

Managing the unmanageable: curriculum challenges and teacher strategies in multicultural preschools in Sweden

Jonas Stier & Margareta Sandström

Dalarna University - Mälardalen University, Sweden

Abstract

In its political ambitions and pedagogical spirit to address an increasingly diverse population, the Swedish national curriculum for the preschool contains contradictory or even conflicting goals. On the one hand, the curriculum stipulates openness to, tolerance for and appreciation of cultural, ethnic, religious and social differences, and respect for the unique background of children. On the other hand, it stresses universal human rights and the fundamental values of Swedish society. How preschool teachers work with and make sense of such contradictory or even conflicting goals in everyday practice is the focus of this text. The research questions are: (1) How do preschool teachers describe the challenges they face in their daily work when they attempt to honour the stipulations of the curriculum? (2) Which strategies do they describe as using to manage these challenges? The empirical material consists of 14 focus group interviews with 41 preschool teachers from two highly ethnically and culturally diverse urban areas of metropolitan Stockholm. Results suggest that there are a number of recurring preschool situations where cultural and religious differences lead to dilemmas and potential friction between children, preschool teachers and parents. Results also show that the preschool curriculum provides little guidance and instead the preschool teachers must develop their own strategies to handle children's and parents' expectations and demands, for instance by using the children as cultural intermediaries. Overall, the preschool teachers adopt strategies that enable them to avoid "difficult" situations, which in effect risks placing the challenges on the shoulders of the children.

Keywords: *Sweden, multicultural preschools, curriculum, preschool teacher strategies*

1. Introduction

Globalisation, migration and ethnic, cultural and social heterogeneity characterise today's Europe. During the last decades, the monocultural nationstate as a political system par excellence has been challenged (Beck 1998) by ideas of multiculturalism and recently interculturalism (see, for instance, Sarmiento 2014). At the same time, there has been an elevated revival of nationalistic and isolationistic movements, challenging ideas of multiculturalism and interculturalism and ultimately openness, diversity, tolerance, equal opportunity and equal rights regardless of gender, ethnic, cultural, religious or social background.

Much of this description also applies to Sweden – traditionally a large recipient of migrants – where there are political calls for more fruitful approaches to counteract social friction and threats to social cohesion and stability. This said, the Swedish Education Act stipulates the centrality of human rights and equality. By the same token, the Swedish national curriculum for the preschool (Swedish National Agency for

Education, SNAE (2011)) stipulates the focal role of the preschool in facilitating children's notions of the background to, tolerance of and respect for human variation and appreciation of diversity:

Democracy forms the foundation of the preschool. The Swedish Code of Statutes (2010:800) stipulates that education in the preschool aims at children acquiring and developing knowledge and values. It should promote all children's development and learning, and a lifelong desire to learn. An important task of the preschool is to impart and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based. Each and every person working in the preschool should promote respect for the intrinsic value of each person as well as respect for our shared environment

The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between the genders, as well as solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are all values that the preschool should actively promote in its work with children.

The foundation on which these values rest expresses the ethical attitude that should characterise all preschool activity. Care and consideration towards other people, justice and equality and the rights of each individual shall be emphasised and made explicit in all preschool activities. Children assimilate ethical values and norms primarily through their concrete experiences. The attitudes of adults influence the child's understanding and respect for the rights and obligations that apply in a democratic society. For this reason, adults serve an important role as models.

Upholding these fundamental values requires that the attitudes from which they are derived are clearly apparent in daily activities. The activities of the preschool should be carried out democratically and thus provide the foundation for a growing responsibility and interest on the part of children to actively participate in society.

Such fundamental values should underpin the activities, climate and methods in Swedish preschools. At the same time, the curriculum contains potential ambiguities and contradictory objectives. Openness to, tolerance for and appreciation of cultural, ethnic, religious and social *differences* and respect for the *unique* background of children may be at odds with *universal* human rights and the fundamental values of Swedish society. How preschool teachers deal with and make sense of such incongruities is, therefore, the focus of this text. The *aim* is to explore the dilemmas preschool teachers face when they attempt to balance universal and particularistic claims in the preschool curriculum.

