



Beyond Colour-Blind Intercultural Education: Operationalising the Concept of Culture for Future Preschool Teachers

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ABSTRACT Swedish preschool teachers have a duty to protect and promote cultural diversity in their teaching and care of young children. Yet, there are underlying notions of culture in the national curriculum for preschools and university preschool teacher education that accentuate rather than undermine existing racial inequality. Preschool teachers' understandings of culture and cultural difference matter for how they treat children, parents and colleagues. This means that what university Early Childhood Education programs teach about cultural difference also matters, since students will ultimately work in preschools and apply their knowledge in practice. In this article I draw on my experience as a faculty member in a School of Education to scrutinise course literature used in preschool teacher education and my supervision of student dissertations on the topic of cultural diversity in preschools. I argue that teacher education often delivers well-intentioned, colour-blind, anti-racist approaches to cultural diversity, which inadvertently sustain rather than change the status quo around everyday and systemic forms of racism. I then discuss the supervision process through which some students came to incorporate critically oriented approaches towards race relations in their observations of preschool practice. Some students were able to rethink how preschool teachers can operationalise the concept of culture by embracing an open-ended and explorative anthropological stance. Their analysis of preschool practice, therefore, can inform a wider theory of culture, valuable for both educational sciences and anthropology in practice.

Key words: applied anthropology; intercultural education; colour-blindness; teacher education

Introduction

Anthropological perspectives on the concept of culture can contribute to improving university preschool teacher education programs and teacher practices in preschool. Preschool teachers' understandings of culture and cultural difference matter for how they treat children, parents and colleagues. This means that what university teacher education programs teach about culture also matters, since students will ultimately work in preschools. In this article I draw on my experiences as a faculty member at a School of Education to examine underlying notions of culture in teacher education literature and how undergraduate students make sense of these notions as they go out to observe preschool teaching practice. I show that the intercultural education approach, which is endorsed in educational policy at all levels and taught in teacher education, rests upon a well-meaning, colour-blind, anti-racist stance that tends to omit or obscure historic and systemic racism as an integral part of cultural diversity and race-relations in Sweden (Mulinari and Neergard 2017; Hübinett and Lundström

2014; Hällgren 2005). I also discuss how many of the students whose dissertations I supervise observe these troubling issues, and how we work together to discover ways for preschool teachers to operationalise the concept of culture without resorting to stereotyping, essentialism and everyday racism.

I begin by positioning this article within the literature on critical race theory in education and then discuss in more detail why Swedish preschool teacher education is a particularly interesting case for studying colour-blind anti-racism. After a brief methodological description, I show how the teacher education literature and students' analyses of preschool practice either reproduce or contest stereotyping and deficit perspectives on the culture of the 'Other' in preschool settings. I then argue, based on students' own observations, for an open-ended and explorative anthropological stance that questions what it means to say that a particular social encounter in preschool is about 'cultural difference'. The case that I explore here provides an empirical example of how educational institutions can invalidate or leave out critical discussions of race-relations in the name of anti-racism. Such 'insidious aggressive intercultural interactions' go unnoticed because they are politically acceptable in our time (Valencia 2010).

Intercultural Education: Contesting or Sustaining Difference?

For the past 40 years, intercultural education has been upheld as a possible strategy to respect and promote cultural diversity at all levels of education, from preschool to university (Mikander et al. 2018). UNESCO introduced the concept in the early 1970s with the intention that education should 'promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial and religious groups', and 'further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace' (UNESCO 2006: 8). The formulations of tolerance and peace, characteristic of the 1970s intercultural era, have since developed to focus on social inclusion, social equity, accessibility, and quality of education for all (Silva et al. 2020; Bove and Sharmahd 2020).

In Sweden, the national curriculum for preschools incorporates rights to culture, stating:

Children belonging to national minorities, which include the indigenous Sami people, should ... be supported in their language development in their national minority language and promoted in their development of a cultural identity. The preschool should thereby help to protect and promote the languages and cultures of the national minorities. (National Agency for Education 2018: 9).

At the same time, the policy suggests that preschool is based on a *uniform* cultural heritage, including values, traditions and history, which should be taught to children. This can be seen in statements such as, "The preschool's task includes transferring and developing a cultural heritage – values, traditions and history, language and knowledge – from one generation to the next" (National Agency for Education 2018: 9).

The formulations concerning the right to culture are of crucial importance since such formal rights were denied to the ethnic minorities in Sweden until the mid-1970s. At the same time, the policy also suggests that there is one distinct Swedish culture, separate from minority cultures. In both cases (minority and Swedish), culture is constructed as fixed and bounded, rather than hybrid and fluid. This characterisation becomes clearer when seen in

contrast to, for example, the Finnish school curriculum, where *all* students are described as having multi-layered and multicultural identities (see Zilliacus et al. 2017).

