“It’s not like someone hands you a brochure”
– A qualitative study of migrant mothers’ perceptions of their learning at Swedish open preschools

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ABSTRACT

Times of transition can provoke informal learning that is both potentially transformative and often unacknowledged. New mothers living in a new country are in effect undergoing a double transition, and thus are in a position to possibly undertake a great deal of informal learning. This research focuses on migrant mothers living in Sweden and aims to understand their perceptions of their own learning at open preschools (öppna förskolor), or drop-in centers for young children and their caretakers. Through a small-scale qualitative study using semi-structured interviews, eight migrant mothers living in Solna municipality shared their memories and opinions about open preschools. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis and examined in light of Wenger’s (1998) social theory of learning and community of practice framework. The mothers overwhelmingly identified open preschools as places of support, with some also perceiving them as places of learning. Nonetheless, the findings show a great deal of informal learning related to mothering and mothering in a new country. There was a complicated relationship between supports and barriers to learning, reflecting the nuanced nature of communities of practice. In short, open preschools gave the participants a place to engage on their own terms with the intellectual work involved with forming their identities as migrant mothers. They also, however, encouraged the development of mothering identities that are in line with dominant Swedish discourses about gender and childrearing. This study proposes nevertheless that open preschools play a vital role in supporting parental learning and easing the transition to life in Sweden for migrant mothers.

Keywords: Community of practice, Wenger, open preschools, migrant mothers, parental learning
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1. INTRODUCTION

For many adults, particularly those who have finished with or are not taking part in the formal education system, the majority of their learning takes place informally (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2016). It is done individually or collectively, without teachers or a set curriculum (Livingstone, 2006). Rather, it often happens through experiences (OECD, 2016). The OECD (2016) goes so far as to say that “it is very likely that this learning, taking place at home, at the workplace or elsewhere, is a lot more important, relevant and significant than the kind of learning that occurs in formal settings” (para. 1). Yet paradoxically, this type of learning is often undervalued by institutions and workplaces (OECD, 2016) and at times unrecognized as learning by the adults themselves (Livingstone, 2006). Furthermore, Livingstone (2006) suggests that times of transition—whether a birth or death, marriage or divorce, new job or new home—can by catalysts for important, even transformative learning.

Becoming a parent is a significant time of transition for most, and parents in Sweden benefit from the country’s strong social support system (Lundqvist, 2015). One lesser known benefit (and possible site of informal learning) is Swedish open preschools (öppna förskolor), centers for small children and their caregivers. Unlike the common understanding of “preschools” as places where children are dropped off, a defining characteristic of open preschools is that caregivers must attend with their children. Their aim in fact is to provide support for the caregivers as well as for children (Lundqvist, 2015). They are typically overseen by one or a few educators who at some locations offer formal learning opportunities for adults but mainly oversee unstructured activities and offer informal guidance. The “open” in “open preschool” is not a misnomer, however, as they are free, open to all, and no advanced registration is required (Lindskov, 2010).

As immigration to Sweden has been steadily rising in recent years (Swedish Institute, 2017b), it is increasingly likely that that non-Swedish as well as Swedish parents are accessing open preschools. Migrant parents are not only grappling with the transition to parenthood, they also are navigating life in a new country. In effect they are facing a double transition. While this

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1 The term “immigrant” often refers to people who intend to stay in their adopted country permanently, whereas “migrant” is a broader term, encompassing “people on the move, or people with temporary status, or no status at all, in the country where they live” (Brah, 1996, as cited in Yax-Fraser, 2011a). I use the terms “migrant” and “migrant mothers” because it is more inclusive.)
circumstance offers the potential for great learning, the ways in which meeting places such as open preschools foster this informal learning is less acknowledged and understood.

1.1 Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this project is to explore migrant mothers’ learning at open preschools. Specifically, the study focuses on a small group of eight migrant women living in Solna, a suburb of Stockholm—all of whom became mothers and moved to Sweden within the previous eight years—and their perceptions of their own learning at open preschools. My research questions are:

• How do migrant mothers perceive their own learning at open preschools and what did they learn?
• Who do they perceive taught them and how did they learn?
• What possibilities or barriers do they see for adult learning at open preschools?

1.2 Contribution of Knowledge

This project is at the juncture of a number of under-developed research areas: the impact of migration on motherhood (Hewett, 2009), parental learning at playgroups and centers for children and parents (Hoshi-Watanabe, Musatti, Rayna, & Vandenbroeck, 2015), and Swedish open preschools (Frank, 2007). Separately the research about each area is sparse, and taken together it is practically nonexistent. Yet despite previously being overlooked in research, examining the learning by migrant women at open preschools has a number of possible implications. Policymakers in Sweden, both in education and immigration, may be interested to learn what migrant mothers are learning at open preschool. As immigration and integration are topics of increasing interest around the world, policymakers in other countries may be interested as well. Lastly but certainly not least, this research may also be beneficial for migrant women themselves, illuminating learning that may not have been fully known even to themselves.

1.3 Structure

This thesis is composed of eight chapters. I start by giving background information about both immigration and parental support in Sweden in order to place the project in context. Next, the literature review explores research about informal learning, motherhood in migration, centers for parents and young children, and Swedish open preschools. I then briefly introduce situated and social theories of learning, and specifically Etienne Wenger’s (1998) concept of Communities of Practice (CoPs), which are the theoretical framework of this thesis. I describe the qualitative methods used, including semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. I then
turn to the findings and explore four key themes in the data. In the discussion chapter, I interpret the findings using the social theory of learning framework and previous research, with an emphasis on the role of identity. Finally, I conclude by suggesting areas for further study.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Immigration to Sweden

Migration to Sweden began in earnest in the 1940s following the end of World War II. Most immigrants were from Scandinavia and the rest of Europe (Swedish Institute, 2017b). In the 1970s, there was a short decline in immigration as both the Swedish Migration Board imposed stricter regulations on immigration and many immigrants returned to their home countries (Swedish Institute, 2017b). Starting in the 1980s, Sweden began to accept a large number of asylum seekers, particularly from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Eritrea, Somalia and some South American countries (Swedish Institute, 2017b). In the 2000s immigration rose yet again, as Sweden joined the Schengen region and its borders opened to other EU countries. In 2013-14, Sweden accepted a record high number of immigrants, and in particular granted residency permits to all Syrians seeking asylum. As a result, almost 1/4 of immigrants in 2015 were from Syria (Swedish Institute, 2017b). Sweden began tightening its migration laws in 2015, and as a result the number of asylum seekers dropped. However, the population still grew by more than 140,000 people in 2016 as a result of immigration (Swedish Institute, 2017b).

In 2016, 47% of immigrants came to Sweden seeking asylum, followed by 26% for family reasons, 16% for work, and 7% for studies (Swedish Institute, 2017b). The large number of immigrants has not been without controversy. In 2016, Sweden’s Minister for Employment and coordinator of the government’s work with refugees, Ylva Johansson, said, “So that unprecedented (population) increase has resulted in a lack of practical resources, from housing to schools to healthcare. And that’s why we can’t continue having such a large number of people coming here year after year—it’s stretching our system” (“Minister Ylva Johansson,” 2016, PARA. 27). Yet a Eurobarometer survey from 2016 finds that 64% of Swedes are still in favor of immigration of people from outside of the EU (Swedish Institute, 2017b).

There are some programs to help immigrants adjust to life in Sweden, often organized at the municipality level. Solna municipality—the site of this research project—offers the following programs for free for recently arrived immigrants: Swedish language classes (Swedish for Immigrants), a civics course, language cafes, and a youth cafe (Solna Stad, 2017). For some programs, a government-issued Swedish personal number is required in order to register.
2.2 Parenting Support in Sweden

Historically, open preschools are part of a broad network of parental support, which has been an integral part of the Swedish welfare state (Lundqvist, 2015). Sweden follows the social democratic welfare model, so the social support system is robust and comprehensive, equality is emphasized and the state is strong. In fact, “…the state is expected to support and intervene into family life” (Lindskov, 2010, p. 47). For parents, this translates into one of the world’s most generous parental leave policies (480 days of paid for both parents combined), a monthly child allowance (barnbidrag) paid by the government until the child reaches age 16, free primary, secondary and university education, government-subsidized affordable preschool (a maximum cost of SEK 1,287/USD 142/EUR 134 per month as of April 2017), and government-provided essentially free healthcare for children up to age 20 (Swedish Institute, 2017a).

In addition to these material benefits, there also is a strong network of parenting support (föräldrastöd), officially defined as “an activity which gives parents knowledge about children’s health, emotional, cognitive and social development and/or strengthening parents’ social network”’ (Swedish Government, 2010, p. 2, as cited in Lundqvist, 2015, p. 658). To understand current parenting support services, it is helpful to give a brief overview of its history in Sweden. Key parenting support features such as antenatal clinics and child health centers were established in the 1930s, however “In these early days, interventions were deployed as a means to control (poor) parents but also as a tool to change society via the family” (Gleichmann, 2004, p. 662, as cited in Lundqvist, 2015, p. 662). In the 1960s, the “gender-equal family” became a point of aspiration, and policy became concerned with helping mothers to stay in the work force. The children’s movement gained momentum in the 1970s, proposing that children should be respected and listened to. Along these lines, Sweden banned corporal punishment of children in 1979, and was the first country in the world to do so (Lagerberg, 2016). The economic crisis in the 1990s led to a reexamination of parenting support, culminating in a 1997 commission report. Among other recommendations, the report “Recommended that parenting support be delivered via childcare centers, preschools and schools” (SOU, 1997, 19030 as cited in Lundqvist, 2015, p. 663), suggested an increased focus on migrant parents among others, and also advocated for a view of parents as empowered rather than deficient and needing expert guidance. This resulted in a policy that was a bit contradictory: parenting support should be designed by and meet the needs of the parents, yet it would be provided by the state. As a result of the contradictions, the state offered two different models, with some support being provided by state intervention and other support “highlighting the role of the individual and autonomous parent and her/his ability to gain and process knowledge of her/his own” (Gleichmann, 2004; Littmarhck, 2012 as cited in
Lundqvist, 2015, p. 664). In the 2000s, the focus shifted again. The center-right government which was in power from 2006 to 2014 kept the idea of the autonomous parent and added the idea of freedom of choice for families. In practice, this led to an increase in civil society organizations as providers of parenting support and a cut in government spending on welfare programs (Lundqvist, 2015).

2.3 Swedish Open Preschools

Open preschools are gathering places available to all young children who do not attend regular preschool and their caregivers. As with other parenting support, they are free, open to all and attendance is voluntary (Lundqvist, 2015). Their primary purpose is “to offer children good pedagogical activities in close cooperation with adults/parents” (Skolverket, 2015, as cited in Lundqvist, 2015, p. 660). They typically are open on a drop-in basis following a set schedule each week, for example from 9-noon and then 13-15, with most sessions open to all children under five and some reserved for younger babies. They often offer structured parenting programs and counseling as well (Lundqvist, 2015). Each open preschool is led by one or a few preschool teachers.

Open preschools started over 40 years ago (Frank, 2007). In 2015, there were approximately 475 open preschools in Sweden run by municipalities, in addition to others organized by churches and other civil society organizations (Skolverket, 2015). This represents a significant decrease from earlier, however, as in 1997 there were about 1000 open preschools and in 1990 there were about 1600 (Gunnarsson, Korpi, & Nordenstam, 1999). While open preschools are found all over the country, they tend to be clustered in and around the larger cities, with rural areas underrepresented. Almost one third of the municipalities do not have any open preschools (Skolverket, 2015). Recently, some open preschools have been integrated into family centers, which provide antenatal care, child health care and social services all under the same roof. In 2013, there were 250 family centers in Sweden, most of which had opened within the previous 10 years (Lundqvist, 2015).

