This is the published version of a paper published in *Intercultural Education*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):


https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2021.1878112

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

http://urn.kb.se(resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:sh:diva-44685)
‘Sometimes we have to clash’: how preschool teachers in Sweden engage with dilemmas arising from cultural diversity and value differences

Susanna Anderstaf, Robert Lecusay & Monica Nilsson

To cite this article: Susanna Anderstaf, Robert Lecusay & Monica Nilsson (2021): ‘Sometimes we have to clash’: how preschool teachers in Sweden engage with dilemmas arising from cultural diversity and value differences, Intercultural Education, DOI: 10.1080/14675986.2021.1878112

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2021.1878112

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 30 Mar 2021.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 380

View related articles

View Crossmark data
'Sometimes we have to clash’: how preschool teachers in Sweden engage with dilemmas arising from cultural diversity and value differences

Susanna Anderstaf, Robert Lecusay, and Monica Nilsson

School of Education and Communication, Högskola i Jönköping, Jönköping, Sweden; School of Culture and Education, Södertörns Högskola, Huddinge, Sweden

ABSTRACT
The research presented in this paper explores how preschool teachers in Sweden negotiate tensions stemming from perceived cultural dilemmas among themselves, the children they work with, and the children’s parents or guardians. The aim in characterising this process of negotiation is to expand knowledge about how to adapt pedagogically to the increasing diversity of the preschool sector in Sweden. The study is based on focus group interviews with preschool teachers who work in schools where nearly 70% of the children are newly arrived immigrants or have parents or guardians who were born in a country other than Sweden. The interview data were subjected to a thematic analysis. Three themes emerged: Circumventing conflicts by keeping preschool peaceful; Culture as a barrier and opportunity for dealing with dilemmas; and engaging with conflicts as a means of developing the preschool profession. The themes are discussed in relation to Gert Biesta’s concepts of the rational community and the community of those who have nothing in common.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

It’s afternoon, a father is going to pick up his son at preschool. The father tells me “yesterday when I came to preschool, my son had a dress on. I don’t want him to wear that.” I did not know how to respond. The following day I told my colleagues about the incident. One of them shrugs her shoulders and says: “yes, maybe it’s the way it is in their culture” and walks away. I ask, “but, what should we do?

This anecdote concerns a preschool teacher, working in a culturally diverse area of a mid-sized city in Sweden. It illustrates the complexities of being a preschool teacher in contemporary Sweden, particularly the task of promoting cultural diversity in preschool settings (Björk-Willén, Gruber, and Puskás 2013; Lunneblad 2006, 2017; Stier et al. 2012).
The Swedish preschool curriculum promotes universalist values that emphasise respect and recognition of the diversity of opinions underpinned by the diversity of cultures in Swedish society. The relationship between teachers and parents is highlighted in the curriculum as critical for mediating cultural inclusion. The curriculum states that: ‘All parents should be able to send their children to the preschool, fully confident that their children will not be prejudiced in favour of any particular view,’ and that staff should, ‘co-operate with the home concerning the child’s upbringing and discuss with parents the rules and attitudes in the preschool . . .’ (Ministry of Education and Sciences in Sweden 2016, 13).

In light of the introductory anecdote, a question emerges: How do teachers engage with values that contradict values related to cultural diversity? The Swedish Education Act (SFS 2010:800) emphasises the importance of having a common framework of norms and values. The act states that an important task of education is to impart respect for human rights and the egalitarian and democratic values on which Swedish society is based. Among these values, one can identify certain tensions related to cultural values.

Of particular interest in this paper are tensions produced by curricular expectations that preschools transmit a common set of norms and values – a ‘cultural heritage’ (Ministry of Education and Sciences in Sweden 2016, 5) – while at the same time asking that preschools respect and promote cultural diversity. Both these missions entail corresponding requirements for how preschool teachers meet their responsibilities to develop norms for equality towards children and adults. Furthermore, the Swedish preschool curriculum asks preschool staff to be sensitive to the varieties of values and beliefs of immigrant children and their families. The curriculum also emphasises the importance of children learning about their home culture while also recognising and respecting other cultures. At the same time, however, teachers are asked to cultivate a shared cultural heritage, one that prioritises democratic values and an appreciation of cultural diversity (Swedish National Agency for Education 2013).