Sweden formally incorporated the intercultural education approach in education policy in 1983 (Department for Education 1983). However, many reports have highlighted the difficulties in implementing the intentions of intercultural education in practice (Hällgren 2005; Bayati 2014; Lunneblad 2017, 2013; Åkerblom and Harju 2019; Odenbring and Johansson 2019). Researchers argue that the core of the problem is a lack of thorough analysis of the underlying theoretical concepts of intercultural education (Hällgren et al. 2006; Norberg 2000; Hammarén and Lunneblad 2017). Often, intercultural educational approaches build on simplistic, essentialist and static notions of culture and classifications of people into the categories of ‘national’ and ‘migrant’ (Åkerblom and Harju 2019; Hällgren 2005). Educators may thus reinforce differences and stereotypes instead of creating inclusive, equal and transformative pedagogies (Zilliacus et al. 2017). Gorski (2008) argues that although the goals of intercultural education are well-intentioned, the perspective rarely serves to challenge dominant racial hegemonies, prevailing social hierarchies, or inequitable distributions of power and privilege. A more productive approach would instead examine racism as an inherent part of the dominant society’s state-formation, a fundamental principle of social organisation in modern society, educational institutions, and everyday life (Mulinari and Neergard 2017; Hällgren 2005). This is where critical race theory can play a significant role. Critical race theory “challenges dominant claims of race and gender neutrality, objectivity, universalism, ahistoricism, colour-blindness, and equal opportunity” (Allen 2012: 173). I now turn to some key concepts in critical race theory as they relate Swedish racialised political and institutional contexts.

Understanding Swedish Racism

Sweden’s self-image is of a country deeply committed to Social Democratic notions of solidarity, social justice, and anti-racism, and as a champion of human rights. Yet Sweden has a violent history of exploiting black, ethnic minority and indigenous populations¹, as well as an extreme right-wing party represented in government, and asylum rules in line with minimum standards under EU law (Mulinari and Neergard 2017; Hübinett and Lundström 2014; Ministry of Justice 2019). Decades of austerity politics and welfare institutional fragmentation have resulted in fast-rising inequality and social ethno-racial segregation in the labour- and housing market, and in education (Ålund et al. 2017; Beach and Sernhede 2011). The widespread presence of systemic and everyday racism is evident in a recent shadow report on Sweden’s compliance with the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) (Civil Right Defenders 2018). These include high rates of hate crimes and a lack of adequate protection in the criminal justice system regarding hate crimes, racial profiling, and hate speech; discrimination related to Roma EU-citizens’ rights to health care, primary education, social services and protection against hate crime and forced evictions; and breaches of Sami rights to self-determination, land, language and culture.

¹ Sweden’s involvement in the slave trade between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries is well documented, as well as its presence in international scientific circles as a leading nation on racial biology in the early 20th century. Sweden’s modern history builds also on centuries of oppression of indigenous and national ethnic minority groups, including the Sami, Swedish Finns, Tornedalers, Roma, and Jews (Hällgren 2005).

This widespread denial of racism is evident not only in Sweden's self-image, but also in its education systems. Swedish secondary-school text books do not always account for racism as part of Swedish history and contemporary society (Johnsson Harrie 2016). There is evidence of children's widespread experiences of racism and discrimination in schools (Odenbring and Johansson 2019; Hällgren 2005) and that university students experience racism in teacher education programs (Bayati 2014). The Swedish Black Lives Matter protests called for teaching about Afrophobia and other forms of racism during the academic year 2020-2021 and demanded that educators revise and update teaching material to remove stereotypes and historical inaccuracies and to add anti-racism to its content (The Afro-Swedes' forum for justice 2020).² Colour-blindness and colour-blind racism likely play a role in the silencing of basic anti-racist demands and the ways in which Swedish pedagogical discourse and practice can reproduce culturally acceptable forms of institutional racism (Lundberg 2015). Colour-blind anti-racism builds on the inner logic that 'race should not matter' and that it is best to ignore the issue of race in order to fight racism. As a result, the colour-blind approach to racism serves to maintain white domination. In adopting 'colour-blind' approaches, many educators resist discussion of racial issues, claiming not to see or be affected by the racial makeup of their students (Allen 2015). In this way, teachers...

...exonerate themselves in the maintenance of racial hegemony, and fail to understand how social and institutional racism pervade the lives of students of colour both inside and outside the classroom. Additionally, by avoiding critical examinations of racism, many educators rely on their own understandings of students of colour, which in many cases reflect dominant stereotypical and deficit views of culture. (Allen 2015: 72)

Deficit theory holds that inequality is the result, not of systemic inequities in access to power, but of intellectual and ethical deficiencies in particular groups of people (Gorski 2008). Deficit theorists draw on stereotypes already well-established in the mainstream psyche in order to pathologise oppressed communities rather than problematising the perpetrators of their oppressions (Gorski 2008). For example, in Sweden, black and ethnic minorities are often represented as migrants in a permanent state of unsuccessful adjustment to mainstream society due to their alien culture (Sabuni 2019). In this way, culture can be attributed with too much explanatory value and used as a simple model to explain behaviour, actions and events (see also Wedel, this volume). This contrasts with the use of culture in contemporary anthropology, where differences between the analytical, scientific and public use of the concept of culture have long been discussed (Taylor 2003; Kuper 1999). Often the anthropologist of today is more inclined to examine why narratives of cultural difference hold currency in a particular social context, rather than regarding culture as a useful explanatory device (Skelton and Allen 2005). A recent example in Swedish anthropology shows that political rhetoric on the need to ban Muslim face veils in Swedish public life is more concerned with conceptualising Swedishness than addressing the actual prevalence and nature of the assumed 'problem' for Swedish culture and values (Frisk and Gillette 2019). However, anthropologists also 'reclaim culture' to show that it has intrinsic value in understanding 'others' and 'ourselves' without necessarily buying into exotifying and neo-colonial perspectives (Engelke 2018). Engelke warns against "reducing cultural differences to the point of inconsequence" (Engelke 2018: 240).

