Preschool Principals' Notions of Digitalized Staff–Parent Communication: The Need to Move from Monocultural to Intercultural Communication in Multicultural Sweden

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Abstract: Drawing on a preschool digitalization project, this article presents the findings from a survey of 75 Swedish preschool principals. One main question guided the survey: how do Swedish preschool principals describe the use and usefulness of digital tools for interaction with parents? These findings are discussed in regard to intercultural differences, intercultural communication competence, and discursive blind spots, where two additional questions are addressed: (1) what preunderstandings and discursive blind spots are found in preschool principals' accounts of the use of digital tools for preschool staff–parent communication, and (2) what implications does the use of digital technology have for (intercultural) communication? Findings from the survey show that preschool principals take little consideration of their own or the parents' cultural background when understanding and promoting the use of digital tools. The conclusion is that overreliance on digital communication may increase the risk of miscommunication – for *all* Swedes but particularly with regard to communication between native and "new" Swedes.

Keywords: preschool, principal, preschool staff–parent communication, digitalization, intercultural communication, discursive blind spots.

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1. Introduction

More than four of five children in Sweden attend preschools (Swedish National Agency for Education 2019). The mission and work of Swedish preschools are regulated by a framework created by the Educational Act (SFS 2010:800) and the Swedish National Curriculum for the Preschool (SKOLFS 2018:50). In Sweden, most preschools are run by municipalities (80%), although the number of private preschools (20%) is rising. In the governance of preschools, there are three levels: (1) state/government, (2) local authority and (3) preschool unit (Jarl et al. 2007, referenced in Öqvist & Cervantes 2018). Governance of preschools involves legal as well as ideological and economic aspects (Jarl et al. 2007, Nihlfors 2003, Pierre 2007).

Today, Swedish preschools are more culturally, ethnically, linguistically, religiously and socially diverse than ever – a fact that can be seen in light of recent years' increased levels of migration (Stier & Sandström 2017, 2019). Approximately 20% of the preschool children in Sweden are of foreign descent (Statistics Sweden 2018): i.e., born abroad or born in Sweden with both parents having been born abroad. An even larger percentage of children use more than one language daily. A significant group of children have one parent who was born abroad. Large migrant groups that have recently settled in Sweden and now have their children in preschool come from Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria (Statistics Sweden 2019).

In October 2017, the Swedish Government decided on a national strategy for digitalization of the school system including preschools. Its objective was to take the lead using the opportunities of digitalization to promote knowledge development and equality (SKL 2019). This strategy must be seen in light of the Swedish covernment's launch of an

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overall strategic digital agenda based on the view that digital competence is an essential matter of democracy (Regeringen 2017).

It is compulsory for schools to work in accordance with this strategy. They are urged to become more "digital", both in their professional endeavor and in stimulating children to become more "digital". The strategy states that "in school, we learn to understand the world in order to change it." Two paragraphs in the strategy are of particular relevance for this paper: **1:2** "principals must have the ability to strategically lead digital development work" and **2:4** "digitalization should be used to facilitate the staff work situation in teaching and administration".

Most preschools struggle to live up to the ambitions of the national agenda and instead try to implement local digitalization strategies. Often, the focus is on the use of digital resources in pedagogy. It follows that increasing research has been conducted on the pedagogic aspects of digitalization (Kjällander & Riddersporre 2019). The preschool's overall work on digitalization and the preschool principal's role in this, as well as communication between the preschool and parents, are commonly viewed as administrative matters.

With digitalization, preschools must manage and make use of the diversity of Swedish society. Preschool is meant to assist every child to develop a sense of cultural identity regardless of background. The preschool's mission entails transmitting and developing a cultural heritage – values, traditions, history, language and knowledge – from one generation to the next. The preschool should make sure that the variety of cultures are made visible (SKOLFS 2018:50: 5.) The Swedish National Curriculum for the Preschool states that "preschool children should not be unilaterally influenced in favor of one or the other view. Therefore, teaching should be objective, versatile and non-confessional" (*our translation*). Given these stipulations, it seems as though the curriculum contains, in part, inconsistent objectives, which may end up being the responsibility of preschool teachers to manage (see Stier & Sandström 2018).