More specifically, the research questions are: (1) How do preschool teachers describe the challenges they face in their daily work when they attempt to honour the stipulations of the curriculum? (2) Which strategies do they describe as using to manage these challenges? Answers to these questions are sought in the preschool teachers' understanding of cultures, mode of reflection and described mode of interaction. The *empirical material* consists of focus group interviews with preschool teachers from two highly ethnically and culturally diverse urban areas of metropolitan Stockholm. In these preschools, teachers themselves represent a highly diverse group of people – they were not born in Sweden, are bi- or multilingual, and are engaged in intercultural communication within their peer group. Their Swedish language competence varies greatly.

Based on these focus group interview accounts (i.e. pertaining to the understanding of cultures, mode of reflection and described mode of interaction), the underlying *rationale* is both to lay bare the challenges preschool teachers face in their professional practices and to illuminate how they constructively work to live up to the goals of the curriculum. In so doing, we hope to contribute to a better understanding and, in turn, lay the grounds for alternative approaches to intercultural work in the preschool.

2. Previous research

Nowadays, there is an ample volume of research on ethnic and cultural diversity in primary and secondary schools (see, for instance, Banks 1994; Souto-Manning 2007). Albeit less voluminous, there is also corresponding research on the preschool. In both instances, a great deal of research takes a relatively distant view on the matter and focuses on the rhetorical level of what preschools are supposed to do (see, for example, Freeman 1998; Geens & Vandebroeck 2013; Han & Shelley Thomas 2010; Husband 2012; Keengwe 2010; Kemple 2017). Similarly, other research remains at a philosophical level, where either the epistemologies of curriculum content or overall discourses on interculturality, intercultural education, differences or othering are central (see Wardle 1998; Vandebroeck 2007). Oliveira-Formosinho and Barros Araújo (2011) identify the main characteristics of a pedagogical approach for early age groups that promote respect for diversity and stress adult-child interactions and family involvement as crucial for any pedagogical approach.

Similarly, there is research on different approaches to multicultural preschool groups (Stier, Tryggvason, Sandström & Sandberg 2012). Less common are studies on how preschool teachers account for their views on and reasons for their everyday practice in concrete situations and relate these accounts to their understanding of cultures, mode of reflection and reported mode of interaction. However, there are some studies on how preschool teachers understand cultural diversity and how they teach in an intercultural setting. Joshi, Eberly and Konzal (2005) found that the outward display of culture of preschool teachers emphasized overt aspects like food and celebrations, whereas the preschool teachers defined culture primarily as being a set of beliefs and values. Thus, the authors found discrepancies between the preschool teachers' outward display of culture and their beliefs. In their studies of preschool teachers' practices and challenges, San Poon, Abdullah and Abdullah (2013) found that teachers claimed to teach in a manner they felt showed awareness for multiculturalism, although a closer analysis (initially a questionnaire was used) revealed that they focused on outward manifestations of culture. Joshi et al. (2005) analyse both the views and everyday practice of preschool teachers. These authors also found a need for the professional development of preschool teachers.

Joshi et al. (2005) also explored the practices teachers employ in their work with families from cultures different from their own and found that the most effective strategy for parental involvement was believed to be written communication. Also, parent-teacher conferences/meetings were mentioned. There are examples that much parent-preschool teacher communication and much preschool teacher-children communication concerns the children's food and their mealtimes. For instance, Harding, Wade and Harrison (2013) and Stier et al. (2012) identified mealtimes as being important learning environments where socialisation and language development take place. Twiner, Cook and Gillen (2009) found that the issue of religious identity is largely overlooked in the debate on school lunches, particularly the question of serving halal food – or not.

3. Methodology

To unravel the earlier described dilemmas facing the preschool teachers in their everyday practice, a qualitative approach was used. Data were collected by using focus group interviews. This approach enables access to the attitudes, values and reflections of the participants (Krueger & King 1998; Krueger & Casey 2000; Kvale & Brinkmann 2009; Wibeck 2015). By allowing the preschool teachers to reflect upon and reason on a set of themes, there was proximity to the everyday life of the preschool.