As open preschools are operated by municipalities and civil society organizations and as they operate on a drop-in basis, the country does not collect data on the number or demographics of the children and adults who attend. However, more traditional “drop off” preschools in Sweden do not accept children under one year old and this, coupled with the policies to encourage mothers to re-enter the workforce (“gender-equal family”), means that the majority of children are at home with a parent during their first year or two. Thus, the potential audience for open preschools is large.
2.4 Solna Municipality: The Context of the Study

All of the participants in the study live and attend open preschool in the municipality of Solna, which is part of the larger Stockholm metro area. In 2016, there were 78,129 inhabitants in Solna. Of those, 13.7% were foreign citizens (Statistics Sweden, n.d.). There are five open preschools in Solna. Three are run by the Solna government (Youth and Education Administration/Office (barn- och utbildningsförvaltningen)) and Social Welfare Office (socialförvaltningen) and two are run by the Church of Sweden (Svenska kyrkan) (Solna Stad, 2013).

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

I start by giving a brief overview of formal, non-formal and informal learning to clarify what I consider to be learning and how I am classifying it for the purpose of this study. Next I turn to motherhood in migration, where I have identified three key themes in the research: migration as an opportunity and burden, changing perceptions of “good” motherhood, and the diversity of experiences among migrant mothers. I then introduce research on playgroups and centers for parents and small children, specifically examining the differing rationales between those sponsoring and those attending the groups/centers. Finally, I discuss the limited research in English on Swedish open preschools.

3.1 Adult Learning: Formal, Non-formal and Informal

One way to categorize learning is as formal, non-formal, and informal. According to Livingstone (2006), there are two primary variables behind these categorizations: the level of directive control and the knowledge tradition. On the one side, formal education is teacher-driven and assumes a rational cognitive knowledge form “that emphasizes recordable theories and articulated descriptions as pre-established, cumulative bases for increased understanding…” (Livingstone, 2006, p. 203). Formal education has a teacher and set curriculum, and importantly, the teacher or other higher authority has the power to give institutional credit and widely-recognized legitimacy to the learning (Livingstone, 2006). Traditional classroom learning falls into this category. Non-formal learning, on the other hand, is learner-driven while still adhering to a rational, cognitive knowledge form. Learners voluntarily take courses with a teacher, for example continuing education. Livingstone defines informal learning as “any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge, or skill that occurs without the presence of externally imposed curricular criteria” (p. 206), and further divides it into two subcategories. Informal education is again teacher-driven, but adheres to a more situational knowledge tradition that
emphasizes experience and practical knowledge. Importantly, situational knowledge can be tacit. An example is a mentor giving a new hire on-the-job training that does not follow a pre-defined curriculum. **Collective informal learning** encompasses all learning that is learner-driven and situational, and it alternatively can be thought of as “learning by experience” (OECD, 2016, para. 3). It should be noted, however, that these categories are neither distinct nor clearly defined. Livingstone (2006) gives the example of a mature student who voluntarily takes a university course or two for personal reasons (non-formal learning), yet the other students in the same courses would be taking it for credit for a degree (formal learning).

Malcolm, Hodkinson and Colley (2003) criticize this approach, finding that there is significant disagreement in the literature about the definitions and boundaries of formal, non-formal and informal learning. They propose instead that all learning contains elements of formality and informality to a greater or lesser degree, and these elements interact differently depending on the setting. Furthermore, they suggest that it is imperative to examine the formality and informality of learning in light of its broader context, as this allows for an understanding of the role of empowerment and oppression.

### 3.2 Motherhood in Migration as Learning Opportunity and Burden

Yax-Fraser (2011a, 2011b) has conducted key research on motherhood in migration—a concept she terms “cross-cultural mothering”—finding that there is an often invisible intellectual component. Examining the experiences and perceptions of migrant mothers living in Halifax, Canada, she finds that the mothers were constantly engaged in navigating and negotiating the sometimes contradictory parenting discourses from their birth and adopted countries. The mothers assess their options, choosing aspects of parenting philosophy and tools from each discourse to create their own new parenting frameworks. Echoing Livingstone’s (2006) caveat that informal learning is often unrecognized, Yax-Fraser (2011a, 2011b) contends that cross-cultural mothering intellectual work is often invisible both initially to the participants themselves and also in immigration policy.

Their experiences also revealed how gender-based, sexist, racist, and classist social institutions and immigration policies are shaped to respond to the expectations of what is a socially appropriate role for men and women, regardless of whether they are primary or secondary “bread winners” or full-time mothers and cultural laborers. The actual needs of this study’s participants, as women and as mothers were, therefore, made invisible in immigration processes and policies” (Yax-Fraser, 2011a, p. 318).
Yax-Fraser (2011a) situates the mothers in a borderland, suggesting “that migrant mothers, in their cross-cultural mothering work, live and negotiate in spaces where borders are transgressed; at junctures where cultures pollinate and are revitalized, die and are reborn” (p. 319).

By contrast, Robertson (2015) finds that migrant mothers are negatively affected by hardships related to migration and resettlement, and the hardships are in turn exacerbated by structural constraints such as socio-economic status, ethnicity and gender. Some hardships related to migration include a lack of proficiency in the new country’s language, lack of work experience in the new country, credentials not being recognized, and immigration and legal status (Yax-Fraser, 2011a). Liamputtong (2006) suggests that the hardships confronting migrant mothers, coupled with difficulties related to mothering (and particularly the discord between idealized and lived motherhood) constitute a “double burden” for migrant mothers.

There is a good deal of research on the difficulties (and joys) shouldered by mothers of young children. For example, Nyström and Öhrling (2004) conducted a literature review of 33 research articles and found that mothers perceive mothering young children as “overwhelming.” Primary stress-causing concepts were “being satisfied and confident as a mother, being primarily responsible for the child is overwhelming and causes strain, struggling with the limited time available for oneself, and being fatigued and drained” (Nyström & Öhrling, 2004, p. 319).

### 3.3 "Good" Mothers: Perceptions and Influences

Widding (2015) finds that dominant discourses about gender and social class heavily influence parents’ perceptions of parenthood. In particular, middle class values and the ideal of intensive mothering led Swedish parents to identify “good” parents as responsible and engaged, while “bad” parents are cast as irresponsible and uncaring, not setting limits, and not spending enough time with their children (Widding, 2015). Relatedly, mothers from different countries have divergences and convergences in their perceptions of motherhood (Eriksson, Eliasson, Hellström, Määttä, & Vaught, 2016). For example, Eriksson et al. (2016) find that both Swedish-born and Somali-born mothers living in Sweden favor the cultural over the biological aspects of motherhood. However, the Swedish-born mothers focus on the child whereas the Somali-born mothers emphasize the community. Unsurprisingly, migrant mothers whose own parenting philosophy and practices are closely aligned with their adopted country’s dominant mothering discourses are more likely to be considered “good” mothers (Llerena-Quinn & Pravder Mirkin, 2005). Furthermore, migrant mothers often adapt their concept of “good” mothering, elevating and valuing certain elements over others, in response to the situation and context in which they find themselves (Manohar & Busse-Cardenas, 2011).
3.4 Diversity of Influences and Experiences

Power influences migrant mothers’ experiences, be it the normative power of the dominant society, socio-economic power, or power dynamics within the family itself (Tsai, Chen & Huang, 2011). Migrant mothers who live in a country that has a dominant culture that marginalizes their race or ethnicity have the added challenge of preparing their children to take part in “a world they, the mothers, may not fully understand, be a part of, or even allowed to enter” (Llerena-Quinn & Pravder Mirkin, 2005, p. 88).

Upper class and highly-skilled professional women are able to keep their pre-migration standard of living (Dunlop, 2011; Manohar & Busse-Cardenas, 2011). They can more easily travel back to their home country and can employ nannies and housekeepers if they so desire (Suarez 1998 as cited in Llerena-Quinn & Pravder Mirkin, 2005). In addition, their privilege empowers them to challenge the new country’s dominant discourses about motherhood while still being considered “good” mothers (Llerena-Quinn & Pravder Mirkin, 2005). Dunlop (2011), however, argues that it is still important to include professional families in migration research because they are a part of the increasingly globalized world and still may have “psychological, social, and emotional issues and needs that must be explored” (179).

Middle class migrant parents, by contrast, often experience a decrease in social mobility and “unfamiliar mothering challenges due to migration” (Suarez Orozco, 1998 as cited in Llerena-Quinn & Pravder Mirkin, 2005). The poorest immigrants often experience adversity due to “racism, xenophobia, and competition for the lowest paying jobs,” yet they also often have an improved economic situation (Suarez-Orozco, 1998 as cited in Llerena-Quinn & Pravder Mirkin, 2005). In Sweden, welfare-reliant mothers report wanting better support and suggest that Swedish society obstructs their mothering due to lax discipline in school, a disregard for parental authority, and restrictive welfare stipulations” (Bergnehr, 2015).

Other researchers caution, however, that women’s experiences mothering vary even within seemingly homogeneous groups (Kim, Conway-Turner, Sherif-Trask, & Woolfolk, 2006). Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2014) find, for example, that while parents have different attitudes toward parenting education based on their socio-economic status, those attitudes are mediated to some extent by the physical location of the parents. Lower class parents who are in close contact at school with middle class parents adopt the middle class parents’ attitudes. Taken further, Fowler and Lee (2004) highlight maternal learning as a personal process, as each woman struggles “to make sense of and transform memories of personal experience and come to terms with the complex actuality of family life” (p. 43) They suggest that it is important to hear about mothering journeys that do not conform to dominant discourses.
3.5 Centers for Children and Parents

Centers and playgroups for young children and their parents are increasing in many countries, however research about them is limited (Hoshi-Watanabe et al., 2015). Hoshi-Watanabe et al. (2015) examined centers in Japan, Italy, Belgium and France, and found that the rationales underpinning them varied by and within countries. Some of the rationales included combating social isolation among mothers and declining birth rates. Nevertheless, they found that the centers functioned in similar ways, providing informal support. Needham and Jackson (2012), on the other hand, advocate for caution when making cross-cultural comparisons of these types of programs. They propose that even among centers that seem to have similar environments and materials, the purpose and role of the adult participants (parents and instructors) can vary greatly. This, in turn, leads to different experiences for the parents.

Harman, Guifoyle and O’Connor (2014) suggest that three primary determinants for mothers’ attendance (or not) at playgroups are: a wish to develop a sense of belonging, seeking validation as a mother, and having negative experiences in playgroups. Furthermore, Rullo and Musatti (2005) find that mothers of young children want to interact with other mothers of young children, and that this is a “social need specific to early mothering.” They hypothesize that this stems from a desire to become a more competent parent. While this need is particularly strong in first-time mothers, it is also apparent in mothers with more than one child, working and stay-at-home mothers, and mothers with strong other support groups (e.g. extended family). Regarding parental learning at centers for parents and children, Rullo and Musatti (2005) note that providers often assume that parents will benefit from observing a variety of parenting models at the centers while not having to make any long-term commitments to the other parents (p. 108).

3.6 Swedish Open Preschools

There is a dearth of research in English about Swedish open preschools. A notable exception is Abrahamsson and Samarasinghe’s (2013) research on open preschools co-located at integrated health services (family centers). They find that attending open preschools enhances parents’ sense of empowerment, in particular by allowing them to see that their parenting challenges and experiences are typical and by giving them a safe space to “cast off the social facade of being ‘the skilled parent’” (p. 5). Parents perceive that these positive outcomes are due to the open preschool staff, other parents and children, while Abrahamsson and Samarasinghe (2013) attribute the skill of the staff in being sensitive to “parents’ situation and readiness for support” (p. 5) as the most important factor. In addition, they note that open preschools are one of the only places for parents with immigrant backgrounds and Swedes to interact with and learn from each other. Likewise, Svensson (2001) suggests that the staff at family centers are often the
only contact immigrants have with Swedish society (as cited in Lindskov, 2010 p. 63). However, Bak and Gunnarsson (2000) find that immigrant parents tended to primarily socialize with each other (as cited in Lindskov, 2010, p. 63). Lindskov (2010) also examines family centers, in which open preschools are one component. Regarding family centers as a whole, she finds that staff and parents differ in their perceptions of the practice, with staff viewing it as a professional service, informal meeting place and community-based center and parents viewing it as “a professional reception to obtain expert guidance and support, a study circle and living room to informally share experiences and socializing, and a playground for children where children could interact and learn social skills (p. 2).