With its decentralized school system, Sweden has unclear political governance; various actors set goals and norms for the work. "The state formulates the laws and goals in the curriculum, but because of the decentralization, local authority also influences the practice with local goals" (Öqvist & Cervantes 2018: 40). According to the Swedish National Curriculum for the Preschool (SKOLFS 2018:50: 21), the principal is, among other things, responsible for the quality of the preschool and has, within given constraints, a special responsibility to…

- carry out systematic work on quality together with preschool teachers, child minders and other staff as well as providing children's guardians with opportunities to participate in work on quality;
- give each child and their guardian a good introduction to the preschool; and
- develop forms of collaboration between the preschool and guardians, informing guardians about the preschool's goals and work methods.

As the pedagogical leader of the preschool teachers, child minders, and other staff, the principal has overall responsibility to ensure that the education meets the national goals (Skollagen 2010:800; SKOLFS 2018:50). This means that the principal is to ensure that the quality of the school, including work methods and staff competence, meets national standards (Håkansson 2016, Öqvist & Cervantes 2018). With regard to both digitalization and diversity, the principal plays a central role. To equip all new preschool principals[2] for their assignment,

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[2] "Principal" is the term used by Swedish authorities for preschool managers; we choose to use it here. "Manager" and "head" are also used in public discourse.

the National School Leadership Training Programme for school leaders is now mandatory (Swedish Law 2018:1303).

An increasingly diverse Swedish preschool, the ambition to digitalize it, and the responsibility of preschool principals stipulated by the National Curriculum for the Preschool make up the context for preschool staff–parent communication. What does existing research say?

2. Literature review

Drawing from Haelermans (2018), the potential of technology to individualize school tasks makes it efficient, particularly in mathematics, language, and biology. Digital technology assists low-achieving students in particular, consistent with the guiding documents' focus on equivalence (SKL 2019, Kjällander 2019: 30). Mediated communication is an important tool for assigning parental responsibility in the preschool, along with addressing norms about what constitutes a good preschool parent (Eckeskog 2019: ix).

Research suggests that conditions for preschool staff–parent communication in Sweden have changed over time (Persson & Tallberg Broman 2002, Andréasson 2015). One change is an increase in parental influence over the preschool's work; another involves a change in forms of preschool staff–parent communication (Eckeskog 2019, Riddersporre 2019). One implication of this change is what some teachers describe as an eroding sense of professional legitimacy extended from the parents toward the staff; there is a feeling of increasingly being objects of criticism and threats on social media according to oral statements from preschool principals.

In the last decade, demands for documentation of educational activities have increased. Such documentation is usually linked to systematic quality work (Håkansson 2016, Öqvist & Cervantes 2018). The Curriculum for the Preschool states that the preschool teacher is responsible for the documentation (SKOLFS 2018:50). Today much of this documentation is done digitally. Principals and staff in Swedish preschools are highly occupied with documentation, sometimes at the expense of other vital aspects of the work (Riddersporre 2019).

Today, the interpersonal direct communication of "here and now" is increasingly being replaced by written information including preschool staff–parent interaction via digital platforms such as weekly letters, blogs and chat groups (Eckeskog 2019, Riddersporre 2019). Yet research shows that many childcare workers and preschool teachers prefer oral communication, because think they lack the skills for high quality digital communication with parents. Some are also uncomfortable with writing (Eckeskog, 2019), which causes them to be overly concerned with the writing itself rather than focusing on the content or the receiver of the information. Even as expectations on preschool professionals' communication skills (both writing and digital skills) are high, preschool staff–parent communication is insufficiently acknowledged as part of the preschool's work (Eckeskog, 2019).

Ärlestig et al. (2016) write that "studies about leadership in preschools, secondary schools and independent schools are lacking." Although there are a few studies on the preschool principal's leadership in systematic quality work (Håkansson 2016, Öqvist & Cervantes 2018) as well as on topics concerning preschool leadership and organization in general (Lunneblad & Garvis 2019, Riddersporre 2010), this research does not address quality aspects of preschool staff–parent communication. According to the goals of The National School Leadership Training Programme (Swedish National Agency for Education 2015), preschool principals are not especially prepared to lead adult communication processes, and the staff therefore may receive insufficient guidance about their role in communication tasks (Riddersporre 2019).