The tensions inherent in cultivating a shared culture and honouring cultural diversity in preschool have been examined recently (Björk-Willén, Gruber, and Puskás 2013; Fredriksson and Lindgren-Eneflo 2019; Goldstein-Kyaga, Borgström, and Hübinette 2012; Lunneblad 2009, 2013, 2017; Stier et al. 2012). These studies describe how many preschool teachers in Sweden struggle to apply approaches to intercultural education described in relevant steering documents. These struggles were documented by the Swedish School Inspectorate in a recent report which notes that it is common for cultural questions to be framed through the lens of teachers’ values and norms (Swedish Schools Inspectorate 2012, 7). The report also describes teachers as feeling uncertain about how to work with issues of cultural diversity. For example, preschool teachers sometimes have to consider how best to create a welcoming environment for all children while at the same time considering
the aversions that some parents/guardians have to their children participating in the celebration of birthdays, dancing, or playing with dolls. Issues like these are often ‘resolved’ by the preschool teachers in ways that are tentative and end up deferring the problems (Lunneblad and Johansson 2012; Lunneblad 2017; Puskáš 2013). However, preschool teachers are expected to adhere to the guidelines and recommendations laid out by the preschool curriculum, which include the expectation that they counter gender stereotypes. They are also expected to respect the views of parents and guardians. As documented in the literature on Swedish preschool education, these circumstances can lead to the emergence of interpersonal tensions between teachers and parents that in turn have consequences for how teachers communicate with parents and guardians (Lunneblad and Johansson 2012).

In considering the consequences of these potential tensions for addressing cultural issues in Swedish preschool provision, one must also take into account the rapidly diversifying demographics of Swedish society. About half a million children (ages 1 to 5) attend Sweden’s nearly 10,000 preschools. Of these, nearly 20% speak more than one language, and 25% have links to another country1 (Swedish National Agency for Education 2017b). From 2013 to 2016, Sweden was, among European countries, second only to Germany in accepting the majority of refugees fleeing conflicts. For example, in 2015 at the height of this migration, 70,384 children under the age of 18 migrated to Sweden (Swedish Bureau of Statistics 2016).

Given this growing diversification and given the findings in the literature documenting culturally related tensions that preschool teachers in Sweden are confronting, the present study explores the ways in which preschool teachers in Sweden are negotiating these tensions. This study differs from prior work in that it takes these documented tensions as a starting point for eliciting preschool teachers’ observations and opinions about the work they do to make sense of and cope with cultural issues in preschool. The present study examines the perspectives of preschool teachers in Sweden who were tasked with considering how to address questions of intercultural education in preschool. Specifically, the participating teachers belonged to a network of preschools that had been cited by the Swedish School Inspectorate as requiring improvement in their approach to questions of culture and intercultural education. The study participants were part of a regular, voluntary working group in the network that was tasked with routinely reflecting on how the network staff addressed curricular goals related to norms and values. The principal who supervised the network of preschools assigned this working group the task of considering ways to improve how they worked with questions of culture and intercultural education.

The aim of this study is to contribute with knowledge about how preschool teachers in Sweden negotiate tensions that may arise from perceived conflicts
rooted in cultural value differences among parents and preschool staff. The pursuit of this aim is guided by the following research questions:

- How do pre-school teachers negotiate dilemmas that arise from differences based on cultural diversity?
- How can negotiation about these dilemmas contribute to teachers’ professional development in relation to intercultural pedagogy?

**Negotiating cultural values in preschool: the rational community and the other community**

Biesta (2006) conceives of community as constituted by a group of, ‘individuals having something in common – a common language, a common conceptual framework- and building something in common: a nation, a polis, an institution,’ (55). Drawing on the work of Alfonso Lingis, Biesta distinguishes between the **Rational Community** and the **Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common** (hereafter referred to as The Other Community).