4. THEORY

4.1 Situated and Social Theories of Learning

Etienne Wenger’s (1998) social theory of learning and his concept of communities of practice (CoPs) are the theoretical framework guiding this project. The theory falls under the umbrella of situated learning, which suggests that learning is firmly situated in social contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning is the active process of individuals negotiating meaning in social situations, contrasting with, among others, the theory of learning as a primarily individualistic, cognitive endeavor. A key concept is the idea of legitimate peripheral participation, which legitimizes the learning processes involved as novices move from the periphery toward becoming full-fledged members of the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Wenger (1998) further refines situated learning with the introduction of his social theory of learning. As the name suggests, the social theory of learning also views learning as an active process of participation in social situations. Individuals and larger communities both influence and are influenced by each other. Learning, in this sense, involves both transformation of the individual and evolving social structures of the community. Wenger identifies four interrelated components behind this learning:

1. Meaning - learning as experience.
2. Practice - learnings doing
3. Community - learning as belonging
4. Identity - learning as becoming (Wenger, 1998, p. 5)

In this theory, learning is the interplay between participation and reification. Participation is the active process of both being in the world and interacting with others, whereas reification is the process of meaning making and the resulting representative forms and objects.
Importantly, the learning that happens may not be intentional. Rather, social interaction is at the forefront and learning may be an unintentional and perhaps unrecognized byproduct.

Community of practice (CoP) is a concept that originated with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) situated learning theory and then was elaborated on in Wenger’s (1998) social theory of learning, becoming the conceptual framework for it. CoPs are groups of people with a shared interest who interact over time and have shared tools and ways of communicating. More specifically, the three defining characteristics are joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire of communal resources (Wenger, 1998).

- **Joint enterprise** is the common goal and sense of accountability that keeps CoPs together.
- **Mutual engagement** means that the members of the community work and interact together, often using *enabling elements* to encourage interaction.
- Having a **shared repertoire of communal resources** means that the community has resources such as “language, routines, sensibilities, artifacts, tools, stories, styles, etc.” that they all understand and are able to use correctly (Wenger, 1998, p. 229).

CoP boundaries are often undefined, fluid, and changing over time. CoPs are not necessarily constrained to a physical location, as they can be connected by other means such as the internet. Wenger (1998, 2000) gives importance to boundaries as potential places of learning. Two concepts related to boundaries are brokers (people) and boundary objects (such as tools or shared processes used by more than one community), both of which cross boundaries and help spread and interpret knowledge from one community to another.

Identity formation is another key aspect of social learning theory, as Wenger (1998) posits that an integral part of the creation of a community is the negotiation of identities. Identity creation is an active process, and people’s identities change as their roles change within CoPs. Identity affects behavior and interactions both between those within CoPs and also between members of CoPs and outsiders. Wenger (1998) characterizes identity in five ways:

- As a **negotiated experience**, or the way the reification of ones sense of self and the experience of self through participation interact.
- As a **community membership**, or the feeling of competence and familiarity as a marker of membership in a community.
- As a **learning trajectory**, or identity creation as ongoing, influenced by both the past and the future.
• As a **nexus of membership**, or the work of reconciling membership in multiple communities into one identity.

• As a **relation between the local and the global**, or the interplay between the local aspects of one’s identity and the broader context.

Regarding trajectories, Wenger (1998, 2000) proposes that people follow different trajectories as they move through and interact with the CoPs in which they are members. The idea of trajectory implies that past, present and future are linked, and furthermore that all affect the individual’s changing sense of identity. Wenger (1998, 2000) identifies five types of trajectories through CoPs. The first is peripheral trajectories. People following this trajectory do not become full members of the CoP, but their participation nonetheless affects their sense of identity. Secondly there are inbound trajectories. These people are newcomers, working toward becoming full-fledged members. People following insider trajectories are full-fledged members, yet even so their identity is not static. “The evolution of the practice continues—new events, new demands, new inventions, and new generations all create occasions for renegotiating one’s identity” (Wenger, 1998, p. 154). Boundary trajectories are for people who are “spanning boundaries and linking communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998, p. 154). Finally, outbound trajectories are for those leaving a community.

Wenger devotes considerable attention to the role that CoPs play in the workforce. Situated learning and CoPs in relation to organizational learning has been taken up by many others, including Brown and Duguid (1991) who popularized many of the themes (as cited in Willmott & Contu, 2003, p. 288). Orr’s (1990) study of informal learning among photocopier technicians is an often cited example of a CoP (as cited in Willmott & Contu, 2003, p. 289). The concept of CoP also has been applied to other contexts. For example Paechter (2003) argues that learning about gender (termed by her as “masculinities” and “femininities”) can be understood in terms of CoP.

### 4.2 Criticisms

Two key criticisms of situated learning—and by extension the theory of social learning and CoPs—relate to power and gender relations. Willmott and Contu (2003) argue that Lave and Wenger did not adequately address power relations in their conception of situated learning. Furthermore, they argue that this limitation has been compounded by conventional interpretations which further minimize issues of power and conflict and foreground continuity and consensus. In particular, Willmott and Contu (2003) suggest that “community” (which in this case is seen as benevolent, promoting unity and consensus) tends to be given priority as it is
more palatable to managers and those with power in the workplace. A focus on “practice,” on the other hand, allows for conflict and fragmentation. For example, conventional interpretations of situated learning assume an open and benevolent sharing of information within CoPs. Willmott and Contu (2003) suggest that instead the sharing or hoarding of information is influenced by power struggles between a complex network of actors, including workers and management and workers and societal factors like labor market conditions. They propose that researchers must examine the question: “how is 'consensus' interpreted? Is it an expression of unforced agreement, or is it a hegemonically stabilized outcome of a power play of social forces?” (Willmott & Contu, 2003, p. 292). In short, they argue that learning practices in situated learning theory must be understood in relation to power.

Situated learning has also been criticized for overlooking the role of gender. In particular, Salminen-Karlsson (2006) proposes that gender is apparent in CoPs in issues of communities, boundaries, and identity. Firstly, the type of knowledge and characteristics valued by communities may have an inherent, often unrecognized gendered aspect, and thus the community is more welcoming of one gender over the other. Secondly, gender can play a role in defining boundaries. Often “This makes gender easily a dividing line in a community of practice, and to some extent separate single-sex groups are created within the same community” (Salminen-Karlsson, 2006, p. 41). Finally, she notes identity building in CoPs can be used to reinforce gender roles. To become a valued member in the CoP, people often have to learn to conform to gender norms. Furthermore, there is tension when people are constructing an identity in a CoP that does not correspond to their own or the society’s expectations. An example would be the tension a mother who identifies as a lesbian could have in a mothers’ playgroup that has a heteronormative assumption about family constellations.

The lack of attention paid to power and gender are related. Willmott and Contu (2003) note that some interpretations of situated learning have too narrow a focus on the immediate social situation, at the expense of examining the role played by larger societal and structural forces. Salminen-Karlsson (2006) supports this conjecture, writing, “Communities of practice do not emerge or function in a vacuum. The theoretical work on communities of practice has not generally paid very much attention to the external influences on the community” (p. 34). I would suggest that this criticism—that situated learning tends to overlook societal and structural prejudice and oppression—extends to all areas of marginalization, including but not limited to race, socio-economic status, and immigration status. A remedy is to account for power and marginalization in studies of situated learning. As Salminen-Karlsson (2006) suggests, “It should be natural to go more deeply into questions about who has legitimacy and why, what
participation actually means in different communities of practice, and how the peripheral positions are distributed and appreciated by different members of the group, rather than simply assuming equal starting positions for all newcomers” (Salminen-Karlsson, 2006, p. 44).

4.3 Applicability to Project

The community of practice framework is appropriate for this project in a number of ways. I aim to examine migrant mothers’ perceptions of their learning at open preschools. In other words, I am interested in the learning that happens as the mothers (individuals) interact with the open preschool (social context) and the resulting tacit, embedded knowledge. How do the mothers’ perceptions of open preschools align (or not align) with CoP characteristics? Using this theoretical framework allows for an analysis of how the participants’ cultural backgrounds and memberships in other CoPs may have influenced their experiences and learning. It examines whether or not and how the participants’ identities changed over time. In light of the criticisms levied against situated learning, I begin to address the role that larger societal and structural forces play in influencing power, gender and other relations. This is a large topic, however, and one deserving deeper investigation.

5. METHOD

5.1 Research Design

As I am interested in the participants’ lived experiences—their thoughts and perceptions—I use a qualitative approach, or one that is characterized by an emphasis on words and descriptions rather than quantifiable data (Bryman, 2016). To do this, I dive deep into the experiences of a small number of participants, operating under the interpretivist assumption that humans and human experiences are deep, complex, and not always fully encompassed by scientific methods. Likewise, I utilize a constructivist ontology, assuming that people create knowledge rather than believing that it exists externally. More specifically, following Wenger’s (1998) social theory of learning, learning happens during the interaction between the individual and the social situation. My approach is inductivist in that the data led me to use Wenger’s social theory of learning. Finally, the analysis and writing of the thesis has been an iterative process.

5.2 Data Collection

Data was collected through the use of in-depth semi-structured interviews. This method is appropriate when examining participants’ perceptions and opinions, and in situations when the participants may not be explicitly aware of or have a low understanding of the research topic.
(Kallio, Pietil, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). Likewise, I am interested in the migrant mothers’ perceptions of their informal learning, a type of learning that by definition is at times implicit (Livingstone, 2006). This format gives a structure to the interview while allowing room for the conversation to go in directions I had not anticipated. In this way, I hoped to elicit rich descriptions that encompassed both the participants’ memories as well as their feelings about and interpretations of those memories.

5.2.1 Interview guide

I created an interview guide (Appendix A) to use to structure the interview. With the guide, I had dual objectives: to minimize leading questions and to create a relaxed, comfortable environment (Kallio et al., 2016), both of which, I believed, would help me to gather honest, detailed data. The interview guide started out with straightforward questions about the participant’s background and family. I then asked an open ended question, “Tell me a bit about your experiences at open preschool?” I was interested to hear their initial thoughts and attitude, and to learn which topics came to mind first. In addition, I hoped the question would be a comfortable one for the participants to answer, to get them “warmed up” to the interview (Kallio et al., 2016). I had two levels of questions: main themes that spoke to the research questions and follow up questions to elicit further detail (Kallio et al., 2016). For example, the main theme question, “Could you walk me through a typical open preschool visit for you?” was designed to elicit what the participants typically did and who they typically talked to, thus addressing the research question about how they learned and who they learned from. This question was followed by, “Do you keep to yourself or talk to other people? Why/who? What do you talk about? (If applicable).” In order to minimize interviewer bias, I started out with open-ended questions and gradually moved to more directed ones (Bryman, 2016). Two themes I anticipated discussing, and therefore wrote questions for, were parenting and living in Sweden. I anticipated that we would develop trust and rapport as the interview progressed, and therefore saved a question that could be personal (“Have you had any experiences at open preschool that made you feel at all uncomfortable? Would you mind sharing it/them?”) for the latter part of the interview (Bryman, 2016). I ended by asking if the participant had any further thoughts to share in order to leave the participant feeling empowered by and positive toward the experience (Bryman, 2016).

I pilot tested the interview guide two ways in order to ensure that the questions elicited full and relevant data (Kallio et al., 2016). Firstly, I received feedback from an expert, my advisor. Secondly, I field tested the guide with the first few participants and made changes as
needed (Kallio et al., 2016). One change was the expected length of time of the interviews. I initially expected them to take 1-1.5 hours, but after the first few interviews took only 30-40 minutes I adjusted the expectations when recruiting the rest of the participants.