The focus group interviews were held in Swedish, with one of the authors acting as the interview facilitator. Every preschool teacher participated in two interviews with about five months between the first and second session. In total, 14 focus group interviews were conducted with, in total, 41 preschool teachers. To ensure consistency between the interviews, a manual was used. For the first interview session, the manual contained themes on the understanding of culture, mode of reflection and described mode of interaction. These themes were broken down into sub-themes and discussed among preschool teachers. The second interview round focused on challenges and inherent possibilities in the everyday life of the preschool.

Before the focus group sessions commenced, the interview facilitator provided the preschool teachers with written information on the study aim, approach and methodology as well as on the purpose and set-

up of the interviews. They were informed about their right to terminate their participation at any time, without giving a reason for such a decision, and that published interview extracts would be confidential. Confidentiality was ensured by using pseudonyms, altering names of places and events when this was deemed necessary, omitting redundant and irrelevant information, and storing data in a safe location inaccessible to unauthorised individuals. The preschool teachers were invited to raise additional questions or to ask for clarifications. If the participants decided to participate, they completed a consent form. The interview facilitator made back-ups of the consent forms and stored them safely to ensure participant confidentiality.

The facilitators commenced the focus group interviews with an introduction of the themes. To produce multiple ideas and angles on these themes from as many preschool teachers as possible, the facilitators encouraged spontaneous, respectful and fruitful group interaction, and posed additional questions or asked for clarifications if needed. The sessions were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English by the authors.

After each focus group interview, the preschool teachers anonymously completed a written evaluation, where they assessed the extent to which they had presented their views. They could also provide additional comments, which indicated that the interviews were valuable learning opportunities that made them think differently about the matters being discussed.

Drawing upon the interview manual themes, the data (i.e. utterances, themes and stories) were subject to an initial and preliminary qualitative categorisation. Based on this categorisation, the data were analysed more closely as a means to identify commonalities and differences in how the preschool teachers manage contradictory or conflicting goals in the curriculum. Results were then discussed as was the basis for the conclusions that were drawn.

To allow for authenticity, extracts from the interviews are presented verbatim – that is to say, in the actual words of the interviewees. Yet, they are not presented in their original form, because they are translated into English here. For reader clarity and issues of space, some editing has also been necessary.

4. Theoretical approach

At an overall level, the theoretical approach draws upon social psychology, intercultural education and intercultural studies. It is also inspired by norm-critical and intersectional perspectives. More specifically, to analyse the focus group interviews, we have used a framework for analysing approaches to multicultural classrooms developed in a previous study (Stier, Sandström & Tryggvason 2012). In this study, it is argued that preschool teachers have slightly different strategies to manage challenges of ethnocultural diversity when working to uphold the preschool curriculum.

Such approaches entail three components: *The understanding of culture*, *modes of reflection* and *modes of interaction*. The understanding of culture pertains to tacit views on the meaning of culture – views salient both in thought and in concrete ways during daily working life. Modes of reflection refer to self-knowledge, openness and views on the limits of tolerance and adaptiveness motivated by cultural, ethnic, religious or social background. Finally, modes of interaction are about how the understanding of culture and ways of reflection manifest themselves in how the preschool teachers depict interaction with children, parents and colleagues. These three components have implications for practice in terms of how preschool teachers understand and act with regard to the perceived ethnocultural diversity in the preschool group they work with.

5. Results

The interviews reveal that ethnicity, culture and religion are frequent topics of discussion, debate and professional consideration in the preschools. Accounting for and ‘handling’ such variations are part of everyday life. Given the fact that culture is a multifaceted and frequently disputed concept, it is

unsurprising that the preschool teachers have divergent views on culture, ethnicity and diversity. A common denominator is that ‘culture’ includes language, norms, values, world views, modes of behaviour, views on children, boys and girls, gender equality, time conception and social codes.

