teachers from one university in Iceland, two in Norway and one in Sweden were asked to collect picturebook titles during their field training by asking the preschool teachers to name a book available in the preschool that they like to read to the children. At the same time, the student teachers also asked the children to name or show a book they wanted to be read to them. The responses were written down in a form and then submitted

anonymously by each student teacher onto a digital platform. The task was voluntary for the students. From a total of 189 informants, the collected material consisted of 93 teachers' book choices and 96 children's book choices. Divided by country, there are answers from 33 children and 33 teachers from Iceland, 23 children and 23 teachers from Norway and 40 children and 37 teachers from Sweden. In total, 152 unique titles were gathered, including 35 from Norway, 54 from Iceland, and 63 from Sweden. To enable analyses of the content of the books, 28 books out of the 152 book titles were bought, mainly in Swedish and Norwegian, and a few in Icelandic. The purchase of the books was based on funds available and on uniqueness as they were not so easily available in Sweden.

For this specific study, the 28 books were complemented by Icelandic books. Books in Icelandic were borrowed from libraries in Sweden or ordered from Icelandic web pages. The sampling then was based on availability. For this study, 40 books were initially used: 15 from Iceland, 12 from Norway and 13 from Sweden. 35 of the 40 books selected were books with both words and illustrations on each page (Hallberg, 1982); three books were characterised as chapter books as they had no, or very few pictures, and one had no text in it. One book was found to be the wrong book, it had the same title but the wrong author. These five books were excluded from further analysis. The 35 books are examples of picturebooks offered to children in preschools in the three Nordic countries. Furthermore, they can provide a picture of the norms that are conveyed through texts and illustrations in specific picturebooks. Since this study investigates norms regarding language and culture reflected in picturebooks, no emphasis is placed, on whether the choice have been the children's or the teachers.

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches have been used for the analysis of the data. This is because, when we are searching for linguistic and cultural norms in children's picture books, this is regarding both questions that relate to quantity: "To what extent is multilingualism and multiculturalism made visible?", and to quality: "How, in what way, and when, in what context, is multilingualism and multiculturalism made visible?"

## **Analysis**

A primary analytical level in the study is identification of social locations (Yuval-Davis, 2006) related to language and cultures to understand the perspective of the individual child and his/her own sense of belonging, experienced through picturebooks. Thus, we carried out a frequency analysis (cf. Stemler, 2000) in which the number of instances of the following aspects related to multilingualism were identified: aspects of different languages, accents, code-switching, and references to different languages in texts and pictures. We also searched for social locations related to multiculturalism identifying

varied visual aspects of culture, visual embodied signifiers, such as colour of skin and hair, clothing, mode of behaviour, and artefacts, and traditions, in text and pictures. The same categories were used for the alphabetic text and illustrations.

Eleven books (see Table 1), out of 35 books, contained social locations (Yuval-Davis, 2006) related to multilingualism and multiculturalism; six books (*The Tale of the Mighty Bandorulli* by Eastmond, 2021; *On a Mission - Hunted by Mother Police!* by Kilstam, 2022; *The Billy Goats Gruff start school* by Rørvik & Moursund, 2017; *The Billy Goats Gruff at the bathhouse* by Rørvik & Moursund, 2016; *No, said the little monster* by Helmsdal & Güettler, 2004; *A sour lemon* by Virke, 2018) visualised norms of multilingualism whereas seven books (*The Tale of the Mighty Bandorulli* by Eastmond, 2021; *On a Mission - Hunted by Mother Police!* by Kilstam, 2022; *Rumpemelk from Africa* by Loe, 2012; *Palle alone in the world* by Sigsgaard, 1998; *Little people, Big dreams – Michelle Obama* by Sánchez Vegara, 2021; *Viktoria and the green explosion* by Eldjárn, 2021; *Come on, Sigurfjórð!* by Eldjárn, 2017) visualised norms of multiculturalism. Consequently, 24 books that did not include several languages and/or multiculturalism were excluded from further analysis.