There is ample research on diversity in primary and secondary schools (Banks 1994, Souto-Manning 2007, Garcia 2018). Research on the preschool is more limited (e.g., Garvis & Lunneblad 2019; Lunneblad 2006; Stier *et al.* 2012; Stier & Sandström 2018, 2019). Much research on preschool diversity has a normative character, concerned with what preschools are obligated to do or should do (e.g., Freeman 1998, Geens & Vandenbroeck 2013, Han & Shelley Thomas 2010, Husband 2012, Keengwe 2010, Kemple 2017).

Studies suggest a variety of approaches to preschool diversity. Stier and Sandström (2019) write that differences in approaches can be explained by different understandings of cultures, modes of reflection and modes of interaction, which in turn materialize in different approaches to diversity and intercultural interaction. Joshi, Eberly, and Konzal (2005) found that preschool teachers tend to focus on overt aspects of culture and diversity (e.g., food and celebrations). Joshi et al. (2005) found that the most effective strategies for parental involvement in multicultural preschools are written communication and parent–teacher conferences. According to Stier and Sandström (2019) and Stier and Riddersporre (2019), the curriculum gives insufficient guidance in situations involving considerations for and dilemmas connected to cultural, ethnic and social diversity. Instead, preschool teachers are largely left to develop their personal approaches to manage children's and parents' expectations and wishes.

Some research claims that digital communication media themselves reinforce cultural, linguistic, and social biases (Usunier & Roulin 2010). An investigation of how communication styles influence website design and content led Usunier and Roulin to conclude that a "high-context communication style may be detrimental to the design of global Web sites, making them less readable, less effective in their use of colors and graphics, and less interactive for the globally dispersed users" (p.189); "therefore, communication through Internet technologies, especially Web sites presents a challenge—that of digital business communication, which is rather low-context, that is, relies on written, rather explicit messages" (p 195).

The reviewed research notwithstanding, both the extent and consequences of the digital transformation of the preschool in general, and staff–parent communication in particular, remain under-researched (Eckeskog 2019). By the same token, there is limited knowledge about the impact of digitalization on schools or principals´ administrative practices (Pettersson 2018). The same goes for the challenges and inherent possibilities of migration and diversity and the preschool principal's leadership in accounting for these changes in systematic quality work. Similarly, little is known about the work preschool principals do to promote digitalization in an increasingly diverse preschool (Riddersporre, 2019). We have found no research that takes up these matters. For this reason, we focus on the communication between the preschool and parents in this text, with special attention to digitally mediated communication and the intercultural aspects of such communication.

3. The current study

3.1 Aim and research questions

As a part of a preschool digitalization project (Riddersporre 2019), a survey was distributed to 75 Swedish preschool principals in large and medium-sized cities as well as small municipalities in the southern and western parts of Sweden. With few exceptions, these preschools were affected by the extensive immigration to Sweden in recent years. The overall question of the survey was, how do Swedish preschool principals describe the use and usefulness of digital tools for interaction with parents?

The results are discussed here. As a second step, beyond the initial scope of the survey, this article addresses two additional questions regarding the use of digital tools for preschool staff–parent communication. Drawing upon the preschool principals' accounts, these

questions are discussed in light of intercultural differences, intercultural communication competence and discursive blind spots.

- What pre-understandings and discursive blind spots are found in preschool principals' accounts on the use of digital tools for preschool staff–parent communication?
- What implications does the use of digital technology have for (intercultural) communication?

With this article, we want to contribute to current scientific discussion on the digitalization of preschools and its implications, with a focus on the fact that today's Swedish preschool is highly diverse. A limitation of the study is that parents were not included. The rationale was that our primary interest was in principals' views on these matters and that time and resources did not allow.

3.2 Method

The questionnaire comprised five questions, of which three were open-ended, allowing for elaboration. It was distributed to 80 Swedish preschool principals in the larger cities as well as rural municipalities in southern and western Sweden. Informants were recruited from preschool management training courses. After successfully completing the training course, they were asked to participate. Seventy-five completed the questionnaire, of which 25 represent preschools run by the municipality and 50 preschools run by non-municipal actors.