### 5.2.2 Conducting the interviews

The interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes and took place in person at a location chosen by the participant. These included the participant’s home, cafes, and playgrounds and play areas. Some interviews took place one-on-one, while at others the participant’s and/or my own children were present. While the presence of children was at times disruptive, for some participants it was necessary to be with their children as they are stay-at-home mothers and it was difficult for them to arrange childcare. While all participants were given the option of having an interpreter present, all chose to conduct the interview in English. All interviews were voice recorded and later transcribed by me.

The interviews began with brief, informal, unstructured chatting, often about the weather or our children. I then went over the Research Project Information and Consent for Participation to Interview Research sheet (Appendix B) verbally and answered any questions the participant may have had. The participant signed one copy for me and kept another copy for her records. We then began the interview, following the interview guide. I veered off of it at times to follow up on comments made by the participant. Soon after the interview finished, I noted for myself: my impressions of how the interview went, where the interview took place, any other feelings about the interview, and the setting (Bryman, 2016).

### 5.3 Selection of the Participants

I recruited participants by posting flyers (Appendix C) in open preschools in Solna, asking the open preschool teachers for introductions, and by posting a request for participants on the Facebook group “English-Speaking Parents in Solna.” Criteria was that the participants must be 1) mothers of young children; 2) moved to Sweden within the last 10 years; and 3) attend open preschool semi-regularly or regularly. Among possible applicants who fit this criteria, participants were chosen who represented a variety of home countries.

I chose to focus on mothers living in Solna for practical reasons. I had the support of teachers in some of the local open preschools who were able to help me recruit participants. In addition, I was able to easily recruit participants who speak English. Initially, I tried to recruit both asylum seekers and immigrant mothers from neighboring towns in which the majority of the residents are of a lower socio-economic status and mainly from the Middle East and Africa,
however I ran into communication, logistical and trust barriers. Given the time constraints of the project, I decided instead to focus on Solna municipality.

5.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was done using thematic analysis (TA), as explained by Braun and Clarke (2012). TA is a broad and flexible method for managing and making sense of data. It can highlight similarities and differences in a data set, generate unanticipated insights, and allow for social as well as psychological interpretations of data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). It allowed me to examine both the participants perceptions (psychological interpretations) and also their ways of engagement in open preschools (social interpretations), thus it fits well with the theory of social learning. I followed Braun and Clarke’s (2012) six phase approach to TA. In the first phase, I became familiar with the data by reading and re-reading transcripts of the interviews and making “observational and causal” notes on the entirety (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Secondly, I generated initial codes, or short labels for elements of the data that might relate to the research aim. I cast a wide net initially as some concepts that did not initially seem to me to relate to my aims (such as “weather and darkness”) later did in fact prove applicable. In later stages, I merged or purged codes that did not relate directly. I used both descriptive (semantic) and latent (interpretive) codes. Examples of descriptive codes were “educational system” and “lack of extended familial support,” whereas a latent code was “altering previously held beliefs.” In phase three, I organized the codes into broader themes. In phase 4, I examined the data set and codes in light of the themes and revised as necessary. In phase 5, I defined and named the themes and then, in phase 6, wrote the report. I used an iterative approach, and as a result I continually returned to previous phrases instead of completing them in a straightforward, chronological fashion.

5.5 Ethical Considerations

My research complies with the Swedish Research Council’s ethical principles for research in the humanities and social sciences (Gustafsson, Hermeren, & Petersson, 2006). I explained the purpose and participation requirements of my project to the participants verbally ahead of time. At the start of the interview, the participants signed a combined “Research Project Information” and “Consent for Participation in Interview Research” form, which we also reviewed orally. Participants were given a copy of the form for their records. The purpose of the form and conversations were so the participants could make an informed decision as to whether or not to participate. I informed participants that they could withdraw at any time from the research study and for any (or no) reason, in addition to declining to answer any questions. I have done my best to ensure anonymity and confidentiality during the recording, storing and
writing of the research by using pseudonyms and changing identifying information. In addition, I will use the information gathered only for the designated research purposes.

5.6 Quality

I have made every effort to produce a piece of high quality research which conforms to Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Guba and Lincoln’s (1994) criteria for evaluating qualitative research (as cited in Bryman, 2016). To ensure transferability, I have included thick descriptions using the participants own words so that others can draw their own conclusions and decide for themselves whether or not my findings are applicable to another setting. To ensure credibility, I utilized respondent validation. I provided some participants with a brief outline of my findings and asked for feedback and clarification if necessary. While I have not had an external auditor evaluate my procedures and decisions for dependability, I have kept a complete paper trail. I also have not had an auditor evaluate the confirmability, or minimization of personal bias. However, I have done my best to be explicit and transparent about my role and my decisions.

5.7 Role of the Researcher

My interest in migrant mothers’ learning at open preschools stems from personal experience. I moved to Sweden from America three years ago with my husband and then 11-month old daughter. From the start until she began attending drop-off preschool six months later, my daughter and I went to open preschools nearly every weekday. When my son was born last year, I repeated the experience with him. As a result, I have been to a number of different open preschools in Stockholm and Solna as a parent. It has been an integral part of my experience as a migrant mother living in Sweden. Yet from a researcher’s perspective, I am interested in the experiences that other migrant mothers are having at open preschools, and whether or not they perceive them to be sites of learning.

6. FINDINGS

6.1 Information on Participants

I interviewed eight women who range in age from 30-39 years old. They hail from Australia, England, South Africa, India, Russia, Germany, the United States and China. All are married to men (not in same-sex relationships). One is married to a Swede, five are married to a person with the same nationality as themselves, and two are married to a person with a different nationality as themselves (not Swedish). They all have one to two children ranging in age from three months to four years. They moved to Sweden between one and eight years ago. All live in
Solna, a suburb of Sweden. Seven of them came to Sweden because of their husband’s work, while one came as a student. Before moving to Sweden, one was a student, one was an artist, and six worked in professional careers (speech pathology, finance, non-profit administration, business, media, and information technology). At the time of the interviews, five were primarily caring for children and three were working full-time.

**Table 1. Participant Information (pseudonyms used)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Children’s Ages</th>
<th>Moved to Sweden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>3 months &amp; 26 months</td>
<td>1 year ago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priya</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>2 years ago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stefanie</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>20 months &amp; 4 years</td>
<td>2.5 years ago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gemma</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>14 months &amp; 3 years</td>
<td>3 years ago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>14 months</td>
<td>1 year ago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anastasia</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>17 months</td>
<td>4 years ago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>3.5 years ago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qinglian</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>14 months</td>
<td>8 years ago</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 6.2 Themes Identified

After analyzing the data, I developed four themes:

- Parenting: from “mommy stuff” to “how to navigate the system”
- Chatting, observing, and crossing cultural borders
- “It is not a place of learning, unfortunately”: Expectations and motivations
- Learning supports and barriers as intertwined and complicated

The overarching narrative that emerges from these themes is that of open preschools as possible sites of intense, deep learning for the participants. They learned about parenting in general and parenting as a migrant in Sweden. Yet as the learning was primarily informal, with some identifying it as learning while others discount and overlook it. The learning process they describe is complex and at times paradoxical, as the supports and barriers are neither straightforward nor clearly defined.

#### 6.2.1 Parenting: from 'mommy stuff' to 'how to navigate the system'

Most of the learning revolved around parenting and in specific the following four categories:

- Child development
• Practicalities
• Navigating open preschool (unwritten rules)
• Swedish culture and customs

Within each of these categories, the topics of learning fell on a spectrum. On the one side was “mommy stuff,” the general parenting chit chat of interest to most parents. On the other side were topics of interest specifically for migrant parents. Much of the learning fell between these two extremes.

6.2.1.1 "Mommy stuff" and child development

When asked what they talked about with other parents, a number of participants used broad expressions such as “mommy stuff” (Megan) and “Typical parenting stuff” (Jessica). Even when elaborating, they often trailed off at the end as though they were giving an incomplete list. The participants knew I was a mother myself and perhaps assumed (correctly) that I would understand their shorthand. This type of phrasing implies that these topics of discussion are not limited to open preschools, rather the participants assumed they are common knowledge and do not need to be explicated in detail:

**Sarah:** I guess the usual things you talk about with other mums and dads like where they’re at, their development, teething, eating, sleeping (*emphasis mine*).

**Jessica:** We would talk usually, you know, we’d introduce ourselves and oh, you know, “How old’s your child? What’s his name?” That kind of stuff. “Where do you live?” And then usually we’d, you know, napping, feeding, sleeping issues (laughs). That kind of stuff.

**Priya:** I used to talk with other parents. It is a good thing. We express our emotions with babies and their routine, life, their food habits. So many things.

Participants’ discussions and conversations with the teachers also tended to revolve around child development. Sarah noted that the teachers were helpful “if I had questions about [my child’s] development and things like that,” and later further elaborated that “I talked with [the teacher] a little bit about different toys that were appropriate for [my child] for his age and what he was learning.” Priya agreed that the teachers “give lots and lots of information. How we should take care of them. What are things we should give them. What are things we should not give them. So it was informative for me.”
6.2.1.2 Practicalities

A second learning theme revolved around practical topics, and specifically the location of local parks and playgrounds, navigating the healthcare and educational systems, and accessing Swedish language classes. Often, these topics were geared in particular for migrant mothers. Sarah discussed the importance of parks and playgrounds:

Sarah: [I talked with the non-Swedes] about ways to merge what I knew from home into things that I could do here so parks and playgrounds and indoor play areas for the darkness. And I guess things that other parents, international parents, had learned and that Swedes obviously knew, like how to learn about ways to survive through the winter with a one year old that I didn’t know.

She also learned about the healthcare system:

Sarah: I had no idea how the health system worked, where to go for [my child’s] vaccinations. Um, he was 11 months old so he needed his one year vaccines not long after we got here so they told me about the BVC (child healthcare) and where to go, and how to call them. They actually gave me the number for the Solna BVC which was super.

Quinlan was inspired to learn more about the educational system:

Quinlan: And, uh, so for me it’s, uh, really interesting to know that, oh, they have this thing here and they are willing to have this öppna förskola, and what's the reason behind it, and where the money come from? So I start to have a lot of questions and I start maybe asking people and search online to get more information about this educational system in Sweden.

Sarah asked about Swedish language classes:

Sarah: I also talked to her (the teacher) about how to access Swedish classes here and things for me…

6.2.1.3 Navigating open preschools: Learning unwritten rules

Some participants reported learning about a more abstract concept, the social norms or “unwritten rules” at open preschool. While usually not explicitly stated, these govern the ways that people are expected to act in social groups. In this case, participants had to learn the “unwritten rules” about how to interact with others in the preschool and what behavior is expected of both the child and the parent. Gemma explained:

Gemma: I think, I don't know, I think you can take your cues from other parents when you're there. So I go to this one during singing time, and I kind of take my cues from other parents as to if it's generally accepted to let your kids wander around and whether
they have to be sitting in your lap or if they can be a bit freer. And so I can kind of observe what the other parents are doing and then I feel, “Ok that's fine. Let him off the rope. That's keeping to the rules.” So that's kind of interesting.

Jessica took an insight she gained at open preschool and extrapolated to Swedish society at large:

**Jessica**: Another interesting experience for me culturally was when I first went to that first open preschool with my husband's MALE coworker. [My child] was a six month old. So yeah, [my child] was six months old and I was breastfeeding him. You know, I go to an open preschool and I am used to the U.S. where number one, we use a cover, at all time (laughs), so there's no, you know, open breast feeding. [My child] was hungry and, I don't know, I can't remember, I think it might have been in the middle of song time. So I got up and I went to another room. I didn't stay in the room, which in Sweden, it would be culturally normal. Now after time, I have observed that yes, you just feed your child there in the circle and do what you need to do. But I took him to, like, another room. So [my husband’s] coworker came to find me ‘cuz he thought something was wrong ‘cuz I just disappeared. And I'm feeding [my child] with a cover, and like, I'm sitting there feeling completely awkward that, like, my husband's male coworker is watching me breastfeed. And he just thinks it's the most natural thing on earth and he comes and sits down and starts chatting with me. So yeah, so there's little things like that, there were many experiences that I had, that was my first exposure to Swedish culture and “OK, ah ha, this is normal, this is not normal.” There were a lot of those. And it's interesting because it's not just moms there. It's for both parents and so, you know, there's always been guys at the open preschools. It's not like it's all women. So it took some time, then I got comfortable with it. Then I learned that, yeah. So again, after that I realized, Oh, I don't have to go hide in the other room. I realized that I don't have to use a cover up. Which was totally fine with me. I just needed to like realize, “Oh it's different here. It's not the same set of rules.”