Based on the results of the frequency analysis, we selected text and picture excerpts from the picturebooks to carry out a qualitative analysis. In the qualitative analysis, we first searched for patterns within the occurrences of social locations related to multilingualism and multiculturalism. The search for patterns was carried out through a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000; Selvi, 2019) to provide a deeper understanding of how norms regarding languages and cultures are expressed in the picturebooks which in turn showed social positions and ethical and political value systems (cf. Yuval-Davis, 2006) that children use to assess their own and their peers sense of belonging to a group. In the initial phase, the researchers identified meaning units and coded them to determine how language and various visual signs linked to multilingualism and multiculturalism were conceptualised. The units of meaning relating to how and in what context multilingualism is expressed and the languages used were identified and coded to explore the understanding of multilingualism. Also, the meaning units, how and in what context multiculturalism is expressed, were identified, and coded to explore the understanding of multiculturalism. Thereupon, these units of meaning and codes were condensed to a slightly higher level of abstraction, as norms regarding languages and cultures, in the form of an inductive category development, through a process of collaborative discussions, involving the four participating researchers (cf. Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Smagorinsky, 2008). In sum, the interpretations may be described as the result of an ongoing, flexible process in which rethinking, refining, expanding, or rejecting codes and analytic areas have had a part to play (Smagorinsky, 2008).

TABLE 1 Books containing multilingualism and multiculturalism

BOOK TITLE	COUNTRY	MULTILINGUALISM		MULTICULTURALISM	
		Text	Picture	Text	Picture
<i>The Tale of the Mighty Bandorulli</i> [Sagan om den väldige herr Bandorulli]	Sweden	X		X	X
<i>On a Mission - Hunted by Mother Police!</i> [På uppdrag: Jagad av mamma polis!]	Sweden		X		X
<i>The Billy Goats Gruff start school</i> [Bukkene Bruse begynner på skolen]	Norway		X		
<i>The Billy Goats Gruff at the bathhouse</i> [Bukkene Bruse på badeland]	Norway	X	X		
<i>No, said the little monster</i> [Nei! sagði litla skrímslið]	Iceland		X		
<i>A sour lemon</i> [En sur citron]	Sweden	X			
<i>Rumpemealk from Africa</i> [Rumpemelk fra Afrika]	Norway				X
<i>Palle alone in the world</i> [Palle alene i verden]	Iceland				X
<i>Little people, Big dreams – Michelle Obama</i> [Litla fólkið og stóru draumarnir – Michelle Obama]	Iceland			X	X
<i>Viktoria and the green explosion</i> [Sigurfljóð í grænum hveli]	Iceland				X
<i>Come on, Sigurfljóð!</i> [Áfram Sigurfljóð]	Iceland				X

### Ethical and methodological considerations

Although data from picturebooks contained no sensitive information, using postcolonial theory implies an understanding of how power is expressed and sustained through social categories, such as gender, ethnicity, and skin colour (cf. Spivak, 1988; Yuval-Davis, 2006), conveyed, for example, through picturebooks. In the current study we have taken a critical view regarding our position as authors. Representing a combination of men, women, White, Black, African, and European academic researchers in higher education, and some of us with early-years teacher backgrounds, we are aware of our varied history. We have

ethically reflected on our own biases and positionings in society, for example, in what ways our positions affect our reading and the analytical work on children's picturebooks.

Also, we are aware that the analysed books can be culturally read in various ways and that the preschools' range of books varies, and this relates to the limitations of the study - the empirical basis. The analysis of 35 books can only give us a picture of what these particular books express in terms of linguistic and cultural norms and therefore the results cannot claim any kind of generalisation.

## **Findings – Norms regarding languages and cultures**

### **The span of multilingualism and multiculturalism**

The quantitative systematic categorization revealed that social locations related to both multilingualism and multiculturalism occur to a minor degree in the picturebooks analysed. Out of the 35 analysed picturebooks, eleven contained multilingualism and/or multiculturalism. Four books included several languages and five other books contained multiculturalism, while two books contained both multilingualism and multiculturalism. This result points towards a prevailing monolingual and monocultural norm. Thus, there is a lack of diversity of languages and cultures in the selected picturebooks, both in texts and illustrations.