The first two questions were "are you familiar with the national digitalization strategy?" and "do you use digital tools today?" The open-ended questions were "if yes, what tools do you use?", "how are digital tools used in the interaction with parents?" and "what are the main purposes of using digital tools in the interaction with parents?" Typically, the first two open-ended questions yielded relatively brief information, whereas the third provided more substantial responses.

The information respondents provided was read several times then categorized. This led us to single out three themes in the data: *efficient and objective technology*, *communication as one-way transfer of information* and *one information model fits all*.

3.3 Conceptual framework

In an increasingly digitalized and diverse preschool, communication between preschool staff and parents becomes a matter of intercultural communication. Gudykunst and Kim (2003: 17) write, "intercultural communication is a transactional, symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning between people from different cultures." Among many things, cultural variations materialize with regard to communication and time: as in, differences between high- and low-context cultures and between monochronic and polychronic time cultures (Hall 1976, Gudykunst & Kim 2003, Stier 2019).

The meaning of any message comprises both what the involved individuals say and the context in which it is said. In high-context cultures, the meaning is typically embedded in the context; whereas in low-context cultures, the bulk of the message is found in verbal utterances (Hall 1976, Gudykunst & Kim 2003, Stier 2019, Stier & Riddersporre 2019). In high-context cultures (much of Africa, Latin America and Asia), indirect, subtle and unspoken is expected and prescribed. In a way, understanding without words is valued over knowledge through words. In high-context cultures, there is less focus on the sender and more on the recipient of information. More of the message is embedded in the situation itself. After accounting for individual variations, children and parents with roots in recent migrant groups would, at least in their initial time in Sweden, be presumed more likely to use high-context communication. Such a propensity can be assumed to decrease as they spend more time in Sweden.

Every culture defines one's relationship to time (Hall 1959, Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck 1961, Stier 2019). In monochronic cultures (much of Australia, Europe and North America), time is important (we buy, waste and kill time) and punctuality prescribed. Time is conceived of as linear; we prefer to do one thing at a time. Time is a resource where being efficient and planning carefully is important to ensure good time management. In contrast, polychronic time conception (common in most parts of the world) can be cyclical and less concerned with a sense of urgency, punctuality and planning. Emphasis on immediacy and speed is consistent with monochronic time, where time is of the essence (Hall 1966, Stier 2019). Again, children and parents with roots in recent large migrant groups to Sweden can be expected initially to use polychronic time.

Stier and Riddersporre (2019) write that intercultural variations in communication and time conception are salient and can cause misunderstandings or conflict. Given that people are cultural beings from different backgrounds, interlocutors have a set of discursive blindspots they bring to digitally mediated parent–preschool interaction. With inspiration from Stier (2010), the discussion that follows will account for a number of discursive blindspots: technonaivism, ethnocentrism, monolithic xenocentrism and normativism. In Blumer's (1954) words, these are sensitizing concepts, used here to discuss findings from the survey's main question to answer the study's additional two questions.

Technonaivism is unreflective, uncritical favoring of new technology, which is viewed as desirable and an indication of progress, while its downsides are downplayed or dismissed. Ethnocentrism is "home blindness": unawareness of cultural or otherwise social underpinnings of the world, including technological. Monocentrism is unreflective, disproportionate focus on universal similarities: symbols, design, cognitive schemes, and technology users are viewed as universal when they are, in fact, cultural impregnated. Monolithic xenocentrism is unreflective, disproportionate focus on the "other" as similar to oneself. One assumes that other people, regardless of background, opinions, and values, view things (e.g., technology) as one oneself does. Normativism pertains to the unreflective assumption that digital communication has only desirable effects on people's work and other actions.

4. Findings

4.1 Efficient and objective technology

Digital tools for preschool staff–parent communication have increasingly been focused on in preschools, the rationale being their presumed efficiency, immediateness and equal accessibility to parents. This rationale harmonizes with the ideological convictions and policies of the Swedish government: in particular, its digitalization agenda and the National Curriculum for the Preschool.