² However, discussions about the implications of the BLM protests among educators and administrators at my university have yet to take place, at the university level and for the School of Education.

This short review shows the need to scrutinise whether teacher and preschool education programs in Sweden reproduce or contribute to changing well-intentioned yet colonising intercultural practices. I now turn to the methods and research context for the case study that I present arguing for the necessity to connect teacher education, government policy and preschool practice in such an analysis.

Methodology and Research Context

In the following pages I examine notions of culture in mandatory course literature from the Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood (or preschool) Education and in 50 undergraduate student final dissertations. For their dissertations, students interviewed teachers about how they implemented the duty to respect and promote cultural diversity in preschool (National Agency for Education 2018). I provide a qualitative content analysis of this material. My purpose is to connect national policy formulations, teacher education literature and preschool practice, an alignment necessary to develop inclusive education.

The bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education is a three and a half year teacher education program, recognised as a professional qualification for work in nurseries and preschools with children aged one to seven. In addition to academic courses the degree includes 20 weeks of work placement in local preschools. The degree program is shaped by the values, norms and content specified in the Swedish national curriculum for preschools (National Agency for Education 2018). This is a government policy directive revised every few years that all preschools in Sweden are required to follow.

My scrutiny of the teacher education literature reveals that colour-blindness, deficit notions of culture and stereotyping inform the bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education as it is currently taught. I illustrate the ways in which 'critical perspectives' of cultural diversity are marginalised and normative assumptions about cultural difference are sustained.

Some students take a particular interest in how preschool teachers work with cultural diversity in practice and choose to explore this topic in depth for their final dissertations. I am considered a particularly suitable supervisor for these dissertations because of my disciplinary background in anthropology. Since 2016, I have supervised more than 50 students investigating this topic. These supervisions have given me the opportunity to engage closely with what students learn about cultural diversity in preschool during their degree program, as well as in the policy formulations concerning culture in the preschool national curriculum.

Below I discuss literature that is or has recently been used to teach intercultural education in the School of Education where I work. Translations provided are my own. These texts may or may not represent the authors' current positions on the issues discussed; in some cases, more recent publications incorporate more nuanced perspectives than those presented here. I focus however on these specific texts because they are mandatory readings in the preschool teacher degree program. The Early Childhood Education degree also offers an elective module that incorporates more recently published literature, including anti-racist literature. This course is not compulsory and is offered after the dissertation course, so I do not discuss this course literature here.

Following my discussion of the mandatory literature in the degree program, I turn to the students' dissertation research. All the students whose dissertations that I cite and discuss

in detail have given permission for this use.³ The translations provided are my own (the preschool curriculum policy document is available in English). Since the students' texts were originally written in Swedish, translation makes it more difficult, though not impossible, to trace this work (some of these dissertations are published online via the university's library system). The participating students are aware of this possibility. To preserve confidentiality, I have altered some identifying details related to the students and children they write about. They are for example, the language spoken of the persons involved. A final issue relates to the views presented and the identity of the preschool teachers whom the students have interviewed in their dissertations. Though I sometimes provide direct quotes from the students' interviews, the students have presented their interviewees anonymously in their own texts. Identifying these individual interviewees through the present article is thus highly unlikely.

Notions of Culture in the Preschool Teacher Education Curriculum

The required reading for the Early Childhood Education program related to cultural diversity and the preschool setting includes conceptual pieces (Lahdenperä 2018) and texts based on ethnographic research (Sandberg and Vuorinen 2007; Lunneblad 2017; Karlsson 2016). The research data in the latter texts are mostly interviews with preschool teachers, sometimes accompanied by materials from classroom observations (*ibid.*). This research is published in Swedish-language, non-peer reviewed textbooks that are geared specifically towards students. As I show below, essentialism, cultural determinism, social constructionism, as well as 'critical approaches' to the concept of culture can be found in these texts. I now turn to examples of these perspectives from the literature.