Moreover, the results show that social locations related to both multilingualism and multiculturalism are more evident in the picturebook illustrations than in the texts. In the texts, multilingualism is present in three books, and multiculturalism in two. In the illustrations, multilingualism is present in four books and multiculturalism is present in seven books. Thus, the identified norm is that linguistic and cultural diversity is more often expressed through pictures than in text in the picturebooks.

### ***The visualisation of multilingualism***

In the three books, *The Tale of the Mighty Bandorulli*, *The Billy Goats Gruff at the bathhouse* and *A sour lemon*, multilingualism is visible in the text by the use of a single word or a short phrase in a language different from the book's original tongue. In the Norwegian book *The Billy Goats Gruff at the bathhouse*, the reader can follow the goats on their way to the meadow to fatten themselves. On the way, they see a sign that says "WATERPARK [BADELAND] 200 meters" and the smallest goat says "Please" in English, as an expression of "Please, I want to":

- Can't we go there this year? asks the middle goat. [- Kan vi ikke heller dra dit i år? Spurte den mellomste bukken.]<sup>1</sup>
- It's so boring up in the meadow. Just going there ble-e-e-eating all summer. [Det er så kjedelig oppe på setra. Bare gå der og bre-e-e-ke hele sommeren.]
- **Please?** says the smallest goat. Then we don't have to cross the bridge either. The troll is so scary. [- **Please?** Sa den minste. - Da trenger vi ikke gå over brua heller. Det er så skummelt med det trollet.]

This illustrates how the Billy Goats are talking in Norwegian on their way to the meadow. When they see the sign WATERPARK, both the smallest and the middle goat want to go there. The smallest goat switches to English when he says: Please? This transition from one language to another can be understood as code-switching, which in turn can be understood as a linguistic and cognitive tool for a person's will to, for example, position themselves, be included in a specific context or to exert influence (cf. Cromdal, 2001). Switching between different languages, such as Norwegian and English in a picturebook, can make visible and legitimize the fact that several languages may be used.

Another example of multilingualism is from the book *A sour lemon* which contains a dialogue between different types of fruit. While a dialogue is going on in the formal Swedish language, it also includes colloquial language that is known to the Swedish majority such as, "Esh!", "Yeah!", "Boom! Boom! Boom!", "Wow/Yey" ["Äsch!", "Joho!", "Bom! Bom! Bom!", "Tjohej"]. Moreover, when the fruits are communicating, they use the languages of music, dance and song. In the text, we can read the attempts of all the fruits to comfort Lemon who has a sour face, and when Apple wonders if "*A song might help?*" the following dialogue takes place:

- Uh, what! [- Äh, vadå!]<sup>2</sup>
- Apples can't sing, can they? [- Äpplen kan väl inte sjunga?]
- Yes I can! If I may borrow a mouth and a tongue. [- Joho! Om jag får låna en mun och en tunga.]
- **"O sole mio!"** [-"O sole mio!"]

In the example, multilingualism becomes visible when the Apple starts singing in Neapolitan<sup>3</sup>. The use of multiple languages, such as in the example above, make visible political value systems (Yuval-Davis, 2006) of seeing multilingualism as a resource that is being constructed in preschools. Then, children use this value system of seeing

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<sup>1</sup> Norwegian in brackets

<sup>2</sup> Swedish in brackets

<sup>3</sup> O Sole Mio is actually *not* standard Italian. "O Sole Mio" features the original Neapolitan language. Neapolitan is the language of the city of Naples and all the surrounding area in the Region of Campania. <https://language101.com/italian/about-italy/o-sole-mio/>



multilingualism as a resource to assess their own and others' belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006). In this case, children that use several languages daily, can sense that they belong – the whole child belongs with all its linguistic resources. However, the use of solely a single word in an additional language, or a short phrase, visualizes the discrepancy between languages used; it also places languages other than the majority language in a marginalised position; they are the exception, they are positioned as the “Other” (cf. Said, 1979).

### ***Multilingualism carried by artefacts***

In three of the books, multilingualism can be seen in the illustrations: *On a mission - hunted by mother police! The Billy Goats Gruff start school*, and *No, said little monster*. However, in *The Billy Goats Gruff at the bathhouse*, multilingualism is found in both text and illustration. When multilingualism is present in the illustrations, this is visible on different artefacts, such as books on a shelf, paintings on a wall, and signboards or packaging in supermarkets. In the book, *The Billy Goats Gruff start school*, the reader gets to follow the three goats to school. In the illustrations, English words are evident on two occasions. First, this is when the English word “Please” is visible on a wall, when the goats are walking up a staircase. Second, when “Game over” is visible on a computer screen.