At the rhetorical level, technology is to resolve the grand challenges of society and the everyday tasks at hand in the preschool. New technology supports efforts with focus on bilingualism, translanguaging, language support and working with parents with another mother language than Swedish.

The survey shows that, in the view of many preschool principals, technological advancements and their implementation are unreflectively viewed as signs of progress, development, quality enhancement and efficiency. This can be viewed as an expression of technonaivism: that is to say, unreflective, uncritical prioritization of new technology as the preferred solution to the challenges the preschool faces. In many cases, such challenges have to do with inefficient or deficient preschool staff–parent communication. Asked "how are digital tools used in the interaction with parents?" and "what are the main purposes of using digital tools in the interaction with parents?", common answers from preschool principals included:

> For us, it is a way of reaching all parents easy and fast. Primarily for documentation, but also information. The information is equal and reaches everybody at the same time.

> A common channel for information, where all information is gathered in one place.

> It is convenient, saves time and paper, and everybody gets the same information at the same time.

Responsibility for accessing information is sometimes placed on parents, even though the Curriculum for the Preschool states that principals and preschool teachers have the responsibility to inform guardians. Information should be "accessible for all, [with] no paper notes that can disappear" though "it is the parents' own responsibility to seek relevant information". The school's responsibility is "to send information to all parents and know that they all read or have the opportunity to read."

Sometimes a principal mentions pictures as an important part of digital communication with parents. This may reflect an insight into the specific challenges of intercultural communication, which should be "easy to reach all parents. Easy to use pictures to clarify."

It seems clear that preschools explore the possibilities of digital technology, among other things to develop interaction and cooperation with parents. Digitals tools are favored, with arguments of their being time-saving and efficient. Digital tools mean that preschool teachers do not repeatedly have to give parents general information in the entrance hall as the parents leave or pick up children but can address things that pertain to the child "here and now". The notion of digital tools as efficient, time saving and a creative opportunity for preschools is consistent with the digitalization strategies of the Swedish government.

Preschool principals see additional value in new technology:

> Facilitate understanding, a sense of community, discussion and can be used for invitations. We hope it will make parents and children talk about the things that have been documented.

> Information and documentation, showing the preschool´s assignment according to the steering documents.

> Documentation – collaboration around the child´s development and learning, insight into the daily work in the preschool. Information – all gathered in one place (a digital platform).

> Offer the children's guardians an opportunity to be involved. Information.

Digital communication tools can serve as catalyst for community-building and parent-preschool dialogue, not merely information transmission. They enable a more evidence-based approach to children's development and, in particular, learning: "we are working on a plan for digitalization and are in the first phase in which we collect facts, scientific results, experiences in relation to the children's development."

The principals emphasize the immediacy of digital tools, enabling them to communicate with parents in the "here and now"). Digital tools are said to make life easier for the parents, at the same time as it being a means to fulfill the preschool's principle of equal access to information for all parents, regardless of who they are, where they are, or when they need the information. It is argued that the use of digital communication tools elevates parents' participation in the preschool's work and increases the accessibility' of information. By contrast, the downsides of technology are largely downplayed or dismissed, or in some cases described as transitory "challenges" by preschool principals.

> In addition to documentation, information, educating the parents, we use digital tools to make everyone understand that digitalization is something natural for our children. It is we, over 50… hmm… who have to accept this fact.

Some downsides that were mentioned are the lack of immediate response and lack of opportunity to individualize, explain or elaborate information. For some principals, the compulsory use of digital tools in preschool is perceived as negative:

> I feel that I cannot decide very much when it comes to digitalization. The curriculum says that we MUST do that. All we can do is to find the most convenient forms. I have much to learn, as we all have – and many guardians are very negative.

A few of the principals almost seem to dismiss the digitalization requirements:

> What are digital tools? We have a washing machine, a drying cabinet, an oven, and the children use them together with us. But we use Facebook, email and smartphones for preschool staff–parent communication.

None of the principals' statements address the way that preschools are becoming increasingly diverse or what implications this has for intercultural communication. There is no mention of the ethnocentric and monolithic xenocentric underpinnings of preschool staff–parent communication. In other words, the statements do not take into account ct that intercultural communication is nowadays a common occurrence in Swedish preschools.