The **rational community** is constituted by a common language that is identifiable, for example, through institutional documents such as those relevant to the organisation of educational settings (e.g. curricula, school laws, school inspection reports, etc.). It is through this common language, one that is understood as accessible to all persons, that the **rational community** gives persons a voice through which to speak. That is, a normative language that is legitimate, interchangeable, and replicable.

The **other community** is constituted in relation to the **rational community**. It comes into being when the dominance of the language of the **rational community** is disrupted, undermined, robbed of its force: ‘This other community is not simply absorbed into the rational community; it recurs, it troubles the rational community, as its double or its shadow,’ (Lingis 1994, 10).

Biesta (2006) proposes that the domain of education be reconsidered in relation to the **rational community**. The knowledge and discourses that educational institutions provide students can be understood as constituting the normative language of the **rational community**, which provide persons with ‘rational’ voices that are legitimised insofar as students are representative members of the **rational community**. However, Biesta argues, this standardised language is narrowly defined and can exclude those who are not ‘fluent’ in the language of the **rational community**. Thus, while the language of the **rational community** may provide its ‘speakers’ with a representative voice, it can also deprive them of a unique voice (Biesta 2006).

Biesta (2004) invokes the concepts of the rational and other communities as a way to rethink how we conceive of education. Education, he argues, should not be understood only in terms of cultural reproduction (**rational community**), but also as a non-reproductive process that values arranges for encounters with
the unknown, the stranger, and the other. Education should create conditions for the other community to come into existence by creating opportunities for persons to be challenged to confront otherness. For example, it should provoke people to consider these challenges through authentic questions such as ‘What do you think?’ and ‘How will you respond?’ It is in confronting this challenge of meeting the other that one’s unique voice can appear. Biesta (2004, 2006) claims that human beings have the capacity to be receptive to the other. What is important, he argues, is for persons to ‘let go’ of the rational voice and answer the stranger. It is this answer that constitutes the other community.

In his work, Biesta applies the concepts of the rational and other community to consider questions related to cultural value differences that emerge between student and teacher. In what follows, these concepts are used to analyse how preschool teachers negotiate tensions arising from cultural conflicts that they perceive to have with parents and guardians.

**Method**

The present qualitative study is based on data gathered through a series of focus group interviews with preschool teachers all of whom were employed at preschools belonging to a single municipal district in Sweden. In focus groups discussion among participants is structured around a common theme or dilemma and the discussion itself constitutes the empirical data (Dahlin-Ivanoff and Holmgren 2017; Kitzinger 1995; Wibeck [2000] 2010).

**Participants**

Eleven university-trained preschool teachers (age range: 26–57 years) participated in this study. All were female (there were no male teachers employed at the school). The work experience of this cohort ranged from 2 to 30 years. At the time the study was conducted, all the teachers were working at six different preschools located in one municipal district. The selection of participants was conducted in consultation with the principal of the preschools in the municipal district. This was done to ensure minimal disruption to the daily work of each preschool. In Sweden, some principals for municipal preschools administer multiple preschools within a particular area of a municipality, as was the case for the principal that we collaborated with in this study.

As noted, the participating teachers were part of a working group that was assigned the task of discussing and assessing how teachers in the preschools of this municipal district were engaging with issues of cultural diversity, equal rights, and value-based education.
**Procedure**

Selection and implementation of focus group interviews was made in order to enable access to the participants’ different, pronounced and implicit beliefs about values, cultural diversity, and pedagogical dilemmas. Focus groups were conducted following the procedure described by Wibeck [2000] 2010. First, an introductory meeting with the participants was held to help the interviewer (first author) and participants become oriented to the research study goals and the focus group discussion topics. A second meeting was held in which the actual focus group discussion took place. A final meeting was held in which the interviewer reviewed the interview transcripts with the participants (Jaffe-Mero 2011).