When asked whether ‘cultures’ are more stable or changing, answers are ambiguous or even contradictory. Some preschool teachers view culture as being a black-box determinant of children’s, parents’ and colleagues’ actions – ‘a baggage’, ‘a background’ or ‘a given’. The preschool teachers state: ‘Just like us – we come from different countries, we carry different things [...] each of us in our baggage’. This extract indicates a ‘conscious cultural understanding, beyond a more unreflected ‘othering’ of cultures and people. Yet, it also signals the existence of relatively separate cultures within a given context. By other preschool teachers, culture is seen as dynamic and fluid – something that is constantly emerging, negotiated and renegotiated. Some preschool teachers view diversity as a path to cultural hybridisation – that is, as people transgress cultural boundaries, new identities and cultures emerge. One described possibility they see, due to their own multicultural background, is that this fact makes them ‘transcultural’ – i.e. that they are able to mix different cultures, take advantage of and understand all better.

Challenges when honouring the stipulations of the curriculum

Given the diversity of the preschools, the preschool teachers mention several implications of working in (hyper-diverse) preschools where, a vast majority of children does not have Swedish as their first language. At the same time, working in such preschools is seen to enrich – to change you as a person. However, there are some huge challenges that relate to the children’s parents.

One challenge/dilemma related to the background of parents is the matter of halal food. Halal food is mentioned repeatedly and has various aspects: an economic one, it has started to dominate the menu, a symbolic one with the halal-haram dichotomy, and a practical one. The preschool teachers discuss what they see as the parents’ impact on their children and how these children interact with other children:

1. Sometimes I feel I am not sure how to handle it, it is difficult for me. One example is that there are two little girls, both Muslims, but one says to the other ‘you are not that Muslim.’ Do you see what I mean? They both have the same religion, and then the other girl says ‘oh, but I am!’ [...]. There are many situations like this that I find challenging.

Claims that Islam should be given more consideration are seen as a challenge – in particular, whether the preschool should offer halal food or not is viewed as being a highly politicised and emotional question by almost all preschool teachers (even if they were not asked about it) – which manifests itself in the interaction between the children:

2. I saw in a school in x, when they introduced halal there [...] Before it had been ‘meat or not meat’, but then it became if you were a good Muslim or not. That was a huge problem for us. Some children were really strong and said that the devil would take you and they went home with that belief [...] Even if you are a Muslim, you can have different ways of exercising it and believing.

Working with equal rights is also described as a challenge, which the preschool teachers are not quite prepared for. They describe how they have to maintain the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child by informing parents that all people have equal rights regardless of religion or identity.

Among parents, there are also differences in views on gender. Meeting the gender equality stipulations of the curriculum is described as another challenge by the preschool staff:

3. I had these siblings, the older one was a girl and then a boy, and at that time they always helped to set the table and clean up afterwards and so forth. And when the girl was in the group, there were no problems, but then the year after when it was the boy’s turn, well then ‘why should he clean tables?’ It was sort of totally unacceptable, that he shouldn’t need to help out. The children should participate in everything we do.

Conflicting principles are pointed out as challenges. An example of conflicting principles is how tolerance for differences in values, norms and traditions is at odds with principles of gender equality: ‘For men in preschool, this can be problematic, that we cannot take them (the children) to the toilet and we cannot change nappies; that has happened.’ Another example is how to tackle the parents’ views on holiday celebrations in the preschool: (4) “One example may be the celebration of midsummer in preschool, that they see it as connected to Christianity. Then you try to explain that it is just a tradition.”

The preschool teachers describe the challenges that are presented by parents using their children as messengers. For example, the preschool teachers describe children as being ‘innocent’ but under the influence of their parents. Therefore, they convey their parents’ opinions – which are occasionally in conflict with the curriculum. At times this becomes a dilemma for the children as well – which they express in their interaction with the preschool teachers: “This is what they say in preschool and I was thinking ‘what if they are right?’, then it means that ‘my mum is not right – and my mum is always right because she is my mum’ – that kind of anxiety.” At the same time, the preschool teachers stress how the children do not understand what is going on; they just do what their parents expect them to do.

Conflicting wishes and expectations present a challenge to deal with. The wishes and expectations of the parents sometimes differ from what the preschool teachers view as ‘best for the children’. For this reason, a focal question is how the preschool teachers act with this tension in mind. The competition from other preschools is described as a challenge or even as a threat. Teachers claim that these other schools do not follow the curriculum, that they compete to attract parents and as such the children.