Presenting Cultural Difference as Problematic

A textbook by Sandberg and Vuorinen (2007) concerns ways in which preschool teachers can collaborate with parents and guardians effectively. The book discusses different degrees of parental participation and engagement (from none to decision-making power); the diverse aims of collaboration such as to ensure the best interest of the child and to support parenting; how collaboration can be carried out in practice; and factors that facilitate and undermine collaboration. The book is an interesting example in that it entirely excludes an intercultural education perspective. It suggests that collaboration takes place in a context of social change, and describes this change in terms of an increasing group of middle class parents who want to participate and influence the preschool education and care. Though such demands can put pressure on preschool teachers and be challenging for them, the authors also regard engaged parents as a prerequisite for good collaboration to take place. Cultural diversity is not part of the author's account of social change. Ethnic and national minorities' formal rights to culture and language is excluded in the account. So is the increasingly culturally diverse Swedish population, due to labour- and forced migration, since the 1950s. Yet, the book discusses cultural differences in passing as an obstacle for preschool teachers' ability to collaborate with parents. A 'common framework' or shared culture is said to facilitate collaboration. The authors' views concerning the factors that

³ In some cases, I have not been able to reach students to ask for their informed consent because the university administration does not have their contact details. None of this work is cited.

facilitate (and obstruct) preschool teachers' collaboration with parents can be seen in the following extract:

The main factor that facilitates collaboration is that the parent and the preschool teacher/ carer can depart from a shared common framework. A common framework can entail that the parent and the personnel share *thinking patterns and language* and that they hold a common view of children and preschool education. It can also include the sharing of *common tradition and religious beliefs*; similar perceptions of time, gender roles and methods of raising children. Parents and personnel will then, by acting in a similar social and cultural context, come to share *common values*. They can furthermore share a common view of the parent's and the preschool personnel's respective roles in the child's upbringing and nurturing. The common frame of reference is also visible in personal interactions when parents and personnel have a similar way of *relating to other people*. They then act according to each other's expectations concerning *greeting procedures and eye contact*. (Sandberg and Vuorinen 2007: 101, my emphasis).

This text is an instance of an implicit racist discourse about the 'Other' linked to a positive representation of 'ourselves' (Hällgren 2005). Though the text is not explicit, in the Swedish context the references to greeting procedures and eye contact presumably refer to long-running political debates around the reluctance of some Muslims to shake hands with persons of the opposite sex (Nieminen and Mustasaari 2018). This textbook implies that the culture of the 'immigrant other' is problematic and, given that it inhibits collaboration between parents and teachers, inferior.

In a text by Lahdenperä (2018), it is also clear that parents of 'immigrant background' have cultural deficits from the Swedish preschool's perspective:

For many parents with migrant backgrounds the preschool is the first contact with Swedish life, culture and views of child rearing. In the preschool, one becomes, as a parent, socialised into Swedish culture with its demands for time management and time adjustment since one has to ask for permission or inform the preschool in advance about absence and illness. One also has to adjust to the climate by dressing children with purposeful and marked clothes in relation to weather, and participate in activities at the preschool. (Lahdenperä 2018: 66)

In this infantilising depiction of parents 'with migrant backgrounds', we learn that 'they' are fundamentally different from 'us' not only when it comes to time-keeping, but also in their ability to label their children's clothes. The author discusses these issues explicitly in terms of parents' cultural backgrounds. Lahdenperä also categorises the world's cultures into three ideal types: preindustrial, industrial and post-industrial societies and economic systems (or cultures). Indeed, the text takes a colonising view of 'the Other' by ranking cultures and classifying different cultural groups according to this ranking system. The post-industrial system, which the Swedish preschool is said to represent (and to which presumably the author herself belongs), is the most sophisticated ideal type in terms of human development, while the pre-industrial system is farthest removed from the Swedish preschool's norms, values and practices. For example, in the pre-industrial society, adults may strike at children in rage, but in the industrial society, a parent can control and regulate her emotions, and learning takes place largely through instruction rather than beatings. In the post-industrial society, Lahdenperä suggests, child rearing is individualised and child-centric. The author provides no concrete evidence in support of these claims, which seem to be based on personal impressions and opinions around the problem of the immigrant cultures for preschool

education. Lahdenperä cautions against ethnocentrism and claims that the ideal types of societal systems promote an intercultural perspective on the relationship between the preschool and the parents with migration background. The argument is that the ideal types ‘problematise taken-for-granted assumptions regarding Swedish ways of raising children and in this way facilitate more of an intercultural approach towards parents and guardians’ (Lahdenperä 2018: 62). The ‘intercultural perspective’ is in this way used to legitimise a reductionist view of culture.

In the next section, I elaborate on the diversity of perspectives within intercultural education to show texts that are based on anti-racist sentiments, yet often in colour-blind and inconsistent ways.

Colour-Blind, Anti-Racist Intercultural Education

Karlsson (2016) (citing previous research) highlights the tendency in Swedish school settings to not regard cultural diversity as enriching for the school, but to focus instead on parents’ shortcomings and deficiencies. Citing Lunneblad (2013), she points out that preschool teachers should avoid creating a social milieu of ‘Us versus Them’. An intercultural approach, in Karlsson’s view, is “a reflective process in which cultures can enrich one another” and “entails collaboration between cultures where ethnic cultures, religion, way of life, cosmologies, ways of thinking and so forth enrich one another” (Karlsson 2016: 131-132). The text, based on interviews with preschool teachers, provides an account of how preschool teachers approached cultural diversity. They reflect the position that one should respect, know about and explore differences, often through close contact with parents, yet not read too much into the significance of ethnicity.⁴ Children may not perceive that they are different because they (or their parents) were born in a foreign country, and some preschool teachers regard children as having dual identities, such as both Swedish and Somali. Yet, in one instance, the text also treats culture in a less fluid and changeable sense, reflecting a particularistic and static view of culture, which appears to fuel the ‘Us versus Them’ perspective. Karlsson cites an interview with a preschool teacher (called Daniela in the text) who emphasises the value of ‘cultural competency’ training about ‘Somali and Roma cultures’ that she participated in. According to the preschool teacher Daniela, knowledge about children’s experiences and cultural background is a basic precondition for intercultural pedagogy. Yet in the preschool teacher’s description of the lecture on cultural competency that she attended, Somali culture is seemingly discussed in a particularistic and exotifying cultural sense, detached from the particular individual children and adults of the preschool. Below is an excerpt from Karlsson’s interview with Daniela:

We have had some lectures about different cultures... She [the lecturer] knew a lot about the Somali culture and of all these different groups we have here with us. So she lectured about their customs and their ways of thinking, how they live and that, which is completely different compared to Sweden. So, for example Somali fathers who have several women, who have one woman here, who have one woman in Norway, who have one woman in Australia. It can be pretty hard to understand, why the dads, most of them, don’t live together with their children and their women, but they can live for example in Norway and not in Sweden, and the mother is here with four, five, six children. But they are not all their children either, and

⁴ Karlsson uses ethnicity (etnicitet) here, which she does not define, but she uses it interchangeably with origin (ursprung) and background (bakgrund).

then she explained what it is like in Somalia: One man with camels moves to different places and then he has one place here and a woman, so then he comes to a town and has another woman and children with her and then he goes to the first woman. Often when they move, then the first woman, who has highest status, she has all his children and comes for example to Sweden. Then all children go here, for example at this preschool and then the man is somewhere else and that, so for those who do not know and are not interested it is still very hard to understand it. (Karlsson 2016: 142)

Karlsson's comment on the quote above is that

there can be great differences in the families' ways of living that are unknown and hard to understand. Training about cultural differences is one important element in the preschool work. (Karlsson 2016: 142)

In my view the 'knowledge' about 'Somali culture' here is undermining the intercultural approach that Karlsson supports. It is portraying Somali culture as frozen in time, as discrete and uniform. It seems not to trouble the author to accept the preschool teacher's deduced stereotype and exotic view of Somali culture.

Some authors in the mandatory course literature discuss the tendency in educational settings to regard 'Swedishness' as the norm and gold standard against which other cultures are compared (e.g. Lahdenperä 2018). Such texts also discuss why using terms such as 'Swede' versus 'immigrant' (*invandrare*), terms inherited from a history of racism, denial of racism and ethnic discrimination, are problematic (e.g. Lunneblad 2017). At the same time, these same texts can reproduce the tendencies that they criticise. For example, in one text, preschool teachers and parents use the terms 'Swede' and 'immigrant' as categorically immutable groups, which is commonplace in popular discourse. The author retains these terms in the analysis, even though he finds them problematic, explaining "I would lose something of the closeness towards those people I followed if I would transform the term immigrant to a more politically correct expression" (Lunneblad 2013: 32). An employment of racist terms is here depoliticised and reduced to a discussion of political correctness (see Mikander et al. 2018). The author goes on to argue that critical race theory and critical multicultural education are not applicable to the Swedish historical and political context. The argument is that Sweden does not have a violent history of racial oppression on par with countries such as USA, Canada, United Kingdom and Australia. To dismiss the presence of racism in Swedish history in this way, is ahistoric and serves to invalidate Swedish racial minorities' struggles for equal opportunity and political recognition, including the recent Swedish BLM protests. Such 'intercultural' texts sustain the dominant claims of race neutrality, colour-blindness and equal opportunity in Sweden, thus upholding the status quo of racial inequalities in Sweden.

Students' Observations of Preschool Practice

Many students are critical of literature they have read during their degree programs, and of practices they have observed in preschools during their work placements. Some take a special interest in how preschools can ensure equality and equity in working with cultural diversity. These students sometimes describe situations in preschools in which ethnic minority children are excluded in everyday teaching and care practices. One of the students observed the following during work placement in a preschool, which he subsequently described in his dissertation:

The preschool had some children from the Middle East and these children seemed to not have a good command of Swedish. It appeared to me that several of these children were largely ignored by preschool teachers. It was like the teachers didn't really know what to do with them and they were not included in the group of children like the others. It made me so sad. It seemed the preschool teachers didn't know much about the children's skills and abilities and did not know the children well, even though the children had been at the preschool for several months.

Another group of students⁵ said they wanted to explore how preschools could work inclusively and in a non-discriminatory fashion with children. The following incident observed at the preschool, and presented in the dissertation, sparked their interest:

There was a small three years old girl who spoke Tigrinya, like me, and she didn't speak Swedish. I once observed how she tried to make two preschool teachers understand her. They however did not understand what she wanted to say. After a while, they went to another section of the preschool to ask another preschool teacher for help. That preschool teacher spoke Tigrinya too. I don't know why they didn't ask me for help, but I was sitting with another group of children, so maybe they didn't want to interrupt me. When they left to fetch the other teacher, the child turned to me and said: "Please Miss, can I have the toy from the shelf up there?" I gave it to her, and I couldn't really understand what had just happened. It was such a simple situation to understand. I mean, even children who have not started to use verbal language are easy to understand. I couldn't forget it. I wondered if the situation would had turned out differently if the child had been White.