4.2 Communication as a one-way transfer of information

In the survey results, the preschool principals stress the importance of dialogue with parents. Dalogue is viewed as a means of discussion, community-building, and parental participation. Yet, dialogue and communication are largely reduced to providing an information space and transfer of information:

> Information to the parents.

> A possibility to reach all parents in a quick and easy way, it saves time for us. We can easily provide all the guardians with information they need.

> The parents have access to certain documents on our website. We use the blog and a preschool calendar for each preschool unit.

This transmission typically takes place on multiple platforms. Some principals refer to this:

> The information app about the daily work in the preschool.

> Blog, communication/information (mostly one-way communication from us), emails, pictures.

> We use iPads and computers to write, show pictures, documentation – we send it (the documentation) to all parents via an info-app, Google drive and Pluttra (a platform for preschool use).

> We use an app (Tyra) to which all parents have a personal login.

> All parents obtain all information they need in their smartphones.

Digital communication tools are to large extent used to send informative messages in one direction to the parents. In these messages, parents are instructed to ensure that the children have proper clothing and attire, that time schedules are kept and that they are aware when

special occasions take place in the preschool. Sometimes messages are expressed visually in photos, drawings or other semiotic representations. As soon as they have pressed "send", preschool staff stress their lack of responsibility for ensuring that the message has reached the recipient and been understood. Sometimes though, the principal expresses a clear desire for exchange and reciprocity:

> Information – but also an exchange of views and an invitation to collaboration – participation!

> A channel for informing and inviting parents' participation. Show them our daily thematic work. Send them pictures on the child´s development, private. A way to delegate and to receive answers and input from parents.

In many instances, communication draws from ethnocentric and monolithic xenocentric views of preschool staff–parent communication. Communication is conceived as having a low-context character. The bulk of any message lies in what is said or, in this case, written; it is not defined by context or the relationship of the interlocutors. In addition, a highly diverse preschool, variation in linguistic competence is a fact. Digitally mediated communication is relatively devoid of contextual and relational contents, which has implications where communication between parents and preschool has an intercultural character. The notion that digital information is "self-sufficient" is reflected in a confidence in repetition:

> Information – a *clear* way of information, so that everyone gains the same insight and can go back to old information if needed (a shared folder on Google Drive).

In contrast to high-context communication, where the relational dimension is salient, such information is viewed as located outside the parent–preschool teacher relationship: that is, in the app, newsletter or blog. It is external to *and constantly accessible to the individual.* However, it largely lacks relational and contextual information. This means that much of the digital communication is devoid of communicative cues and feedback. It becomes a matter of transferring information, not engaging in interpersonal communication with parents. Such "communication" is often complemented by brief exchanges in the preschool, as parents leave or pick up their children – one reason being that parents find the information insufficient, unclear or too instrumental.

4.3 One information model fits all

Any interaction is colored by the interlocutors' needs, expectations and intentions. Nevertheless, from the survey, it seems that the preschool principals' view of communication is predominantly guided by their (or their municipality managers) intentions – as in, the desired outcomes of communication – rather than the needs, expectations or intentions of the parents. One example is how parents are to report absence:

> The preschool thinks that this [new] system can provide us with statistics on, for instance, children's attendance over the day, which the municipal management [*huvudman*] can be interested in. We believe that this interest will render us a "better" basis for our work.

Some principals stress the importance of "information accessibility fairness" whereby all parents have access to the same information at the same time:

> An opportunity for parents to be involved in the preschool – and in evaluating what we do. It is a tool targeting all parents, it is not a channel of communication about a particular child.

By receiving information common to all, parents are expected, almost automatically, to exercise influence over activities in the preschool.

> Documentation in order to give parents insight into the activities. Increase parents´ influence in the preschool.

Not much is mentioned about how this communication materializes in concrete parental feedback to the preschool. However, ideas are sometimes expressed that information will provide parents with new possibilities for involvement and ability to influence.

> To develop our work to facilitate the influence and participation of the children's guardians, we need to inform and educate them and cooperate in many ways.