Strategies for managing challenges

Overall, the teachers want to maintain the fundamental values stipulated in the curriculum. At the same time, they are cautious not to interfere with family customs or habits that do not related to fundamental values:

5. I wouldn’t compromise if a parent said: ‘my child cannot play with that child’ or ‘is not allowed to be with that child’ or so, or [...] ‘girls should not play with boys’ [...] no, it would not be possible to compromise [...] because we have Policy for Gender Equality [...]. But then if someone said: ‘I want my child to wear rubber boots, or not wear rubber boots, he doesn’t want that’; that doesn’t matter ... vinyl trousers... must wear two sweaters outdoors ... must eat or not eat this or that ... that’s fine with me.

Yet another example relates to gender and illustrates a preschool teacher’s ambition to meet with the stipulations on gender found in the Swedish preschool curriculum:

6. We were reading a book about a family with two dads, and then the day after, the parent told us ‘you can definitely not read such books to my son.’ Then I indeed said that we were going to have a talk and I will explain our curriculum, Swedish values and this is not, you cannot negotiate this with me.’ This is true in Sweden, too bad if you don’t like it, but this will apply in Sweden and is true every day in Sweden, in this country, this curriculum and the laws we have here. I described the Child Convention to him, and after one hour he said ‘thank you, I understand it.’

These examples notwithstanding, many of the preschool teachers’ strategies for managing challenges are to *avoid* them. In their own words, they ‘choose their battles’ and do not argue over ‘details’ (such as clothes). One strategy teachers choose when interacting with parents is not to be explicit: ‘I don’t think we have dared to be explicit with parents when it comes to the curriculum’ one preschool teacher says.

Halal food is dealt with by adopting many different (avoidance) strategies. One strategy is to circumvent the problem:

7. I think that [serving halal] makes the preschool more attractive to parents and if the school serves halal meat then you keep the children [...] Many have gone to other preschools [...] Yes, it is true that you lose children. In our preschool we have had to close one department.

Another avoidance strategy is to remain passive. For example, the preschool teachers retell situations in which the (Muslim) children express intolerant views of non-halal food – without suggesting strategies to deal with such situations:

8. This with halal is a very heated question and you may think very differently about it [...] well sometimes you are allowed to talk about it [...] it is double-edged for me really because if you look at the guiding documents and the school, they say that preschools should be non-confessional. But of course, you should observe different religions and enrich the children, but if you think about it – this halal slaughtered food is a religious element we allow in preschools [...]. I used to work in a department where there was a child who didn't want halal food [...] I talked to the parent about how this child felt, but she thought he should eat it and he had to eat it. Given the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child, what I did was not right; I gave in to the parent, so yes. I have come across other such stories from colleagues, how five-year old children say to each other 'you are not halal, you are not clean because you do not eat halal'.

One avoidance strategy is to maintain that 'vegetables are better food than meat':

9. We have talked about this in our unit that now you should think about sustainable development and there are directives for that, buy organic, eat more vegetarian food. Because we cannot eat as much meat as we are doing, that is not sustainable, so we have discussed that [...] to have four days of eating vegetarian and one day fish to counteract this.

Yet another avoidance strategy is to use 'noa-words' (generally speaking, words free of taboo) for halal meat: We don't say halal any longer, we say 'alternative' [...] or 'red bowl', says one preschool teacher. The next extract illustrates an alternative use of noa-words to solve the halal problem:

10. We have received a letter telling us to stop saying 'halal'. Now we are to say 'regular food', [...] 'variation meat' [...] because the children sat watching the others who didn't eat halal saying that it was 'haram' and that it was [...] ugly.

One other avoidance strategy is to give in and serve halal food to *all* children:

11. I think it is nice to accommodate this thing with halal meat, but what has become of it is that everybody gets halal meat many times and I think that you should also have a discussion about 'okay, we don't serve pork' – fine, 90 percent may have a Muslim background in our preschool. It is quite in order that you can accommodate that, but at the same time, I think that 'OK, but halal food for everyone? We're doing that now and it's nothing obviously [...] do we really have to accommodate this far? Personally, I don't think so.

The avoidance strategy for dealing with the described challenge or the threat of competing preschools is to *remain passive*. Preschool teachers describe how: 'These private preschools, I do not need to mention names, but perhaps they do not work as much with diversity, which may also be a threat to us; they attract many parents.'