Students have rarely discussed such issues in depth during their degree. In the first phases of supervision, I invite students to discuss observations they have made in preschool practice. I then provide them with a new body of literature to help them navigate the politicised context in which narratives of cultural diversity and difference take place. I typically suggest that students familiarise themselves with essentialist, social constructionist and post-colonial perspectives on culture and ethnicity. Students need time to read and digest this literature. As I show in the following paragraphs, it is often while discussing their own interview materials in depth during supervision that the significance of the different concepts and issues become concrete and start to make sense to them.

The sections below shed light on some of the key themes that emerge from students' interviews with preschool teachers. When these teachers talk about cultural difference, it is frequently a euphemism used to position oneself in relation to unequal race relations in a deeply racist yet colour-blind society. As in the teacher education literature, preschool teachers usually suggest that culture plays a role in situations involving black and ethnic minority individuals. However, there is often weak evidence to that effect.

The Presumed Presence of Culture: Normative Cultural Narratives

The first theme I want to explore is how preschool teachers and students readily buy into a narrative of cultural difference when describing interactions across racialised groups. Individuals *expect* culture to play a role and *describe* social action as such, rather this necessarily being the case. Moreover, preschool teachers often rank cultures implicitly or explicitly, with 'Swedish ways' usually coming out on top, reflecting a deficit view of the culture of the 'Other' (Gorski 2008).

⁵ In the School of Education's Early Childhood Education program, students write their dissertations in pairs.

In one dissertation, a pair of students carried out interviews with teachers in a preschool that had a large proportion of black and ethnic minority children. One of the students had carried out a work placement there and had the impression that the preschool teaching was inclusive of all children. She thought that the preschool teachers' ethnic minority background could be a contributing factor. When she and her co-researcher returned to the preschool, they were disappointed to find the preschool teachers mostly talked about their work in terms of being overwhelmed by the 'diversity of cultures'. At the same time, the students also suspected that the preschool teachers thought this was what the students wanted to hear. To quote:

It seemed like, when we turned up there wanting to interview them and write about them, they said what they thought we wanted them to say and saw us as these blond and blue eyed 'ethnic Swedes'. They said they wanted to promote Swedish culture above all other cultures.

Some of the preschool teachers said that in working with children of 'foreign backgrounds', they chose to promote 'Swedish culture' above other 'cultures' because they felt that there were too many cultures to consider. To quote an interviewee in the dissertation:

Sometimes I feel it is too much hard work with many cultures involved. It is better then to go for Swedish culture in preschools. Otherwise it becomes too much. Sometimes it is just too much.

Some of the preschool teachers had the view that children with an 'immigrant' background often needed to be socialised to be able to conduct themselves at the same developmental level as 'Swedish' children of the same age. An example that they gave was that some children ate with their hands rather than with cutlery. The preschool teachers also said that they mostly observed 'cultural differences' in relation to the parents. For example, they said that parents did not comprehend that the preschool was a place for learning, but rather saw it as a place for care and nursing; that parents did not address and talk to their children but spoke 'over their heads' and preferred talking to the preschool teachers; and that children were sometimes overweight because parents gave them too much food. The preschool teachers further talked about 'culture shock' in relation to different ideas about gender roles and ways of raising children. One teacher said, "It is also because of culture that children are not used to dads cooking food, but only mums. When children play in the play-kitchen, one child might say, I am a boy, and I can't cook. Then I say, well, you can try it out".

The teacher went on

There are parents who do not want girls and boys to sit next to each other and play together. For children it works in one way in the home and in another way in the preschool. Because at home they have their ways of raising children and how things should be. Then in preschool we have another way of raising children and other values and it can become a clash for children sometimes.

In these interviews, the teachers appear to assume that culture and cultural difference are what is at stake. The 'culture card' legitimises grouping together differences observed among black and ethnic minority children as 'the culture of the Other'. Using the concept of culture in this sense is commonplace and deeply rooted in Swedish society, so the teachers can talk about it as a self-evident fact. Students often think that this is a reasonable assumption as well.

When confronted by these assumptions, I encourage the students to ask whether the issues here are accurately described as cultural issues, or whether they might more specifically be about different ways of eating, different developmental stages, different styles of parenting, and different views of traditional gender roles.

Some students observed that in relation to White parents, preschool teachers were more inclined to apply an individualist perspective rather than talking about culture as an explanation. For example, teachers talked about White parents with sexist views as ‘difficult individuals’, and not as representatives of a collective (Swedish) ‘culture’.

In some cases, the ‘cultural difference’ narrative was used to conceal preschool teachers’ insecurities and manifest their good intentions, their concern ‘to do it right’ and not offend children and parents, particularly in relation to Muslim parents. In the quote below, a preschool teacher is concerned that the Swedish tradition to dress up as witches at Easter may cause offence:

We have a family from Syria. They are Muslims. I personally don't know much about Islam, about how a Muslim lives. I said for example [to the parents] that the girl can dress up as an Easter witch because we do that here in Sweden. Perhaps this is completely against their beliefs, because it perhaps has to do with witches. One is afraid of doing those kinds of religious mistakes.