**6.2.1.4 Swedish culture and customs**

Finally, Swedish culture and customs were cited as topics of learning, particularly by participants who had recently arrived and were not partnered with/married to a Swede. For many of them, open preschools were one of the few places they could observe, participate in, and ask questions about Swedish culture, and in particular about holidays and songs. Most open preschools celebrate major holidays with the parents and children. In the summer, for example, they sing traditional summer solstice (midsommer) songs and do traditional dances during the singing time. Furthermore, the preschool staff and other parents also give suggestions about how and where to celebrate the holidays beyond preschool:
**Priya:** And the instructors, they used to talk to me a lot (laughs). And they used to tell me about the Swedes culture. If there is any special occasion, like *midsommer*, like that, they used to tell me why we are celebrating this. That’s why we are celebrating this, all those things.

**Anastasia:** So I think they do a great job, like, explaining customs. For example Easter, they do everything that is, like, usual. So yeah, you can ask what is happening, what should you expect.

While most participants mentioned learning about Swedish children’s songs, Qinglian added that she believed that the songs would help her with her parenting by allowing her and her daughter to share that part of Swedish culture together. Otherwise, she feared that her daughter would eventually learn the songs in drop-off preschool and she would not be able to take part:

**Qinglian:** I learn a lot of children’s songs. I’m sure if I don’t know them, after my daughter go to preschool, she will start to sing and I can’t follow her. That’s, yeah, so for me I learn some, this local Swedish children song. I think it will improve our communication.

### 6.2.2 Chatting, observing, and crossing cultural borders

The answer to the question of *who the participants learned from and how did they learn* has two parts. Firstly, on a practical level, participants reported chatting with and observing teachers and other parents as the primary sources of learning. Interestingly, the formal classes offered through open preschools were overwhelmingly identified as not being sources of learning. On a more abstract level, their learning can be traced to “crossing borders,” a complex negotiation of merging their own parenting philosophy and tools with the ones they find at open preschool.

#### 6.2.2.1 Chatting and observing

Participants learned primarily through informal means, particularly through talking and observing other parents and teachers. Sarah stated explicitly, “I learned most of it informally just from chatting with other parents and the teachers.” While the discussions all tended to revolve around parenting issues, the participants reported discussing different aspects with the instructors, parents in general, and parents with a similar cultural background as their own.

Participants tended to talk about general child development issues with the instructors, and in particular appropriate toys and food for their child:
**Stefanie:** [The teacher] was showing toys directly to my child, to G. And what she could do with that. Especially she offered her to go to the crafting room. She showed her all the materials. I thought yes, that's good.

**Megan:** Yeah they (the teachers) are quite interested in people. They're also quite interested in what we feed them, I find. Because sometimes they make meals for the mommies and the kids. And they're always quite like, “Oh you should be giving your child this food because it's homemade.” (Interviewer: Yeah). I guess, uh, I don't know, I get the feeling that they don't, they prefer to see mommies feed their children homemade food than out of a jar. (Interviewer: Oh that's interesting). That's, but that’s just, I might be wrong but it's the impression that I got.

Interestingly, beyond simply recounting the conversation, Megan makes an assumption as to what it means: that the teachers place an importance on homemade food.

With other parents, participants talked about general parenting topics, as described in the previous section. In addition, Stefanie and Jessica noted that the learning was bidirectional: Swedish parents were often interested to learn from them:

**Stefanie:** Especially when you are from another country, they are curious where you’re coming from, why are you coming to Sweden, what’s the purpose? (laughs). How do you think? How do you feel about living in Sweden? They’re interested in how we see their country.

**Jessica:** I got a lot of questions. Because [my child] was only six months old—I can't remember how the conversations would start (Interviewer: Mmmhm)—but when we would talk about, you know, parental leave and the fact that some of them were there with their 18 month old, when they would hear that I took my child to daycare at four months old and dropped him off, not even for partial days but for ten hour days, they were just appalled. So I think it was an eye opener for a lot of Swedes about how good they actually have it. I don't think that they realized, or they thought “Okay they have three months” but then when they heard that it wasn't paid entirely, that it was funded by my vacation that I had saved up for a year, my sick time which I hadn't taken, so all the things that I had saved up for so I could pay for 50-75% of that. And then you come back to work and you don't have any vacation days. And so when the child's sick there's no sick days for your child. You have your five sick days and let's hope you don't both get sick more than five times. I mean, yeah. Or the pumping. That was also fascinating for them because a lot of them don't need to pump because by the time they need to go back the kids are weaned. So yeah, so it was definitely an educational experience for a lot of them to hear what our experience was like and then they were like, “Wow, this is good here.”
With other migrant parents, participants often discussed both parenting issues and issues related to being a non-Swede in Sweden.

**Gemma:** It's the other English speaking parents I think that are really helpful for me. That was the main thing, rather than the staff.

**Sarah:** …I found people who were similar and from similar cultures and backgrounds and then it was easier to talk about where I was at with parenting. And also people who had moved here and left their family and so I guess you're in a similar place and position.

Jessica went more in depth with her reasons for discussing certain topics with other migrant parents rather than Swedish parents, noting that Swedish parents had a different frame of reference that made discussing some issues complicated:

**Jessica:** My experience is that Swedes don't really understand how challenging it is for expats. They know the system, it comes naturally. They understand what open preschool is. They understand BVC (health clinics for children) and how that works. They know what to do inherently either from growing up here or having friends or they have a sister or mom or friend to ask, so. In that regard, definitely, with the other expats, it was definitely a lot of discussion around, “Oh how'd you do that?” “Oh. Yeah. Emergency dentist.” All these things that yeah, I wouldn't have known. And I probably wouldn't have asked a Swede because probably they wouldn't, I don't know. With personal number issues and stuff like… They don't understand. “Oh that's a problem?” “Oh you don't get one of those automatically?” (Interviewer: Right). So those are maybe conversations that would have been harder to have (with Swedish parents).

Participants also observed. For some, learning was a conscious decision and one that they reflected about:

**Jessica:** I observe a lot. So I thought it was fascinating to go and see other people's, yeah. I like to observe the other cultures and just sit back and take it all in. I could have just gone in and done what I wanted and left, but I tried to adapt definitely, so. Yeah. I did learn about toys that maybe I didn't know about through seeing things, but it's not like anybody was, yeah, explaining things to me.

Others initially had a more difficult time recalling instances of observation:

**Megan:** I guess I don't really sit around much and, and sort of, observe people too much because I'm busy playing with [my child]. So I haven't seen anything.

But then after a moment’s reflection, she came up with two things she had observed. Interestingly, she also made the leap from merely reporting to conjecturing about the reasons:
Megan: I mean, some moms definitely leave poos in nappies for too long, but I guess it depends on what kind of child you have. I guess some children make it more difficult to change nappies so you're a little bit like, “Oh I don't really want to do that right now, he's having fun and he's just going to be grumpy.” So that's the only thing I've noticed but that's probably because it's hard not to notice ‘cuz it sort of smells the whole (laughs) open preschool out. Um, no, that's, yeah, probably not. I'm not paying that much attention. I do find that some parents, I guess what I have noticed, is that some parents do go there and they don't play with their kids. They sit there and, I think I've noticed it more with the dads, um. Uh, and the Swedish dads. They sit there and they talk to their friends (Interviewer: Uh huh) and their child's off doing whatever and they're on their phone and talking to their friend which seems...a bit strange to me but... Maybe they feel that it's good to let their child play on their, you know, independently. So, that's the only thing I've noticed.

6.2.2.2 Formal classes

The open preschools also offered formal classes in topics such as nutrition and baby massage, however only two participants reported attending. The rest of the participants gave a variety of explanations for their lack of participation, including:

- Not speaking Swedish
- Not convenient locations/“it would be a bit of an event to go” (Gemma)
- Busy (Qinglian)
- Not applicable for my child

Jessica: No, I didn't ever, um, I didn't ever sign up for them. To come on those days or sit through it. Probably again because of the language barrier at that point in time and I don't think I would have gotten much out of it.

Gemma: Some of the courses are aimed for babies I think and I didn't go when he was a baby ‘cuz they don't need so much stimulation at that age so baby massage isn't so appropriate.

Interestingly, the classes were discussed almost as an afterthought by many participants, implying that they did not perceive them as an important part of their open preschool experience. Qinglian even remembered after we had turned off the recording device. Anastasia did attend a baby massage class but found it mismatched her child’s temperament, and as a result did not find it useful:

Anastasia: Umm, so I think they have baby massage courses and I think one of the um teachers or how do you call them, she was taught like, and yeah, it's just, I think it's not
real massage but just how to... So for us it was difficult because my son was not so patient and, like, I managed just to massage his leg and then it was like, no.

Priya reported the lone positive experience:

**Priya:** And for kids, they used to give dietician, uh, like what food we can make for them. So that was a good activity.

### 6.2.2.3 Crossing borders

In addition to chatting and observing, participants also described a more complex process of cross-cultural parenting, as described by Yax-Fraser (2011a, 2011b). To borrow a term from community of practice terminology, I call this “crossing borders.” The first step was to identify the similarities and differences. For some this was an unrecognized step, whereas others described the process:

**Jessica:** Ooh. Yes, I think that that's definitely where I um, uh, American culture versus Swedish culture, we tend to be more helicopter parents I think. And I definitely, especially when he was older, most of the other parents would not intervene, um, you know on the slide. The children were allowed to go up the slide the wrong way, were not told that they must go up the ladder and down the slide. The children were allowed to do what they wanted to do. And so I think there were definitely times when I learned some culture there or, in the U.S. you might, not shout at your child but you know, kind of bark at them to, to stop doing that or to share the toys or, you know, to act properly to do this. And I did not observe that in a typical parenting style. It was much more hands off.

Participants responded to the differences—the discrepancy between their own mental images and the new information—in a few different ways:

- Ascribing the differences to structural differences between the countries
- Adopt the Swedish parenting philosophy
- Valuing both (additive strategy)
- Picking and choosing
- Rejecting the Swedish approach

One strategy was to ascribe the differences to structural differences between the countries. For example, Sarah noted that there are more stay-at-home parents in Australia due to the high cost of preschool there. Stefanie noticed that in Germany families often had to wait for a preschool placement but there was no place, such as open preschools, for them to go to socialize in the interim. A second strategy was to adopt a new parenting philosophy:
**Priya:** Now I feel that the Swedes way is easy [laughs]. So Indian way is a little tough. The parents should always say "No no no." Swedish way, they can do if they want, they like. If they like, you can do. It's easy parenting, I can see.

**Priya:** Now I feel bad we should stress them. Let them do what they want. It is easy for them and easy for us. If they like to do that, yeah do. Now I feel that. The big difference is that. In India, there's a little stressful.

Sarah recounted gaining an understanding of the Swedish way while still valuing her own way, thus using an additive strategy:

**Sarah:** Uhh, probably...the thing that I found the most different to what I was used to was the idea that once [my child] turned one that he should go to a full preschool, um, and not be home. …

**Sarah:** I think it's probably cultural. And now [my child] goes to preschool and I think it's super [laughs]. It's great. So I can see definitely both sides.

**Sarah:** Yeah, I think it (interactions at open preschool) did. It made me look into the preschools to see which ones I liked. It pushed me to put [my child] on a list for preschool. Um, and also just let me see the benefits of it. I think that it's nice to have a child at home but it's also really nice to see the, I guess the emphasis here in preschool is on social and emotional development so it's nice that [my child] is getting that and I can see that that was something that I wouldn't give him at home. The children to play with, to share with, to interact with, and learn with is, yeah, so I saw that (pause).