In the same way as when multilingualism is visible in texts, the presence of multilingualism in illustrations make political value systems visible (cf. Yuval-Davis, 2006), signalling a norm of using several languages for communication. However, when multilingualism is only seen on artefacts in pictures, it also makes visible norms and power relations between different languages, different social locations (cf. Yuval-Davis, 2006). It visualizes a power relation between the written text in the majority language and the language displayed in illustrations, where the majority language in text comes across as having more power than other languages. It also positions languages other than the majority as the exception and not the norm (cf. Said, 1979). At the same time, it enhances power relations between different minority languages displayed on books, paintings and packaging. This will be outlined further in the next section.

### ***Power relations between languages***

An additional finding regarding multilingualism relates to the social location of the English language as it appears more frequently than any other language besides the country's majority languages. In five of the picturebooks English words are included in majority language sentences or illustrations. Also, additional languages such as French, Spanish, and Italian, are as social locations visual in two books. These languages are also relatively dominant languages in Europe/the world. Through the lens of the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006), we can expose norms regarding languages and cultures

and the power relations between them; here for example through the presence of English. It is reasonable to believe that the use of English is a mirror of the international and multilingual society; English is an international language that is widely used in many countries all over the globe and often a lingua franca when people communicate and move between countries. At the same time, the use of English, and other dominant languages, spreads light on the absence of subordinate languages, within the three Nordic countries. Linguistic norms that are being visualised are reflections of power relations, and even more so, it is through norms that power is produced and negotiated (cf. Kelly, 2019). This result indicates that linguistic power relations about which language to use i.e. English, are reproduced and maintained through children's picturebooks, while other languages are positioned as the "Other" (cf. Said, 1979).

## The visualisation of multiculturalism

### *Cultural diversity in texts*

As expressed above, the presence of cultural diversity in the analysed picturebooks is scarce in both texts and illustrations. However, in two books, multiculturalism is visible in the text: *Little people, Big dreams – Michelle Obama* and *The Tale of the Mighty Bandorulli*. *The Tale of the Mighty Bandorulli* is a book about a man who cannot get enough of the food he is eating. There are chefs from different countries working to help him get the food that makes him satisfied. In the text, there are words used that express the origin of the chefs working in the kitchen and the food they are preparing "Molly Marshmallow" (English), "Beata Brulé" (French), and "Felix Fondant" (French). There is also food from different cultures mentioned in the text, such as Palak Paneer and Pizza from Italy:

- I am chopping the mushrooms, said Molly **Marshmallow**. [Jag hackar svampen, sa Molly Marshmallow.]<sup>4</sup>
- Excellent! said Cekar, bring the **Portobello**. [Utmärkt! sa Cekar, ta med Portobello.] He finally turned to Beata **Brylé**: [Han vände sig sist till Beata Brylé:]
- Do you know how to cook a **palak paneer**? [Vet du hur man lagar en palak paneer?]
- The **Indian** dish? Of course! said Beata. [Den indiska rätten? Såklart! sa Beata.]

The expressions in the text show the hard work of different workers in the kitchen, their attempts to serve the Mighty Bandorulli who is never satisfied. This illustrates how the conversation is carried out in the Swedish language, and how cultural diversity is expressed by words that have specific cultural signifiers, understood as social locations (cf. Yuval-Davis, 2006), such as marshmallow – English, Portobello – Italian, Brulé – French, and Palak paneer – Indian. On the one hand, by using names that originate from different languages and countries, power relations can be neutralised, and children can

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<sup>4</sup> Swedish in brackets

be given the opportunity to relate to the content of the book in different ways. On the one hand, children can recognize themselves, feel that they belong, and at the same time be exposed to the unknown and thus developing openness and awareness for others (cf. Bishop, 1990).