The avoidance strategy to prevent children from finding themselves in conflict situations between the expectations and norms of the preschool and those of their family is to refrain from upholding the principles of the curriculum. Such situations have become more frequent and often the preschool teachers find themselves unable to deal with them adequately. Instead, they provide an unreasonable level of flexibility to prevent parents from moving the children to private preschools:

12. It is becoming clearer and clearer [...] it has become stronger. This is not how it was a year ago, they did not claim their religion and their values in this hard way [...] but I think we also reinforce it. Why do we not eat pork? I am thinking 'have we done this? Have we put ourselves in this situation?' I think we have... When we introduced halal food in preschool, it was because the

parents were choosing other preschools since they offered halal food [...] it was an economic issue for us.'

As we have seen, the preschool curriculum contains an inherent dilemma between openness to heterogeneity and cultural, ethnic and religious variations on the one hand and a set of fundamental values beyond compromise. Hence, in this context, codes of interaction revolve around allowing for as much flexibility and parent-adaptation as possible versus setting clear limits as to flexibility and adaptation based on the existing curriculum and legislation. Given the objectives of the preschool curriculum, the preschool teachers are asked about how they go about promoting multilingualism and a multicultural background. The strategy described for dealing with the challenge that the children are multicultural is that the preschool teachers try to lead by example, pointing out that you do not, for example, have to fixate on some particular food. One teacher says:

13. 'There you go', I used to say, 'I can eat halal food, I can eat my food, I can eat all food, I have much more to choose from, because I can eat everything' [...] they need a counterbalance to this because of course at home it is 'this is how we do it; this is how it is'.

The fact that the parents are not addressed is an avoidance strategy. Instead, the teachers talk to the children. The teachers point out mealtimes as being good opportunities to discuss different cultures with the children:

14. Lunch time is a very good time for discussions. Then there is much talk about language 'what is this? How do you say that? Can you say that in English?' Different dishes and we sort of talk about how you eat and 'what do you eat in that country?' Yesterday, for example, there was a girl who said – we had meatloaf – and she said 'I want more chicken!' No, I said, it is not chicken. The meat comes from a cow. 'Cow?' she said, and looked very surprised. Yes, I said, people can eat cow, and so we started to count up all the different animals that people can eat in different countries 'you see, in that country they can even eat dogs and cockroaches', so that became a very exciting discussion.

Preschool teachers see that the preschool can influence the parents and what goes on in the children's homes, through the children. Sometimes, this comes out successfully:

15. Through the children, exactly! [...] then parents can come back and have reflected at home and said, hopefully, positive things, but it can be both, but for the most part it is sort of positive feedback, that 'he has told them this and that' or 'she has done this at home, although we normally don't do that'. For example, we have worked a lot with being independent, that you serve yourself the food and you take as much as you can eat and so on, and then they can do that at home, too. They tested it at home and then they came back – the children and the parents – and they said that the children wanted to – some allow it, others say 'no'. So that through the children, you can also influence the parents.

Another avoidance strategy is *not* to confront the parents. This strategy is relevant in the sense that the teachers talk about problems among themselves. Dilemmas are discussed during teacher meetings:

16. We always discuss such things at teacher meetings [...] we start a discussion and you talk about what you have experienced. It can be, for example, an event with a mother and her daughter, and then you ask questions like 'what would you have done? How should we think?'

Only a few of the strategies that are described involve confronting the parents. One is to talk to them: 'I still believe in good communication... we have had many cases having to do with celebrating Lucia [...]. Parents said 'no', they would not come, and then after a discussion [...] They have ended up coming', says one preschool teacher. Parent meetings and parent-teacher conferences are also used to explain the purpose of preschool activities and to exhibit interest in the parents' backgrounds and current life situation:

17. There has been a shift from only talking to showing in practice how we do things and, for example at parents' meetings, we had one parent meeting [...] how does preschool work with mathematics for children between the ages of 1 and 3 years? And we had invited parents and it wasn't that we sat there looking at PowerPoints about the curriculum. Instead, they were offered the chance to [...] do what the children do in a daycare room for toddlers, every day, all the time, it was sort of 'wow' – even if it was Duplo or soft blocks or logical blocks [...]. So it goes more from only informing orally to also connecting in practice, to get an understanding [...] I also think this is important to bring up when you see the parents for parent-teacher conferences [...].