Jessica described instances of picking and choosing aspects to adopt and others to reject:

**Jessica:** So I've learned, I've learned here to adopt more their style and I can appreciate it more now that I see it in action more and it's actually funny for me now to travel back to the United States where I'm letting him, you know, climb on rocks and trees and, you know, other people are a little nervous and I'm like, “Ah, he's got it. He climbs all the time at school.” So yes, and now it's a little interesting for me to be dual culture. But I adopt what I, what I see that I like and if there's other things like maybe, you know, I would intervene if [my child] was being not nice to another child or did something that I felt was inappropriate so I would still intervene. I just don't intervene as much. I try to let him solve his own problems with the kids or, yeah. But there's definitely a push-pull to having your home culture being ingrained in you and then be in a different culture (laughs).

A final strategy was to reject the new approach:

**Gemma:** I don't know if I've really seriously questioned my parenting as a result. I suppose actually sometimes I think am I being too hovery when you see parents being
quite free with their kids. Physical things like climbing on slides and things like that. I'm a bit more, generally a bit more cautious parent.

**Stefanie:** Well there I'm very German I think because I'm not like that. I don't take these kinds of rules over. And how they say you always have to sit when you eat, for example, this is in the kindergarten where they do, and then after a while it's like, “Okay, I'm sorry but my child needs half an hour for an apple and I can't really let her sitting her half an hour with an apple, no.” In that way, I think I'm a bit more liberal and we do that in Germany: give them a snack when they want or when you think that they need it and, um, not that you have all the times these strict rules and I'm going with that still.

While most parents discuss this in terms of their home country versus Sweden, it should be noted that this concept of border crossing also applies to other group memberships. Sarah was a speech pathologist for children in her home country of Australia and had to reconcile the different way that language learning was viewed at the open preschool:

**Sarah:** And I think that I've had to learn here that I need to just accept the differences in the system and in their approach to language learning. There are a lot of similarities but there are differences too and I've just learned to just accept them and go about my stuff on my own.

### 6.2.3 "It is not a place of learning, unfortunately": Expectations and motivations

In this section, I examine the mothers’ expectations and motivations in more depth. Firstly, I briefly examine the participants’ expectations of learning at open preschool, concluding that some viewed learning in purely formal and non-formal terms. For many participants, their child was the primary reason for attending open preschools, and as a result, they put their child’s needs first and placed their own needs secondary. This constrained their experiences at open preschools. Finally, many participants viewed the support they received at open preschool as especially important for migrant parents who are living far away from extended family.

#### 6.2.3.1 Conceptions of learning

When asked if they viewed open preschools as places of learning, I received the gamut of responses, from absolutely through potentially to absolutely not:

**Sarah:** Um, I've never really thought about that until now but I really think that I learnt everything—everything that I learnt about how to parent here--from open preschool.

**Anastasia:** Right now, how they're formed, they're more like a place for support. But not for learning unfortunately. I think they could add that part as well. So I know at [one
open preschool] they sometimes also invited uh, I don't know, speakers or someone who spoke about different topics.

**Megan:** No we don't learn anything at open preschool. I know they have first aid courses and, um, things like that but yeah, I wouldn't, the open preschool is not the place to go for information. Uh, yeah. I guess if it was that sort of place that a lot of people wouldn't go 'cuz when you're a parent you get a bit tired of everyone telling you what to do. So you wouldn't want to go to an open preschool where they're sort of giving you loads of suggestions. It's just like, “Aughhh this is not fun for me at all.”

These comments suggest that Megan and Anastasia are defining learning as formal education or non-formal learning. Likewise, Sarah appears to have only realized the extent of her learning during the interview process. Livingstone (2006) argues that people can be unaware of their informal learning, and that seems to have been the case here.

**6.2.3.2 Child-driven**

All participants, with the exception of Megan, reported that they went to open preschools for their own benefit in addition to their child’s benefit. Yet parents tended to put their needs secondary. This meant that in some cases the child drove:

At what age they began attending:

**Megan:** We started quite late. Because I didn't feel that it suited [my child] from an early age. He wasn't very social and he didn't enjoy it. And he slept a lot.

If they attend open preschool on any given day, and what they do when they are there:

**Priya:** It all depends on kids. If they want to draw, we will go to the drawing room and we will draw or paint. Or if she wants to play with other kids, we will stay in the hall itself. Or it's, we can't make anything special. It depends on what they want. Nothing special, it's like a normal day. We will go there. If my daughter wants to play there. Some day, she don't want to go there. She wants to play outside.

Stefanie echoed that her child chose the activities that they did:

**Stefanie:** Um, yeah, you come in there and you have normally different play rooms. One is for, um, creative stuff, painting and doing some crafting things. And the other room is for playing and you ask your child, “Where would you like to go?” And then you choose. Either you go and craft something, or you paint, or you go and play. Normally she always wanted to go and play because there were other kids.

How long they stayed:
Anastasia: He (my child) wasn't very patient so it was hard for him to sit still even for like ten minutes (laughter). But I think the older he became it was easier (Interviewer: Yeah). And he was more interested in what is happening. So it was usually, um, I think one hour visit not longer.

6.2.3.3 Diverse motivations

Participants cited a few different motivations for attending, including making friends, relieving boredom and loneliness, socializing with other parents, socialization for their child, learning Swedish, and aiding learning about and integration into Swedish society. Some participants noted that these interactions and support were especially important as they did not have support from extended family nearby:

Anastasia: Oh I think especially for such parents as we that don't have any family here, it's very valuable to come somewhere where you can speak with other parents because experienced personnel and yeah, get some support.

Priya: That's why we need so many things here (in Sweden). Like öppna förskola. That helps a lot. But in India we don't need that. We have cousins, relatives. So taking care of kids is like, it's an easy job.

Megan and Stefanie, on the other hand, reported emphatically that the open preschool did not fill the place of extended family for them. For Stefanie, her Swedish in-laws lived nearby and were her primary source of information about life in Sweden:

Stefanie: But I think we were quite involved, like, in the Swedish system due to [my Swedish husband], and (moreover) his family living in Stockholm too--so his sister and her family--so we always had people who knew already where to go and what to do.

Megan also turned to her partner for advice about navigating life in Sweden. For parenting concerns, she communicated with (and learned from) friends and extended family thanks to communication technology:

Megan: Yeah, I guess it's what you make of it. I don't go there (open preschool) for those sorts of things because I have that. I have friends who are mothers and I talk to my family regularly on FaceTime so, um, and my partner knows the system quite well, so I don't really go to open preschool for that.
6.2.4 Learning supports and barriers as intertwined and complicated

The data reveals a complicated relationship between the supports and barriers to learning, which manifests into four sets of dualities:

- The setting is accessible and welcoming, but also unfamiliar and confusing
- Interaction is encouraged yet requires initiative and energy
- Building relationships was encouraged yet membership was transitory
- Everyone speaks English but communication barriers abound

6.2.4.1 Welcoming but confusing

Open preschools were viewed as welcoming but also unfamiliar and confusing, depending on the person, situation, and time. Many participants noted that centers similar to open preschools did not exist in their home country, and as a result they were not familiar with the concept before moving to Sweden. For Jessica, they were novel and exciting:

**Jessica:** …we don't have open preschool in the U.S., in the country that I come from, and so it was a format that I had never experienced before and so for me it was really cool because I thought, “Oh gosh I wish we had this at home, a place to go with the kids when they're little to let them play and actually get a little bit of adult interaction.” So for me, overall, it was a very positive and cool experience.

Qinglian, on the other hand, remembered initially feeling anxiety about the unknown:

**Qinglian:** I remember, before when I went there, I was thinking what, I don't know what it will look like. And I don't know if they are speaking all the way Swedish if I can follow them or not. And if I can really integrate with the small society in the öppna förskola. I have a lot of doubts and questions but my first experience I found it's much easier compared to what I thought.

What factors did participants identify as making them easy to attend? To begin, their accessibility made them welcoming. Participants found them conveniently located, as having inviting facilities, and easy to access (no advanced registration or fee). Megan and Sarah spoke to the convenient location, which was particularly important when the weather was bad or during the dark winter months:

**Megan:** We found one that we liked. That we went to. And it was quite easy to get to, so that was nice. We tried other ones sort of every now and then, and they were also great, but they were far away so. And the nice, I guess you don't want to spend a lot of time
traveling because you want to get there and you want him to play for the very short amount of time that he has energy so, um, yeah, we've got one that we go to.

Sarah: I feel like it's amazing and that I wouldn't have survived here without it, to be honest, because I didn't know anybody and it's really hard to have a one year old at home in the winter--we moved here in November--in the winter and the darkness with nothing else to do.

Some found certain ones attractive because of their nice facilities.

Megan: I mean it's clean, a lot of them aren't clean. (Interviewer: It's beautiful there) The space is nice, and they're quite strict about, uh, sickness.

Most participants commented appreciatively that the drop-in nature and lack of fee made them easy to access:

Priya: You can be with your kid as much as time can. No timing is there. Any time you can go and any time you can leave. That is a good thing. Very convenient for parents with small babies. Any time you can go, you can give food, there will be small snacks for the kids, like a banana, chips, so it was so convenient and relaxed. And it is indoors.

Jessica: So, I think it's a great program and the idea that they offer it for free, like, I would have paid, you know, a small fee to come and hang out and be there for the day.

In addition, Jessica noted the significance of all open preschools having a similar concept and structure, explaining that she was able to easily and confidently attend different ones.

Jessica: I've probably been to one, two, three, four, five different types of open preschools so, just trying different ones at different days at different times, different locations, so. It's nice to me that they're all the same concept so if you've been to one you have a general idea of, like, what to expect at the other one. Um, so it's nice that there's something, or if you move from one community to another, that there's, yeah.

Yet despite these characteristics making it welcoming, it was still a new and at times confusing experience. It was difficult to learn how to access them:

Jessica: I didn't know, I knew what the (open preschool) concept was but then I needed to figure out, “Well, where are these? Where's my nearest one?” and yeah, it's not like someone hands you a brochure when you come (laughs) and tells you, “Here, here are your nearest locations.”

Participants had some anxiety learning the norms and expected behaviors at the preschool, as described earlier in the “unwritten rules” section:
Gemma: I didn't like the fact that it was really strict at this one particular preschool. I kind of felt on edge a little bit, like [my husband] phoned me and, “I don't know if I'm allowed to talk on my phone right now!” You kind of feel like this, watching it, or if your kid sneezes you think, "Oh no!

Participants also viewed teachers with some confusion but also appreciation. Anastasia and Jessica showed some confusion over the role and qualifications of the teachers:

Anastasia: I think they were all teachers at the preschool before. Maybe not, uh, at open preschool but at… But I don't know, like, if they have education.

Jessica: Do you remember what their titles are? (Interviewer: No). Something strange. Uh. I'm not going to remember what their official title is but I remember thinking that it was a little strange (laughs). They feel to me like they may be you know retired preschool teachers or maybe with an education background. Maybe not.

Priya, on the other hand, highlighted the role that the teachers played in making her feel welcome:

Priya: But some activities makes them outstanding. Like Christmas and some days just for parents. They (the teachers) give breakfast just for parents. They show that they care parents also. On that day, they care parents.

6.2.4.2 Interaction is encouraged but requires initiative

Participants believed that the aim and structure of open preschools encouraged interactions with others. Jessica explained the difference between interactions at open preschool and playgrounds, including the cultural aspect:

Jessica: The nice thing about the environment is that maybe on a playground you might be separated from other parents and not really chatting with strangers. It's encouraged there (open preschool) for you to actually be chatting with strangers. Which is not a typical Swedish activity (laughs). So in that regard I think it's actually really good because it did give you the opportunity to see that, yeah, one, another parent's child was hyperactive and maybe, OK, oh I have that problem too, maybe I should ask them what they do, whereas I would never do that on the playground here. Like culturally, not, not typical. Sure you can if you want to, but yeah, not typical.