For the focus group discussions (meeting 2) the 11 participants were divided in two groups of 5 and 6 participants. This was done to ensure that all participants would have the opportunity to contribute to the discussion. These focus group discussions involved the use of stimulus material\(^3\) to elicit deeper and more structured conversation (Nejadmehr 2018; Wibeck [2000] 2010). This material was used solely for the latter purpose, and not as an interventional tool to assess changes in the teachers’ approaches to culturally related practices in the preschool. The first author conducted the sessions consecutively, with each session lasting approximately one hour.

In the third session, all the participants were given the opportunity to read over the transcript from their previous group session. Discussions elicited in this session were documented as part of the study data corpus. Jaffe-Mero (2011, 244–245) notes the value of having participants read and reflect on interview transcripts, for reasons of ethics, accuracy and the possibility that such reflections can deepen interpretation of the data. At the same time, she urges that such an approach be taken with caution and consideration.

**Ethical considerations**

The study followed the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (2017).

**Analysis**

An abductive analysis of the focus group transcripts was conducted. This involved repeated readings of the transcripts in order to analyse the empirical material to identify themes and topics relevant for addressing the research aims and questions (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2008). The readings of the transcripts were conducted with a general focus on grasping how the participants negotiated tensions that may arise from perceived
conflicts rooted in cultural value differences among parents, guardians and preschool staff. These readings were also guided in part by Biesta’s conceptual frame of rational and other communities. During the first round of readings, two sets of themes emerged: teachers’ avoidance of dilemmas rooted in cultural value differences; and teacher’s reflections on these dilemmas. After this round of analyses, parallels were identified between the emergent themes, and Biesta’s interpretation of the two concepts of the rational community and the other community. Specifically, teachers were found to initially be speaking in the voice of the rational community but gradually becoming sensitive to and resistant to this rational voice. They then became more open to listening to each other and came to appreciate the value of recognising the voices of the others, which emerged as the third theme.

Themes and discussion

The analyses yielded three themes: Circumventing conflicts by keeping preschool peaceful; Culture as a barrier and opportunity for dealing with dilemmas; Engaging with conflicts as a means of developing the preschool profession.

Circumventing conflicts by keeping preschool peaceful

The first theme concerned assumptions and expectations by the teachers that preschool teachers should avoid tensions that can lead to conflicts. Specifically, the teachers described the importance of being calm, careful and polite in their profession, with particular focus on ensuring that the preschool itself be seen and experienced as a peaceful place. This is in line with observations made in prior research in the Swedish preschool context (Lunneblad 2013; Stier et al. 2012). The teachers saw the avoidance of interpersonal conflicts with parents as key to maintaining this calmness and politeness. They described tactics such as the following:

-We had an incident with a dress in my preschool, a boy who liked to wear a dress [pointing at the text of the stimulus material] … but we made sure that the boy didn’t have a dress on when the father came to pick him up … then he had the dress on during the days if he wanted to.4

The teachers also invoked institutional means, such as the curriculum or meetings with the principal, in order to justify their positions. For example, when presented with the hypothetical problem in the stimulus material of the father being upset about his son wearing a dress, teachers proposed asking the principal to speak with the father about the issue. Teachers also suggested
speaking with the father calmly while invoking the curriculum as a kind of tool to support them and at the same time deflect attention from them:

- I think it’s easier to face a conflict if I have knowledge … if I have the curriculum behind me … then the focus is not on me … the focus is on the text.

Both of these examples illustrate ways in which the teachers spoke through the voice of the rational community, a representative voice that exists in official documents, with rules and principles, or higher authorities. It is not a unique voice, it is a voice that is learned. However, the teachers’ discussion also leads to doubts:

- But do I have the right to say to someone that his or her values are wrong? I think this is hard to deal with. I really don’t know what to say …

One can argue that the other community comes into existence in instances like these when the teachers began to show signs of doubt, of questioning whether or not they are entitled to make these kinds of value judgements. That is, these doubts represent a kind of interruption of the rational community, and a unique human voice comes into being, or as Biesta puts it, ‘it is only in the end through our engagement with the other community, that is, in the end through the way we expose ourselves to what is strange and other, that we come into the world as unique and singular beings – and not as instances of some more general “form” of what it is to be human,’ (Biesta 2006, 53).