The effectiveness and quality of the communication is assessed in light of parents' achievements: e.g., ability and willingness to accommodate offers or meet the preschool's expectations. Information is given *to* parents: either normative (what parents are expected to do, when their children are expected to be in the preschool) or descriptive information (e.g., documentation from the preschool):

> Information. In communication with parents on the development and learning of their children. Parents send text messages when the children are absent.

Some principals have developed strategies to elevate parents' commitment and participation. In the following example, educating the parents seems necessary. Parents seem to be viewed as a homogenous group:

> We think of the systematic quality work as consisting of three parts: children, preschool, and parents. We use *Hjärntorget* (a digital platform) to document what we do and relate it to the curriculum goals. This provides parents and children an opportunity for participation and influence. The documentation on the platform [consists of] – along with joint meetings with all the preschool's parents, planned individual contacts, and daily contact in the entrance hall – a basis for parents' opportunities for influence and participation in the evaluation of the work. Partly, it will be an education for parents as well, as the teachers sometimes highlight examples of how conflicts are handled in the preschool.

In these cases, ethnocentric and monolithic xenocentric biases in communication are not reflected on. Parents are seldom viewed as communicative co-creators but merely the recipients of low-context communication messages who are expected to receive information and act accordingly. Yet, there are examples that show an ambition to explore digitalization possibilities together with parents:

> Already last autumn, we introduced the upcoming digitalization requirements in the new curriculum at a meeting with all parents. They discussed in smaller groups. It is important for us, in our preschool, to show that digital tools can be used in other ways than the traditional: for example, by apps prepared by parents themselves at home. We have already initiated an opportunity for parents to read aloud tales in their own language. In the preschool, we then make QR codes for the children to use here. They can listen to the fairy tales in the language they choose.

5. Discussion

Traditionally, an important arena for communication between preschool staff and parents has been the preschool entrance hall (Eckeskog 2019). As parents leave their children in the

morning or pick them up in the afternoon, situations for informal conversations present themselves. Typically, such conversations revolve around the mood and state of the children, special considerations to be made, or information pertaining to schedule changes. In the entrance hall, notices on the walls supplement this oral and dialogic communication with notices such as "don't forget to bring rain clothes for next week's excursion" or "make sure to inform the staff about schedule changes". The everyday character of preschool staff–parent communication makes it nonintrusive and available for all parents.

However, the digitalization of preschool staff–parent communication has changed the character of parent–preschool communication (Riddersporre 2019). It is a shift of modality, from oral to written. In many cases, it is also a shift from dialogue to monologue and from conversation to information – although staff, unofficially, still use conversations in the hall and notices on the wall as a complement.

The survey conducted shows that preschool principals emphasize technological advancements; the implementation of digital communication tools are unreflectively viewed as signs of progress, development, quality enhancement, and efficiency. Technology enables immediacy and swiftness in the preschool's everyday work. It enables documentation in a structured fashion, which, according to the curriculum, the preschools are obligated to provide. This may be seen as what we call "technonaivism" seen in both public discourse on digitalization and the way digitalization advocates in the preschool unreflectively argue for the unavoidable necessity and benefits of digitalization in parent–preschool interaction. Digital communication is usually implemented according to the one-size-fits-all formula, where technology assists the preschool in fostering "good" parents, which – in this case – are parents who make sure they receive and adhere to the information given by the preschool. Communication is viewed as one-way transfer of information, which is at least partly at odds with statements about the importance of dialogue, parental participation, and community-building to the preschool's work.

The preschool is an arena where the future is created and tomorrow's citizens formed. When aligning the preschool to digitalization, the focus tends to be on children's inherent learning capacities: i.e., variations with regard to cognitive or emotional abilities. Both in relation to the children and parent–preschool communication, little account is taken of intercultural variations in interaction patterns, differences in high- and low-context communication, views on time, or individual differences: e.g., in access to technology, language and culture competence, propensity to adapt new technology or openness to digital literacy. Digital communication is typically presupposed to function in *all* contexts, for all purposes, in relation to all people. In other words, digital communication is decontextualized in discussions about its usefulness and inherent challenges.