One preschool teacher describes a disagreement about gender equality:

18. We had a discussion with a parent when she came with her daughter and the girl wanted to stay inside, but we were already in the hall on our way out and then this mother takes her daughter upstairs anyway. We work upstairs, so she walks up and we were thinking 'but why doesn't she come?' [...] finally, she comes down without the girl and we said: 'we're going out, you must get your daughter. Then she said 'no, she can stay inside.' So, this became a conflict, because as she said that 'girls can stay inside whereas boys, they must run around outside [...]. I am thinking about gender here [...] She had to go and get her; we said that everybody needs fresh air. Everybody needs to move around, it makes it easier for them to concentrate; the whole child group becomes calmer, and the girl thinks it is fun when we get outside.

Another example that involves gender equality is as follows:

19. The other day, they children were playing dress-up, when a dad came by and said to his son 'are you wearing a skirt?' [...] I said: 'yes, of course, all boys wear skirts'.... 'we have skirts, we have dresses', but he did not answer [...] I am thinking that at parent-teacher conferences, you can try to explain.

Finally, the preschool teachers see areas where parent-preschool interaction can be improved:

20. I am thinking, maybe you should start discussion groups. Then parents will probably meet each other [...] discussion groups among parents [...] the view of our work; parents want different things for their child, and I am thinking that different families want different things, and when you have a discussion [...], you do have different views on what children should learn.

The preschool staff describe the issue of halal food as being a clear and current challenge. Albeit to a lesser extent, the same is true for matters pertaining to gender and gender equality. When it comes to strategies for dealing with the issues of halal and gender, respectively, there is, however, an interesting difference. The staff seem more confident when it comes to dealing with gender issues. They describe how they manage to honour the stipulations of the curriculum in such situations (described in interview extracts 5, 6 and 18). By contrast, when it comes to dealing with the challenges associated with halal food, they fail to honour the stipulations of the curriculum and instead use avoidance strategies (described in extracts 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12). The results also indicate how the staff turn to the children (extracts 13, 14 and 15) rather than talking to the parents. At the same time, they express a desire to be more firm and direct in their interaction with the parents in the future, not only about mathematics teaching (citation 17), but also about values (citation 20).

6. Discussion

In Europe as a whole, as well as in Sweden, the idea of multiculturalism has been challenged over the last decade. Similarly, challenges of multicultural preschools have been brought to the foreground – by politicians, researchers and preschool teachers themselves. At the same time, it is an indisputable fact that Swedish society of today is ethnically, culturally, religiously and socially more heterogeneous than in any

previous era in history. This fact is mirrored in the Curriculum for the Preschool (Swedish National Agency for Education, SNAE (2011)), and has had a profound impact on the everyday work in Swedish preschools – albeit there are great variations within the country. In the preschools focused on in this text, native Swedes make up an absolute minority. In these preschools, teachers, children, parents and others are engaged in daily intercultural interactions, which require an intricate balance between flexibility and cultural or religious considerations on the one hand, and a set of non-negotiable basic values stipulated by legislation and the curriculum, on the other.

The interviewed preschool teachers face a number of challenges, which they must manage and which are typically connected to recurrent and common situations in the preschool. Based on their accounts, we have tried to unravel the basis of their actions and strategies in such situations by looking at their understanding of culture, the ways they reflect on matters and the ways they interact.

The preschool teachers' understanding of culture becomes partly visible in how they reflect upon themselves in relation to notions of culture and diversity in the preschool. In the focus group interviews, they place themselves in relation to an external culture, to society and to the preschool where they work. They exhibit knowledge about the meaning and dynamics of culture and cross-cultural differences. For example, they argue that cultures are 'different' and internally heterogeneous, yet frequently equate 'culture' with religion – more specifically, with Islam. In itself, this is unsurprising since the suburb in question has a high percentage of Muslims. The preschool teachers frequently attribute differences in traditions, habits, norms and values to religion. Yet, "knowing-that" is not the same as "knowing-how", something which was shown by Joshi et al. (2005) in that there were discrepancies between the outward display of culture and the beliefs of cultures among preschool teachers.