**Culture as a barrier and opportunity for dealing with dilemmas**

The second theme concerns how teachers resolved dilemmas by invoking culture to explain the actions of the parents. In some instances in which the teachers invoked culture in this way, the teachers were also moved to reflect on their presumptions about the parents. In particular, they came to see that culture was not just a means of explaining the parents’ actions, it could also be used to explain their own actions. That is, they came to understand that even they, as ‘Swedes’ collectively, differed from one another culturally. Various examples illustrate this way of invoking culture.

In this first example, a teacher specifically invoked culture by way of the parent’s country of origin:

- I think a father could say something like that [for a boy not wear a dress]..because that’s how it is in his country where he comes from…
- Yes … you respond based on what you have in your ‘backpack’ [metaphor for one’s personal history]
- Then you must tell him… in our country (Sweden) we don’t do that.

The teacher invoked specific values, ethnically and nationally infused, in order to make sense of the parents’ actions. Seen through the lens of the rational vs.
other community, this excerpt illustrates how the privilege of speaking about ‘we and them’ is one accorded to one who speaks using the rational voice.

In the second example, a change can be seen in the teachers’ awareness of their invocation of culture. Talk about ‘we and them’ led the teachers to reflect on their tendency to rely on cultural and national categories to make sense of the parents’ actions. In the following excerpt, the teachers speculate how invoking culture affects teacher–parent interactions with the hypothetical parent who is upset about the boy wearing a dress (as described in the introductory anecdote):

- Maybe the argument stops .. when we say it’s in their culture ..
- Will it be ok then? .. when we say it’s in their culture?
- But how can we know that something is in their culture?
- Maybe it’s just something one uses as an excuse.

The next example illustrates a change in the teachers’ thinking about their invocation of culture as a means of reflecting on their interactions with parents. Here the teachers recognised that culture was just a ‘thing’ that the parents had, but also something that the teachers, ‘the Swedes”, had:

- But when you said ‘culture’… I think traditions… but then after we discussed it for some time… hold on! … what cultural background have I from my family?
- But if you think like that, then culture is so big. It actually includes values, political stance… then it is really important to be professional..

Here an emerging awareness on the part of the teachers becomes evident: A movement from seeing culture as something static, as a noun, to seeing it as a verb, something that is done (Runfors 2003, 2013). In other words, from something having culture to being cultural (Fine 1979)

In the fourth example, this movement from culture to cultural is thrown into more powerful relief as the teachers saw the activities that took place in the preschool as a form of cultural production. The teachers, in seeing culture as something that was both theirs and the parents, came to recognise it as something that was localised: That culture ‘need not be part of a demographically distinct subgroup, but rather that it is a particularistic development of any group in the society,’ that is, an idioculture (Fine 1979, 734). In particular, the teachers talked about preschool as a site where the intersection of multiple cultures itself produced a culture specific to the preschool:

- But I think … or hope … if we have many cultures … it can be a mixed culture, which is quite typical of preschool … so to draw on one cultural heritage is to draw on everyone’s cultures … because that’s how I hope the future will look like.

- Perhaps culture could be something we create in a smaller context, and ask, what is culture for me? We may create culture all the time at preschool … And ask instead what can be shared between us?
This excerpt illustrates how preschools came to be understood by the teachers as sites that bring together multiple cultures. As such sites, from the teachers’ perspectives, preschools have the potential to produce opportunities for ‘breaking in’ – that is for becoming spaces that afford an emancipatory ‘third way’ for the other community to come into existence (Biesta 2006, 70). Where earlier the teachers hid from conflict and dilemmas in their initial thinking, they were now moving towards a recognition and acceptance that they should engage with the parents, even if they saw it as an uncomfortable risk. A movement is thus evident on the part of the teachers from understanding the avoidance of conflict and dilemmas as the appropriate thing to do, to seeing engagement with these dilemmas as the responsible thing to do. Why? Because to engage with dilemmas and confront conflicts was seen by the teachers as offering opportunities for co-constructing a local culture in the preschool with the parents and the children.