Still another visualisation of cultural diversity is illustrated in the book *Little people, Big dreams – Michelle Obama*. The book describes Michelle Obama and her life, growing up as the daughter of working-class parents on the south side of Chicago, and her way through university and higher education. The text emphasizes how Michelle struggled as a minority – a woman of colour, and how she organized herself to support other minorities during her time at university. The visualisations of diversity in the two cases above show a norm characterized by openness and tolerance towards different cultures. It can enable all children to assess themselves and other children to be included in the preschool community.

### ***Cultural diversity in illustrations***

The representation of multiculturalism in the analysed picturebooks is scarce and the result suggests that cultural diversity is not the norm in our sample. Yet, in the illustrations in seven out of 35 books, the diversity of embodied signifiers, understood as social locations (Yuval-Davis, 2006), such as hair and skin colour, and headdresses, such as hats, berets, caps, and headscarves, are visually explicit. In relation to multilingualism, which is identified as being present in texts and illustrations by a single word or a short phrase, multiculturalism is shown as more prominent, in several illustrations, pages, in the books. For example, in the book *On a Mission - Hunted by Mother Police!*, the illustrations exemplify people with different skin colours, a child with a hearing aid, old people and young people, and women with shawls and women without. Most individuals in the picturebook are black skinned suggesting that it could be another country than Sweden. However, the statue of the famous Swedish writer Karin Boye, and the police car with the Swedish name “Polis”, the yellow and blue colour and the police uniform indicate it is a Swedish setting that is depicted in the illustration. Some illustrations in the book also show pictures of symbols with specific meaning-bearing ideas, such as paintings on a wall with a clenched black fist and the rainbow symbol. In a food store, there are different products shown, some, such as falafel, originate from other countries than Sweden. Another example is a sign in the store with the word “Fair”, as in “Fair trade”. In the story, the policewoman was sneaking up on a child and another woman and then discovering them. At the end of the book, they ride home in the police car and when safely at home, they are sitting at the table eating pizza together. From the rainbow sign, a symbol representing diversity, love, and friendship, on a picture on a wall, and the way

they are surrounding the child in the illustrations, suggests that the women are in a relationship together and that they are both mothers of the girl.

Thus, in the book *On a Mission - Hunted by Mother Police!* diversity is the norm which can enable children to both experience different languages and different cultures through the book. With a postcolonial lens (Yuval-Davis, 2006) it becomes visible how children, through the illustrations, can assess that themselves and all other children are to be included in the preschool community. That is, on equal terms. However, in the book *Come on, Sigurfljóð!* we follow Sigurfljóð who flies out into the world and ends wars. Sigurfljóð also meets children who are both hungry and sad. She helps them and soon they begin to feel better. In the illustrations, Sigurfljóð is a white, blond, and blue-eyed girl, who ends wars and saves children with brown skin, hair and eyes, and gives them shelter and food. In this book, the children with brown skin are positioned as the Other (cf. Said, 1979) that is, as marginalised, and needing help from the white child – the favoured ones.

## Discussion

Our analysis of children's picturebooks reveals several linguistic and cultural norms. Firstly, a prevailing *monolingual norm* is evident. The books analysed are written in the three countries' majority languages: Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish. When multilingualism is visible, in six of the books, a single word or a short phrase is written in a language other than the majority one, and is visible on signs, pictures, in the illustrations or in the texts. Such single words or short phrases can easily be overlooked, and this positions multilingualism as the exception and not the norm. Secondly, a strong *monocultural norm* is visible. Seven books revealed multicultural diversity. In these books, a norm of openness and acceptance for diversity could be sensed. However, some books that include people of diversity revealed a norm that showed a marginalised position of black people and a favoured position of white people. Thirdly, when multilingualism is visible, the most frequent additional language besides the majority language is English; hence, the *English language holds an advanced position*, which places other minority languages in a marginalised position. In the following section, we will discuss these results in relation to the children's own sense of belonging to a multilingual society and equal education in a democratic society. The discussion also includes a methodological discussion and possible implications for early childhood education.