Gemma also appreciated that she was able to talk with people at open preschool who she might otherwise not have had an opportunity to interact with:
Gemma: I enjoyed this conversation with the teacher the other day about careers. That was quite interesting. It's not often that you get the opportunity to speak to a more experienced Swede about things like that.

Some suggested that they were able to use their children as icebreakers to start interactions:

Gemma: I just, usually it's if [my child] starts playing with a certain kid, then you kind of strike up a conversation with that person.

Qinglian included the caveat, however, that she had to make a conscious decision to interact with the other parents:

Qinglian: For me, because I try to be really social—even though I don't think I'm a really social person—but I try to make friends in öppna förskola. But I know other friends from China, they don't have motivation or they have different sort so they don't talk much with Swedish people in öppna förskola. Even though the kids are having fun, they are having fun, but for integrating with the society they won't get any difference after the whole thing is finished.

Likewise, Stefanie and Gemma also mentioned the effort involved with interacting.

Stefanie: Mm, well, I was happy then that we got our kindergarten spot that I don't have to go there (to open preschool) anymore because of course it's an effort to go there as a parent and as well maybe sometimes you are not in the mood to communicate with others. And um, but still you don't want to lose your face and you have to be friendly so (laughs) of course this is the other point.

Gemma: When I go and I don't know anyone and I'm trying to speak in Swedish it's a bit more of an effort. But it's still just, yeah, nice to be somewhere new with new toys and a new environment.

A number of participants also noted that they had to initiate interactions with the teachers, rather than the other way around. Furthermore, many noted that while they did not seek advice from the teachers, they felt that they could have:

Jessica: There was not any advice given. Um. I'm trying to think around to all the different ones I went to. No, I wouldn't say that there was advice given. But I feel like if I had questions, that staff was always open to that. So I feel like I could have at any point in time pulled them to the side and said, “Hey, you know, what should I do here?” or if I had a one-on-one conversation with them I can also see them sharing advice during that conversation.
A number of other barriers to interaction were given, including hesitation approaching other parents, feeling uncomfortable and out of place, worry about being accepted, perceived discomfort by others, and a lack of privacy.

6.2.4.3 Building relationships despite transitory membership

Some noted that open preschools allowed them to build relationships with people over time, thus making the relationships deeper and more meaningful.

Qinglian: Otherwise I won't have much other chance to get to know new people. I feel, I heard from many people including my colleague from for example America or other country, Swedish most of the personality are not that open. They are, for example in a bus, they don't like to talk to strangers, so, for us, we are not come from this country. If we want to integrate with this society we need to make friends. One hand is not enough. We need to meet several times to get familiar then we can become friends.

Yet others, such as Gemma, recognized the potential of developing relationships over time, which acknowledging that she had not done that herself. Rather, she reported choosing to attend many different open preschools, valuing breadth over depth:

Gemma: I can see the benefit of going to the same one regularly and getting to know people a bit better. It's up to you whether you make the most of them or not. So I guess I haven't been so involved in the open preschool experience. Some people go every day to the same one and really get to know people. Um, and then you would build up friendships and the staff would get to know you and you'd say, “Oh he didn't sleep last night what should I do?” But I never really got that involved.

By definition, however, being a parent of a young child is transitory: the child will grow up. Parents attend open preschool for a short window with clearly defined limitations, from when the parent believes that the child is old enough to attend to the time that the child enters drop-off preschool. Rather than going through this cycle as a cohort, the timing is instead individualized for each person. Furthermore, the drop-in nature of open preschools means that it is difficult to predict who will be there and for how long. Jessica explained:

Jessica: It's not the same people every day. And so you really just have to keep putting yourself out there over and over and over again in the hopes that you find yourself an adult friend (laughs).

Some participants counteracted the transitory nature of open preschools by becoming friends with other parents there or introducing friends to the open preschool. Qinglian described
making friendships that extended beyond open preschool both physically and temporally, thus for her open preschools were a springboard for further interaction.

**Qinglian**: And I also made a lot of friends in öppna förskola. And some of them are from China and a few of them are living close to our apartment. We are neighbors. And so most probably their kids and our kids will go to the same förskola (preschool).

**6.2.4.4 Everyone speaks English yet communication barriers abound**

The fact that most people there (parents and staff) spoke English was also cited as a supportive aspect:

**Priya**: Most of the Swedes speak very good English (laughs) so it was easy to mingle with them, if it was a Swede or non-Swede.

Yet despite everyone speaking English, all participants identified language as a primary barrier to feeling accepted and comfortable at open preschools. Sarah and Gemma noted that they may have received less support from teachers:

**Sarah**: …because I don’t speak Swedish and definitely didn’t speak any Swedish when I started going there that I probably got less support than others did.

**Gemma**: I don't know if I've ever really gotten into that type of conversation (about child development) either because when I was talking in English maybe they didn't feel their English was so strong to discuss that sort of thing (Interviewer: Right). Maybe when I'm talking in Swedish my Swedish isn't as strong.

Jessica spoke to the difficulty sustaining conversations with other parents:

**Jessica**: And then it was interesting because I didn't speak the language and so every once in a while someone would talk to me and interact with me and ask me questions and then that was that (laughs). And then that didn't really continue.

She later elaborated:

**Jessica**: And so that part's really isolating and for me it's good to just see people. But then at the same time I didn't speak the language. So as much as I was going to socialize, it wasn't really truly socializing.

Qinglian further spoke to the privileged position of being an English-speaker, explaining that people who speak neither Swedish nor English are at an even greater disadvantage:

**Qinglian**: But for my parents-in-law, they only understand Swedish. So my husband this morning is taking them to öppna förskola to show them and so that when my husband return to work they can continue to take my daughter to öppna förskola. So this might be
a problem for them, the communication. They don't understand Swedish, they don't understand English, that's the problem. I believe if there's some new, let's see, someone just moved to Sweden and their Swedish is not so good and they don't understand English, they will have some difficulties to go to this place. Or even, maybe, they won't get this information (Interviewer: Right). They don't know there's öppna förskola. So. And um, maybe it's also difficult for öppna förskola to find other teacher knows so many languages. That's not possible, I think.

7. **DISCUSSION**

The aim of this project is to understand migrant mother’s perceptions of their learning at open preschools: what do they learn, how do they learn, and what are the barriers and supportive mechanisms? The findings indicate that there is a significant amount of learning occurring, both about mothering and specifically being a mother in Sweden. As the learning primarily occurred through informal means, the participants sometimes did not identify the learning as learning. Rather, they identified a myriad of other reasons as their motivation for attending, often elevating benefits for their child to the top. The image they present of open preschool is complex, with supportive mechanisms and barriers tightly intertwined. In this chapter, I interpret the findings in light of the communities of practice framework and main themes from the literature. First, I argue that open preschools can be communities of practice. Then, I examine in greater detail the ways in which their experiences at open preschool affected their sense of identity. Finally, I briefly lay out limitations of the study and implications for further work.

7.1 **Open Preschools as Communities of Practice**

I propose that open preschools can be sites of communities of practice. More specifically, certain characteristics of open preschools—such as the shared experience of caring for children, opportunity to meet and interact regularly, and tacit rules and routines—promote the creation of communities of practice. Their creation, however, is neither automatic nor assured (Wenger, 1998). The participants in this study went to different open preschools, attended them at different times, and brought their own backgrounds and motivations, therefore each person’s recounted experience aligned to a different degree with the CoP framework. However, when viewed as a whole, the findings indicate that participants often encountered CoPs at open preschool.

To be a community of practice, there must be joint enterprise, mutual engagement and a shared repertoire of communal resources (Wenger, 1998, 2000). For joint enterprise to occur, the members must have a shared interest or common goal that they are working towards. While everyone who attends open preschools—whether teachers, parents, grandparents or other
caregivers—is there because they in some capacity care for young children, on closer inspection their motivation is more complex, nuanced and varied. Some enterprises/motivations identified by the participants align with the primary determinants for playgroup attendance as identified by Harman, Guifoyle and O’Connor (2014): developing a sense of belonging, seeking validation as a mother, having a negative experience (a deterrent). An additional enterprise identified by participants, becoming more integrated into society, relates to the participants’ particular position as migrant mothers. These enterprises were at times at odds. For example, Megan was adamant that her motivation for attending was to benefit her child and she was not interested in socializing, whereas Qinglian highlighted her desire to gain access to Swedish society (through making friends and improving her understanding of the language). Yet despite the contradictions, the enterprises relate to the common aim of making open preschools a hospitable place for parents and children. An additional characteristic of joint enterprise—expected modes of behavior and ramifications if they are broken—is evident in the participants’ acknowledgement of the “unwritten rules.”

For mutual engagement to occur, the members must work and interact together. As open preschools are physical places where the participants go on a regular or semi-regular basis, they have the opportunity for interactions. All participants described having conversations with and observing other parent and teachers there. Furthermore, echoing Lindskov’s (2010) finding that parents view open preschools as professional receptions, study circles, and places for socializing, participants noted that the structure and purpose of the open preschools provided an opportunity and motivation for interacting together. Food provided by the open preschool was an enabling element, as participants recounted anecdotes of food sparking conversations. Furthermore, their children themselves can be viewed as enabling elements, as participants reported interacting with other parents only after their children began playing together, or commenting on another parent’s child as an icebreaker to begin an interaction. For engagement to occur, there needs to be some diversity within the community (Wenger, 1998). Likewise, the participants at open preschools have a diversity of backgrounds including different cultural backgrounds, different childrearing philosophies, and different amounts of experience raising children. This diversity leads to competencies that are at times overlapping (such as migrant parents working together to understand the “unwritten rules” of parenting in Sweden) and at times complimentary (such as new parents seeking the advice of more experienced parents). Thus, mutual engagement gives insight into who teaches the participants and how they learn.

A shared repertoire of communal resources has a shared history, richness and ambiguity (Wenger, 1998). They reported routines and rules that everyone followed. These rules were in
place before the participants began attending, thus they were part of the shared history. Parents reported observing the routines that other parents followed (community history), but also creating their own variations on the routine (making their own history). An example of a tool used is “mommy stuff” and the other similar terms used by participants as shorthand to encompass general parenting topics. Wenger (1998) notes that there is an element of ambiguity with tools and that they can be interpreted differently by different people or at different times. Likewise, depending on the context and tone of voice, “mommy stuff” could be said proudly (indicating membership in the “mommy” community), matter-of-factly (a neutral term to describe topics of conversation), or dismissively.

7.2 A Complex Web of Identity Formation

The findings indicate that migrant mothers undergo complex identity formation-related learning at open preschools. Rullo and Musatti (2005) suggest that part of the appeal of centers for children and parents may lie in their being low pressure meeting places. Parents do not have to make long-term commitments to each other; rather they can use them as a place of respite. Likewise, Abrahamsson and Samarasinghe (2013) find that parents view open preschools as safe spaces where they can be themselves. The participants in this study, however, describe presenting a specific facet of themselves at open preschools: themselves as mothers. Parenting was the primary topic of conversation, to the exclusion of almost everything else. Similarly, their observations of other parents and teachers focused solely on how they interacted with children. To use Wenger’s terminology, open preschools were a site of negotiated experience, where the participants’ interactions with others reinforced their reified view of themselves as “mothers.” This desire to interact as mothers with other mothers was reflected in many of the motivations for attending, which is in line with Rullo and Musatti’s (2005) finding that mothers of young children in specific have a deep-seated desire to spend time in the company of other parents of young children. Thus the paradox of building relationships despite the transitory nature of open preschools is perhaps not such a paradox. Open preschools provide interactions with other parents during the short, intense time that it is needed, without asking for any further obligations.