The interview suggests that the preschool teacher wants to avoid offending the parents, on one hand, but also that she does not want to discuss this issue with them on the other. She instead takes refuge in a cultural difference narrative. It is possible that the core issue is a lack of rapport with the parents, rather than culture, and the teacher is reluctant to engage in a dialogue with the parents because of this. Moreover, one must ask whether the practice of dressing up as an Easter witch is a symbolic religious activity, or ‘just play’. Since by law the Swedish preschool is nonconfessional, preschool teachers commonly exclude the religious aspects of traditions and focus instead on play, arts and crafts, and dressing-up (Reimers 2019). Yet talking about dressing up as an Easter witch as play does not necessarily empty the practice of religious or cultural connotations.

When I discuss these kinds of issues with students, they sometimes begin to question the analytical value of culture as an explanatory model. They start to look at their interview data in different terms and move away from accepting the cultural difference narrative at face value. For example, in their discussion of their research, two students wrote the following reflection:

It is noteworthy and interesting that the teachers talk about situations in terms of ‘cultural behaviour’. They could have said that it is about something else, for example traditional gender roles. We maintain that the interview quotes illuminate teachers’ analyses of how parents’ behaviour should be understood and categorised. They make an analysis of behaviour as cultural and the underlying understanding of cultural behaviour is that it is generalisable and typical for a whole group of individuals of ‘the same’ ethnicity or country of origin.’

Other students suggested in their dissertation analysis that what could be considered to be ‘culture’ in a given situation and encounter need not be pre-determined or based on preconceived ideas. Rather, it could be left open-ended and ambiguous. Their understanding is reflected in this passage from the conclusion:

Though preschool teachers are supposed to work with promoting culture, we maintain that culture is much more unclear and not something that can be discerned and clearly ring-

fenced – it is more ambivalent. Therefore, teachers need not decide beforehand what it means and is about in a given situation. It is something they can find out instead.

Problematizing the normative narrative of culture and cultural difference in preschools can be both revelatory and frustrating for students. While it is interesting for many to explore social and political constructions of culture in relation to the preschool context, others experience racism personally and need no such ‘political awakening’. They want instead to learn about ‘good practice’ of inclusive education, for reasons of personal and professional development. I recommend that students conduct strategic and purposeful sampling, to ensure that they interview preschool teachers who are specialised in the issues students want to examine (in this case, protecting and promoting cultural diversity). By using this methodology, students procure interviews with varied perspectives on race and culture, and their dissertations often point away from culture as an explanatory model for behaviour. These students instead investigate the centrality of building personal and trusting relationships across race and ethnicity in educational settings. I turn to this theme below.

‘Super-Diversity’ Views on Culture: Inclusive and Non-Targeting

One group of students focused their dissertation research on how the preschool might provide inclusive education for newly arrived migrant children. For the dissertation, the students contacted five preschool teachers specialised in this area. Two of the teachers had written Masters dissertations on the topic, and three of them had extensive work experience with this particular group of children. In the interviews presented in this dissertation, the preschool teachers foreground what scholars have called a ‘progressive universalist’ position (Bove and Sharmahd 2020), in which education and care are focused on being inclusive of potentially marginalised groups, while at the same time being ‘non-targeting’ and ‘non-stereotyping’. In such non-stereotyping practice, the preschool teachers apparently understand culture in terms of a ‘super-diversity’ of social and cultural groups, e.g. an intersectional perspective of multiple axes of differentiation such as “country of origin, ethnicity, language, migration status (and its concomitant rights, benefits and restrictions), age, gender, education, occupation and locality” (Vertovech 2007: 1044). These preschool teachers talked about the importance of building trusting relationships and getting to know parents and children when they are new to the preschool. Said one,

You cannot work at the preschool without forming close relationships with the children. It is important to know – like, if a child is tired, it affects the entire day. If I know why and have a good relationship with the parents, I can ask them if the child has been tired and if something has happened.

These teachers emphasised treating every child equally, while finding out the individual needs of the child at the same time. One teacher talked about a child’s introduction to a new preschool as an example of how this can take place:

The introduction of a new child should entail exactly the same thing as it does for all children in the preschool. It is not that we do something extra or that a special method is needed if the child has a different language or ethnic background, but the introduction may need to go on for longer periods of time. It needs to be adjusted to the child’s needs. What is needed is a thorough introduction. And that means getting to know both the parent and the family because then they too get a sense of what we are doing here and what we work for, what our goals are, what policy documents we follow and what the preschool is for.

This preschool teacher seems to emphasise the importance of parents' participation and the value of parents' knowledge about their own child. Culture is portrayed neither as an obstacle nor a deficit. Indeed, the teacher does not mention culture in relation to these situations.