### Children's sense of belonging to a multilingual society

A reasonable argument is, when texts and pictures visualise a diversity of people, regarding colour of skin and hair, age, and gender etcetera, the more likely it is for all children to identify with and sense that they belong to the preschool community as well

as to the multilingual society at large. This is also supported by research (e.g., Galda, 1998; Garces-Bacsal, 2022; Ibrahim, 2020). When we try to approach children's own sense of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006) to a multilingual society, it becomes visible that the books analysed, will to a small extent promote children's experienced sense of belonging. We can understand how a child who uses two or more languages at home is less likely to identify with the characters in the analysed books. Moreover, it becomes visible how children who speak the country's majority language are most likely to see themselves in these books. Furthermore, children who speak the English language are more likely to see themselves than children who speak other minority languages. The same conclusion applies to multiculturalism and black- and brown-skinned children's scarce possibilities of identifying with the characters in the analysed books.

The analysed books offer a Eurocentric expression thereby placing certain groups and languages, such as majority languages and the English language, in positions of power and other minority languages in marginalised positions (cf. Bouchard, 2022). Children's picturebooks can be used to develop multilingual and intercultural awareness in children (Galda, 1998; Garces-Bacsal, 2022; Ibrahim, 2020; Martens et al. 2015), thus, when the norms conveyed through the analysed picturebooks express Eurocentric languages and cultures as being favoured, there is a risk that these books will contribute to maintenance of Eurocentric power and of a majority children's developing of an ethnocentric awareness instead of intercultural awareness (cf. Bishop, 1990; Bouchard, 2022).

### **Equal and democratic education in multilingual society**

Today, to a varied degree, the Nordic countries have a multicultural and multilingual population. While having picturebooks that mirror the contemporary society could help children from the minorities, at the same time, it could also be useful for children with a majority background. It gives them a picture of the society they are living in and that there are children who look different, who speak other languages, who have other religious and cultural backgrounds. Providing children with books with linguistic and cultural variety will help them to understand diversity (e.g., Galda, 1998; Ibrahim, 2020; Martens et al. 2015;) and the need for "unity in diversity" or the integration project these countries may strive towards - An education that caters for children's development of self and at the same time, for a development of openness and compassion for others.

In line with Braden and Rodrigues (2016), this study shows that the English language is seen as the most prominent besides the majority languages. What does this show? Is this an expression of a multilingual society or is it an expression of the Nordic context, in which children are educated in English at an early age and are exposed to English through media? What are the possibilities for other languages to be used in a similar way? Why

are writers closer to using English than other languages? These questions are hard to answer but the privileged position of the English language needs to be discussed, also in relation to early childhood education and the democratic mission of education systems. Children's possibilities of developing languages and knowledge have been shown to vary depending on which language is the target language, where, for example, children who will develop the majority language or English as L1 have better opportunities than children developing minority languages (Skaremyr, 2019). This challenges the preschool's mission to offer forms of education on an equal standing (Skaremyr, 2019). Through norms of language use, power is produced, reflected, and negotiated (Kelly, 2019). The results of this study suggest how multilingualism is not valued and there is a risk that the favoured position of majority languages and English affect the linguistic norm maintaining monolingualism, and, in extension, this affects children's development of several languages.

Given previous research that has found picturebooks important when developing languages (cf. Fleta, 2019; Mourão, 2015; Walsh, 2003) and the monolingual norm highlighted in this study, it is important to critically discuss in relation to children's belonging in a multilingual society. For children to sense that they are part of a multilingual society—in the twenty-first century—all their languages need to be acknowledged and developed.

## **Implications**

One of several possible implications is the risk that the majority language and culture children will, through the analysed picturebooks, sense that they belong to the monolingual, preschool community and, at the same time, consider minority languages and/or multilingual children as 'other': outside the community. Moreover, there is a risk that a minority and/or multilingual children will sense that they do not belong and are excluded from the preschool's monolingual community. At the same time, minority and/or multilingual children may consider majority and/or monolingual children, who speak the official language of the country, as included and part of the preschool community.

The educational significance of the research is that representation of a diversity of languages and cultures in children's picturebooks in preschool is vital for all children's future language and literacy development. For children to develop languages, their own linguistic and cultural identity/-ies and prepare all children for a /the multilingual society, multilingual and multicultural diversity needs to be present in picturebooks used in early childhood education. The picturebook can thus function as a tool for children to develop multicultural literacy (Bishop, 1990) and a sense of belonging to a multilingual society.



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