It is not possible to make specific claims about how this change in perspective took place over the course of the unstructured interview (this was not the aim of this study). Here one can point back to aspects of the research design that potentially relate to these changes. First, while not specifically intended to produce changes in perspective, the anecdote that was used as stimulus material – an anecdote that highlighted cultural tensions – was carefully selected to induce participants to consider different perspectives in relation to cultural values and preschool practice (Nejadmehr 2018). Second, it should be reiterated that the teachers were selected to participate in the study because they had been examining questions of culture and preschool practice in the course of their daily work (recall that these teachers were part of a group convened by the principal for just this purpose). One could thus argue that this particular group of teachers was more open, relatively speaking, to adopting and adapting new ways of engaging in preschool practice based on cultural questions.

**Engaging with conflicts as a means of developing the preschool profession**

The third theme, which addresses the second research question, concerns the paradoxical way that the teachers came to see conflict as an important means of developing the preschool profession. Three examples illustrate this transformation. The first concerns uncertainty experienced by the teachers in facing dilemmas. The second concerns how teachers understood their responsibilities as preschool teachers. The third concerns pre-school teachers’ feelings of uncertainty when negotiating tensions that arise from cultural value conflicts. The analysis showed that the teachers saw the avoidance of conflicts in the preschool as an important norm in preschool teaching as a profession, a norm that they viewed as associated with a general Swedish value of avoiding conflict by seeking consensus:
- In Sweden ... a good conversation is when everyone agrees  
  - I think Swedes are afraid of conflicts...  
  - Yes, instead we get silence...

A point of discussion that reoccurred often among the preschool teachers concerned their fear of doing wrong. For example, one teacher attributed this fear to her experience having been a student in the compulsory school system, where education is focused on the correct way to solve problems. At other points in the discussion, the teachers described instances in which they became aware of contradictions between their tendency to avoid conflict and other values that they held dear. For example, when discussing the stimulus material concerning the conflict with the father who did not want his son to wear a dress, the teachers saw how their conflict avoidance undermined their ability to address gender equality:

- Why don’t we stand up for this boy? But for god’s sake he might have a dress on if he wants... What are we afraid of?  
- I think we will choose to protect ourselves...  
- Yes, for the sake of calm and peacefulness

Moments like this led the teachers to recognise that cooperation and trust between teachers and parents needed to be based on the willingness of both parties to take responsibility for learning to listen to one another, to both respect and challenge one another, to be vulnerable with one another, and to learn to live with each other (Bauman 2016):

- I think about what you said about conflicts, and that we should be equal... but if we will not get into conflicts with anyone... how do you achieve equality if you do not dare to say what you think.  
- It will not be equal if we don’t clash sometimes.  
- Maybe we should welcome clashes  
- Maybe we can learn from them

This excerpt demonstrates recognition by the teachers of the need for both them and the parents to be vulnerable in one another’s presence. It is this recognition that constitutes an interruption of the rational community by the other community.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this study has been to contribute knowledge about how preschool teachers in Sweden negotiate tensions that may arise from perceived conflicts rooted in cultural value differences. Three themes were identified: (1) Circumvent conflicts: a wish for preschool as a peaceful place, (2) Culture as a barrier and opportunity for dealing with dilemmas (3) Engaging with conflicts as a means of developing the preschool profession. The themes threw into relief how the teachers came to recognise the complicated and paradoxical ways in
which they conceptualised culture and deployed it to make sense of their relationship with parents, and in turn, how they understood themselves as professionals. Specifically, they focused on the problem of conflict avoidance – understood from the teachers’ perspectives as a Swedish norm – and how this norm governed the ways in which they interacted with the parents and with one another. Over the course of the interview, as the teachers discussed this problem, they came to critically reflect on their own norms, behaviours, and prejudices, reflections that are critical for teachers to develop their skills and competencies in relation to intercultural education (Banks 2006). Most significantly, this process of collective self-reflection led teachers to the insight that conflict can at times be a necessary means for generating enough vulnerability between parents and teachers to recognise one another’s uniqueness, or in Biesta’s (2006) terms, the emergence of the other community through the interruption of the rational community.