Some of the other preschool teachers who were interviewed considered that the preschool should be aware itself as a bearer of 'culture'. Explained one,

The preschool has its own 'culture' and ways of doing things. Its own ideas of what is considered normal and not. These are important things to consider. So I don't take it for granted that a child new to Sweden and the preschool and their parents would consider self-evident and 'normal' what we do around Christmas, St. Lucia and Midsummer. The important thing is to build trust so that you can talk about these things and so we know how to accommodate children in the preschool.

Another preschool teacher considered the national curriculum's directive to counteract gender stereotypes in the preschool as an example of the preschool's particular 'culture'. This preschool teacher regarded culture as a relevant aspect of social interaction and simultaneously questioned culture as a collective, analytical category. To quote:

I notice that not all parents appreciate the preschool's value and goal to work against stereotypical gender roles. You can see in the parents' faces that they don't necessarily appreciate that their little boys dress up in shiny, pink, princess dresses. And boys who make pretty necklaces may know it is not appreciated at home and therefore they don't take it home with them or wear them. But it is not the most constructive to think about these issues as their culture. I mean, not all Swedes appreciate those things either, but then we don't say it's about culture, but that it is that particular person's opinion on gender stereotypes and deal with it in that way.

Both of these teachers attributed culture to the preschool rather than to the parents or children. They did not regard the values and practices of the preschool as a reflection of 'Swedish' culture, shared by all 'Swedes', but rather as a top-down policy formulation.

The examples from this dissertation suggest that cultural difference and cultural 'deficits' are not always the conceptual framework that preschool teachers use when working with diverse groups of children. Indeed, based on this dissertation, it appears that preschool teachers who have long experience of working in culturally diverse groups of children talk instead about getting to know the individual child and her/his parents and building trusting relationships. It is within trusting relationships that preschool teachers can have a dialogue with parents and children about preferences related to gender and religious festivals.

Final Remarks: Cultural Difference as a Starting Point for Inquiry into Race Relations

While culture may be regarded as a process of "making meanings, making social relations, and making the world that we inhabit, in which all of us are engaged" (Taylor 2003: 179), it must be stressed that meaning-making in the world we inhabit plays out on an unlevel, racially-inflected playing field. The dominant intercultural perspective taught at my home institution rests upon a well-meaning, colour-blind anti-racist stance. This approach obscures the everyday racism which characterises the surrounding society, and hides or minimises the importance of major social justice struggles past and present. Colour-blind, anti-racist (and so unintentionally racist) course literature in teacher education programs causes harm to students and impedes change in the surrounding society. Swedish educational institutions,

including my home university, need to do more to respond to decades of social unrest and calls for change, including the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. Calls to decolonise the curriculum and offer social justice education (Morreira 2017; Osman and Hornsby 2018) are not adequately addressed by promoting intercultural education, which as I have shown can inadvertently undermine the fight against Afrophobia and other forms of racism and discrimination. Based on my students' research, it appears that all too often intercultural education in teacher education programs facilitates 'insidious aggressive intercultural interactions' in preschools (Valencia 2010). Narratives of 'cultural difference' can subtly legitimise racial hierarchies of power.

Students pursuing the Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education have challenged me to consider, from an anthropological perspective, what it means to say that a particular social encounter in the preschool is about 'cultural difference'. Though cultural differences related to beliefs, customs, and expectations about preschool can play a role in interactions between parents, teachers and children, in my experience these aspects of culture are rarely if ever discernable 'on their own', isolated from (often unintentional) racist discourse. In the mandatory literature for Early Childhood Education at my institution, the practice of some preschool teachers, and some student papers, 'culture' is often attributed more explanatory and analytical value than it should have. Often a standard narrative of cultural difference, based on common, everyday usage of the term in Sweden, is accepted at face value. However, when I interact with the students and engage in a discussion about what it means to apply culture as an explanatory mechanism for behavior, some students come to regard culture less as a self-explanatory underlying factor, and more in terms of an open-ended process.

Through my work with students to realise the spirit of the national curriculum policy, students have challenged me to put anthropology to practical use and think carefully about what an anthropological analysis can contribute to the narratives of cultural difference that are so commonly used to discuss preschool settings. In conclusion, I offer what my students' dissertations suggest about how to think about culture in preschool practice. Their dissertation analyses support the following perspectives: 1) Notions of culture need not be predefined, but can be open-ended. Culture can be a question for investigation; 2) When narratives of 'culture' or 'cultural difference' are put to use, this is a good starting point for an in-depth inquiry into the relationships surrounding such narratives. In particular, one should ask who talks about culture, why, and in relation to whom? As one of my students pointed out, it can be useful to consider how the individuals involved might have discussed a similar event in relation to White, middle class children and parents; 3) When a preschool teacher argues that culture is at stake in particular interaction, on what evidence does she or he base these claims? Might other interpretive models of causality have equally good or better explanatory power? Is it possible for the teacher to give a precise and concrete description of what part of the particular social action is 'cultural'? These perspectives make it possible to shift the focus away from a fixed and essentialist notion of culture. They raise questions about the operations of power, and draw attention to the potential for implicit racism to be colouring the discussion. Ultimately, they may help students recognise that "culture" may be less important for preschool teachers in comparison to building trustworthy, open and inquisitive relationships.

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