Not only did the participants desire to interact with other parents of young children, but they also valued interacting with others who had even more specific similarities to themselves, such as other parents of active children or other migrant parents. The relationships some participants described having with other migrant parents indicates that they created a mini-CoP within the larger open preschool CoP, with their shared experiences serving to draw them closer to each other and to exclude the Swedish parents. Another reason for the creation of a mini-CoP may be because of difficulties being accepted in to the general open preschool CoP. Participants
reported feeling excluded due to not understanding the language and feeling like an imposition asking others to switch to English, perhaps hindering their claim of legitimacy to become a full member. This, in turn, could explain why participants reported that interaction sometimes felt burdensome despite it being encouraged. The mini-CoP, however, may also serve as a response to Liamputong’s (2006) concept of the “double burden” faced by migrant mothers, giving them a place of support as they navigate the hardships associated with motherhood and migration.

Wenger’s (1998) concept of the nexus of membership, or the learning that occurs through struggling to incorporate one’s membership in multiple CoPs into a single identity, is also applicable. Supporting Yax Fraser’s (2011a, 2011b) concept of “cross-cultural mothering” and the often invisible intellectual component, the participants reported numerous instances of struggling to align their personal parenting frameworks (which they identified as being influenced by their home culture, family and/or books about child rearing—all possibly related to other CoPs) with the parenting they observed at open preschool. I have identified a few ways that the participants dealt with these discrepancies, including accepting the differences, adopting new strategies or philosophies, picking and choosing, and rejecting the new approach.

Kim et al. (2006) remind us to pay attention to the different experiences among seemingly homogeneous groups. Likewise, the participants followed a few different trajectories through the CoPs, with different implications for their learning. Sarah, for example, described moving from discomfort to comfort (an inbound trajectory), being an active participant, and learning a great deal. By contrast, Gemma noted that she attended several open preschools but never became a full member in any, thus describing a peripheral trajectory. The participants had different motivations and personalities, which affected the trajectories they chose. For Sarah, a very recent arrival with no other ties to Sweden, open preschool was her only opportunity to meet people, motivating her to become a full member. Gemma, on the other hand, reported valuing variety, feeling confident in her parenting skills, and having a strong network of friends, and thus may have had less need for full membership. She still, however, reported instances of learning which is also consistent with a peripheral trajectory. In sum, the participants were able to engage with the open preschools on their own terms and depending on their own needs.

It is important, however, not to minimize the larger societal forces at play. While hesitant to speculate about the motivations and biases of the individuals running open preschools—be it the teachers or administrators—a close investigation of the findings suggests that the mothers perceive that open preschools encouraged their identity to grow in certain directions. Widding (2015) suggests that dominant discourses about gender and class influence parents’ perceptions of parenthood and Eriksson et al. (2016) find a cultural dimension to perceptions of motherhood,
and likewise I suggest that open preschools encourage migrant mothers to mold their identities in ways that are heavily influenced by dominant Swedish discourses about gender and class.

Firstly, the participants’ experiences suggest that preschools promoted the official governmental policy of the “gender-equal family” (Lundqvist, 2015). Participants noted that fathers also attended open preschool and were viewed as competent caregivers for their children. Thus childrearing was assumed to be a shared task, not gender-specific. Breastfeeding in public was normalized rather than being viewed as something that should be confined to a women-only space. There was pressure to place older children in drop-off preschool, indicating that stay-at-home motherhood was not viewed as the ideal. Discussions about participants’ career options further implied that mothers should take part in the work force.

Secondly, open preschools encouraged the participants to adopt a view of children as having rights. It was expected that decisions about attending open preschool (how long to stay, what to do there, etc.) would be led by the children. Participants also noted that Swedish parents gave their children more “freedom” or agency to make decisions than parents in their home country did. Thirdly, open preschools subtly encouraged the participants to view themselves as mothers of young Swedes. In other words, open preschools were teaching the participants how to raise their children so that the children could benefit from a Swedish upbringing and identify—at least partially—as Swedish. Participants were encouraged to adopt or include Swedish ways of celebrating holidays, sing Swedish children's songs, put their children drop-off preschool like most Swedish parents do, and treat their children as having rights. Naturally, the participants did not blindly adopt these suggested views of motherhood. Rather, following Yax-Fraser’s (2011a; 2011b) findings, they actively engaged with them, adopting some aspects and rejecting others.

Furthermore, economic status adds an additional layer of complexity to the migrant mothers’ identity work. Supporting Llerena-Quinn and Pravder Mirkin’s (2005) study, the participants reported feeling welcomed and comfortable in open preschool especially when their parenting philosophy was well aligned with the dominant Swedish parenting discourses. As Mahohar and Busse-Cardenas (2011) suggest, they also at times adapted their concept of "good" or competent mothering to better align with Swedish parenting discourses. Yet even when participants reported instances of being at odds with Swedish parenting, they still demonstrated the ability to maintain their self-conception as a "good" or competent mother while challenging the discourse. Perhaps this ability stems from their privileged positions as members of the professional class, an idea supported by Llerena-Quinn and Pravder Mirkin’s (2005) study.

In short, through their identity work at open preschool, the participants learned about Swedish conceptions of motherhood and gender, and also about themselves. This learning was
perceived as learning to varying degrees, with some reflecting explicitly on the changes to their sense of identity and others merely alluding to it. In particular, the idea that holding onto one’s beliefs in the face of outside pressure is a form of learning was often unacknowledged. In other words, by rejecting aspects of motherhood that they saw at open preschool, they learned about their own priorities. Their privileged position as members of the professional class, however, may have supported their ability to challenge the dominant Swedish discourses.

7.3 Limitations and Implications for Further Research

The narrow scope of the project and small number of participants limit the extent to which the results can be generalized. The research does, however, point towards other potentially fruitful areas for further research. In particular, the criteria for selecting participants can be expanded in a number of ways, opening the discussion to a wider and more diverse group. Research could focus on gender, examining the experiences of fathers and gender non-conforming women and men. It could focus on socio-economic status. The participants in this study hailed from the professional class and moved to Sweden voluntarily, which Dunlop (2011) and Manohar and Busse-Cardenas (2011) suggest gives them a freedom and license to maintain their beliefs and pre-migration lifestyles that is not available to lower class migrants and refugees. Geography could be explored, comparing mothers from rural, suburban and urban Sweden. Non-traditional mothers (single mothers, mothers of adopted children, young mothers, etc.) could offer a different perspective.

It also would be interesting to examine the ways in which these findings could be applied in other contexts and in other countries. While all of the mothers believed there was a need for open preschools in their home country, the different political and economic structures, history and cultural values in each country mean that the concept would have to be adapted for each new context. For example, extended parental leave is both legally protected and socially acceptable in Sweden, which means that parents have time to be with their children and attend open preschools for an extended amount of time. In other countries with shorter average parental leaves, parents would cycle through open preschool more quickly, thus possibly changing the dynamic. Furthermore, Salminen-Karlsson (2006) warns that CoPs are not places of equality; rather larger societal discourses can influence people’s acceptance and perceived legitimacy. The role of power in open preschools, therefore, deserves a closer examination.
8. CONCLUSION

This project aims to shed light on the learning done by migrant mothers at Swedish open preschools, tackling the issue with an emphasis on the point of view of the mothers themselves. I find that the migrant mothers in my small-scale qualitative study overwhelmingly perceived open preschools as places of support, with some also perceiving them as places of learning. Yet all described instances of informal learning consistent with Wenger’s (1998) community of practice framework, particularly learning related to forming their identities as migrant mothers. Consistent with the research on centers for parents and young children and motherhood in migration, the open preschools met the mothers’ primal need for interaction with others in a similar situation and gave them a supportive place to engage in the often tacit intellectual work of navigating motherhood in a new country. Migration, motherhood and motherhood in migration can be lonely and confusing experiences. After all, it’s not like someone hands you a brochure explaining explicitly how it is done. Nevertheless, open preschools can give migrant mothers something even more valuable: a healthy community of practice that meets their individual needs. This study proposes that open preschools play a vital role in supporting parental learning and easing the transition to life in Sweden for migrant mothers.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Interview Guide - Open Preschools as Sites of Learning for Immigrant Mothers
Ariana Moir
As of 2/21/2017

Background
- Please tell me a little bit about yourself.
  - Name, age and gender
  - What is your nationality? Where did you grow up? Where have you lived as an adult and for how long?
  - What brought you to Sweden? When? How did you feel about it?
  - Tell me about your family. How many children do you have? Ages? Who are you living with (husband or partner)? How would you describe your relationship with your extended family?

Open Preschool General Experience
- Tell me a bit about your experiences at open preschools.
  - When did you start going to open preschools? Why?
  - How regularly do you go?
  - Which one or ones do you go to? How did you hear about them?
- Could you very briefly walk me through a typical open preschool visit for you?
  - When you are at the preschool, do you talk to other parents or staff? What do you talk about?
  - Have you made any friends through open preschool?
  - Would you say that most people attending seem to have a similar typical day to yours or does it vary?
- What do you like most about open preschool? What do you like least?

Open Preschool Learning
- What are some of your first memories of open preschool?
- When you compare your memories of those first days to more recent memories, do you notice any changes in yourself or your thinking? For example?

- Can you think of any experiences that you’ve had at open preschools that stand out?
  - Do any other experiences come to mind?
  - What made them so memorable?

“Earlier you mentioned xxx, I’d like to talk a little more about (parenting/assimilating to life in Sweden)”

Parenting
- The Solna city website describes open preschools as “aimed at both children and adults.” What do you think about that?
  - In what ways do you think preschools are beneficial for adults?
  - In what ways could they be improved?
The website further states that “Trained staff can advise you on toys, child development, etc.” Have you found this to be true for you personally, as a parent?
  o If you agree with the statement, could you give me some examples? If not, in why not?
  o Does parenting support need to be improved and if so how?

What factors would you say have influenced your parenting philosophy?
How does your parenting philosophy mesh with the parenting that you observed at the open preschool?
  o Could you give me some examples?
  o How did that make you feel?
  o Were there any times that you changed or questioned your own parenting based on what you saw or heard?

Assimilating to Sweden

Could you give me some specific examples of things about Sweden that you learned in open preschool?
How else have you learned about Sweden?
How else could the open preschool have supported your learning about Sweden?

Final Thoughts

Have you had any experiences at open preschool that made you feel at all uncomfortable? Would you mind sharing it/them?
On the other side, have you had any experiences that were really positive?
Overall, would you say that open preschool has been a place of learning for you personally?
What else would you like to tell me?

After the interview, I will note:

How the interview went (impression of interviewee)
Where the interview took place
Any other feelings about the interview
The setting
Other participants (e.g. the interpreter) and initial thoughts about how that influenced the interview
APPENDIX B

Research Project Information
The purpose of this project is to gather information about the learning experiences non-Swedish mothers have at Swedish open preschools (öppna förskolor).

Participation involves being interviewed. An interpreter will be provided if requested. The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes and will be audio-recorded. Approximately eight people will be interviewed.

Research is conducted by Ariana Moir, a graduate student from Linköping University, for her Master’s thesis.

Consent for Participation in Interview Research

- My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

- If I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.

- Information gathered from the interview will be recorded, stored and reported following best practices for confidentiality. Personal details such as name and address will not be revealed to people outside the project.

- Information gathered will only be used for research purposes. It will not be used for commercial or other non-scientific uses.

- I have read and understand the information provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction.

- I have been given a copy of this consent form.

____________________________  ____________________
My Signature                  Date

____________________________  ____________________
My Printed Name                Signature of the Researcher

For further information, please contact Ariana Moir at arimo488@student.liu.se or 073-155-3834.
APPENDIX C

Seeking Volunteers for a Research Project

The purpose of this research project is to examine open preschools (öppna förskolor) as places of learning for migrant mothers.

To participate, you must:
• Be a mother
• Attend open preschool regularly
• Have moved to Sweden after 2012

Participation involves:
• One 30 minute-1 hour long interview in English or in the language of your choice (with an interpreter)

For more information, please contact Ariana Moir at arimo488@student.liu.se or 073-155-3834.

Ariana Moir, graduate student, Linköping Universitet
Master’s thesis research project