As any other arena, the preschool is characterized by an ethnocentric view of the world. From the survey findings, it seems as though technology is viewed as devoid of culture. Embedded values, worldviews, and communicative patterns are neither reflected over nor accounted for, when in fact both the design of technology and the attitudes toward it are anchored in deeply embedded worldviews and values. Such views and values may include the idea that change is better than stability, progress and the *status quo* are ideal, the future is better than the past: what Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), Hall (1959) and Stier (2019) refer to as "time orientation". Given the stipulations of the curriculum as the highly diverse nature of most preschools today, one could have expected the preschool principals to have mentioned intercultural variations and their implications for digital communication.

The emphasis on immediateness and swiftness consistent with a monochronic time conception where time is of the essence (Hall 1976, Stier 2019): we buy, waste, kill and plan time. Time is a resource characterized by its intrinsic austerity; being efficient, documenting well, and planning carefully are all tools to ensure good time management. A preoccupation

with documentation mirrors a monochronic, low-context understanding of information as non-volatile, existing "out there" – beyond relationships and situation – which ensures linearity and follow-up in the preschool's work. It is striking how preschool teachers and principals seem to take a monochronic time conception as universal and so largely overlook the fact that many parents to Swedish preschool children adhere to a polychronic time conception, free of the monochronic sense of urgency, less concerned with absolute punctuality, documentation and instrumental planning.

Many parents of Swedish preschool children have their roots in high-context cultures such as Afghanistan, Iraq, or Syria. In these cultures, indirect, subtle, and unspoken is expected and, indeed, prescribed. Understanding without words is valued over knowledge through words. In high-context cultures, less focus is placed on the sender and more on the recipient of information. A large part of the message is embedded in the situation itself; the documentation that the preschools use is less of a concern. At the same time, although these parents initially tend to use to high-context communication in Sweden, they are presumably familiarizing themselves with the Swedish communication style; and many of them are used to digitally mediated, low-context communication.

Overall, in the principals' responses, intercultural variations in human communication are largely overlooked, reflecting a monolithic xenocentric bias. This is consistent with other research showing that preschool teachers do not account for their own ethnocentrism and exhibit a lack of understanding for differences between high- and low-context communication (Stier & Sandström 2018). Both the rationale for and design of digital communication tools are more consistent with low- rather than high-context communication. The focus is primarily on the message and sender, not the context or receiver of the message. In low-content Sweden, what is most important for the preschool teachers and principals is *what* is communicated, not *who* is communicating (Triandis 1994: 184; see also Hall 1959, Gudykunst & Kim 2003). In other words, communicative contents are more important than the relationship between interlocutors. Digital communication is largely devoid of nonverbal cues, leaving interlocutors with reduced-modality interpretation. Concretely, this means that teachers and principals are made aware of their own communication, sending information to parents in a relatively instrumental fashion. Communication responsibility is transferred from the preschool onto the parents (Riddersporre 2019).

6. Conclusions

In the survey, the preschool principals express much confidence in the potential of digital communication tools for parent–preschool communication. At the same time, they seem to view it less as a means for dialogue and more a channel for documentation of preschool work and information transmission to parents: not a genuine interchange.

An overemphasis on digital communication increases the risk for miscommunication for *all* Swedes. For communication between native and "new" Swedes, this risk is even greater. In high-context cultures, too much information or speaking about self-evident matters may come across as confusing; whereas in low-context cultures like Sweden, high-context communication can appear ambiguous or unclear. At least initially, parents from more pronounced high-context cultures may show the preschool principal respect by *not* asking questions, while the principal may interpret the absence of questions as a sign of parents' indifference.

Misunderstandings may arise in differences of view on oral and written communication. Written mode is very salient in Swedish preschools, especially in relation to parents; at the same time, many parents have roots in more oral cultures. For preschool principals, such misunderstandings are likely to be interpreted through a low-context cultural lens: explained and managed as "information gaps", "lack of communication skills" or "insufficient

information", where the solution characteristically is documentation and follow-up, resulting in more rather than different communication. The focus needs to be on genuine communication, including face-to-face dialogue, digitally mediated communication and greater appreciation for the diversity that characterizes Swedish preschools.

A limitation of the study is that the parents were not included. The rationale was our primary interest in principals' views on these matters, given that they are responsible for the quality of the parent–staff communication. In any case, the time and resources available for the initial project did not allow for inclusion of parents.

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