Prior research shows that preschool teachers in Sweden have for some time confronted the task of working with cultural diversity with uncertainty and confusion (Lunneblad 2009, 2017; Runfors 2013; Stier et al. 2012). As the present study shows, part of this uncertainty and confusion can be rooted in educators’ desires to avoid conflict. For example, Lunneblad (2006) showed that preschool staff avoided talking about cultural differences in order to maintain the sense of equal treatment of others. At the same time, as illustrated in the present study, it is possible for teachers to gain the courage to engage with cultural conflicts when they conceive of culture in new and varied ways.

This said, it should be recognised that being open to the possibility of cultural conflicts, as means of developing teachers’ intercultural competencies, holds the risk of undermining an ethos of respect and humanity in the school. The findings in the present study do not immediately reveal insights into how teachers should act in moments of cultural conflict. However, these findings suggest approaches for making sense of and preparing for these moments. It is not just a matter of providing teachers with information about the potentials for greater understanding that can flow from careful engagement with cultural clashes. It is also important, for example, that preschools arrange for routine moments for staff to collectively reflect on culturally related issues. Group discussions of this kind can provide an important way for teachers to build a culture of ‘dialogical engagement’ (Farquhar and Tesar 2016, 261) that afford opportunities for them to recognise their own biases, and appreciate the cultural perspectives that families bring to their schools.

The understanding developed by the teachers in this study of culture as fluid and situated is critical for rethinking intercultural education in preschool. As Portera (2008) and Lahdenperä (2000) argue, intercultural education should be grounded in an ethos of open dialogue, not necessarily driven by the need to reach a final resolution. Seen from this perspective, the uncertainty of teachers, like the ones in this study, can be understood as a kind of precondition for
dialogue that offers the possibility for seeing intercultural education as an ongoing process. This uncertainty forms part of the ‘beautiful risk’ (Biesta 2013) that education entails when teachers make the rational voice vulnerable to that of the other.

Notes

1. There are four groups, foreign born, domestic born with two born parents, domestic born with a domestic and a foreign born, home born with two home-born parents.
2. In 2017 males made up 4% of staff employed in Swedish preschools (Swedish National Agency for Education 2017a).
3. The text of the stimulus material reads as follows; ‘It’s afternoon, a dad is going to pick up his son at preschool. The father tells me that “yesterday when I came to preschool, my son had a dress on. I don’t want him to wear that”. I did not know how to answer. The following day I told my colleagues about the incident with the father. One of them shrugs the shoulders and says: “yes, maybe it´s the way it is in their culture” and walks away. “But, what should we do?” I ask’.
4. Transcript excerpts have been translated from the Swedish to English and, for the sake of readability, common but distracting components of speech such as ‘ah,’ ‘um,’ and false starts were deleted. The core meaning in what the participants said is retained.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Susanna Anderstaf is a former preschool teacher and doctoral student at Högskola i Jönköping. She studies how intercultural pedagogies can contribute to the development of democratic values, openness and respect for differences in preschool education.

Dr. Robert Lecusay is Associate Professor in the School of Culture and Education at Södertörns Högskola and affiliate researcher in Högskola i Jönköping’s Preschool Education Research group. His research examines the relationship between formal and informal learning in early childhood education and after school settings.

Dr. Monica Nilsson is a former preschool teacher and Associate Professor at Södertörns Högskola, School of Culture and Education. Her research focuses on adult-child joint play and exploratory learning processes in preschool and pedagogical change and development.

References