There are also particular challenges associated with what they conceive to be conflicting stipulations in the curriculum as well as parent expectations, which are at odds with the curriculum, for instance, when it comes to working with equal rights and gender equality. The preschool teachers say they struggle to find a reasonable balance between the curriculum and parental pressure to give Arabic culture and Islam more consideration in preschool. This is an intricate subject for the teachers to deal with, and draws upon a very long tradition of religious freedom and the privatisation of religiosity in Sweden.

In this context, a particularly complex and heated area of friction and conflict is food and eating. Discussions with children, parents or colleagues on dietary rules with bearing on Islam (i.e. halal-haram) are daily occurrences according to the preschool teachers, where parents do not want their children to eat certain food, and where children, at lunch, talk about 'good' and 'bad' food with one another or even condemn one another for eating certain things. One reason for this is that a vast majority of children and parents are Muslim. Similarly, Twiner et al. (2009) found that the question of serving halal food is an important issue of identity – a fact largely overlooked in the debate. In the focus group interviews, the question of halal meat is a highly sensitive and potent matter, and it seems unreasonable to leave this matter to the preschool teachers to manage on their own. Yet, the curriculum provides little guidance in this endeavour.

By the same token, and, with it being a sensitive matter, the question of what religion *is* and *is not* is largely avoided by the preschool teachers. Rather than dissecting and discussing it in more depth, or addressing the core matter (i.e. whether halal food should be served in the preschool or not), the preschool teachers employ avoidance strategies. These strategies include rhetorical 'repackaging' strategies for choices made by the preschool teachers (e.g. using noa-words, 'serving halal meat is an economic issue', 'maintaining' that 'vegetables are better food than meat', or 'since other preschools offer halal food, the municipal schools must also do this, otherwise parents send their children to other preschools'). They remain passive or deny there is a problem (e.g., 'serve halal food to all children because they all want it').

The challenges depicted above both evolve and are negotiated in the space between people – between the children; the children and preschool teachers; the preschool teachers, children and parents; the preschool teachers and parents; and the parents. When working with the values stipulated by the curriculum, the preschool teachers try to lead by example. At the same time, they see how the parents' values (in many cases such values are described as inconsistent or conflicting with the curriculum) are expressed by and through the children in their interaction with other children and with preschool teachers. The preschool

teachers describe the children as being the bearers of the ‘home’ culture, which in many instances is at odds with the curriculum and which causes confusion for the children. It appears likely that this also works the other way around – the values, traditions and norms in the preschool are at odds with the parents’ beliefs and convictions. In relation to previous research, this is not surprising. San Poon et al. (2013) found that preschool teachers mainly focused on outward manifestations of culture. In the focus group interviews, the preschool teachers described how they largely avoided discussions on norms and values with parents, and instead turned directly to the children on such matters.

This said, the preschool teachers stress the importance of not merely making parents understand the ideas behind and functions of preschool, but of making them understand and ultimately embrace the norms and values underpinning Swedish society. The preschool teachers see the value of parent information days, discussions and information material. Overall, however, this is something that the preschool teachers themselves are reluctant to do. Instead, they depict situations where they refrain from upholding the principles of the curriculum (‘for the sake of the children’) or where they challenge the children’s views (in effect what the preschool teachers view as the parents’ views) and leave it to the children to mediate between the preschool’s expectations and their parents’ norms and values. Thus, the children find themselves in the role of ill-prepared and involuntary mediators between preschool (and Swedish society as such) and their parents.

7. Conclusions

Against this background, several conclusions can be drawn. Teachers in Swedish preschools characterised by ‘hyperdiversity’, such as the ones in this study, face a set of intricate challenges. By and large, strategies to manage such challenges must be developed by the teachers themselves. Containing potential ambiguities and contradictory objectives, the preschool curriculum offers the preschool teachers little concrete guidance in this endeavour. The vagueness of the curriculum also mirrors the overall inability and unwillingness of Swedish politicians and lawmakers to address the overall question of what a multicultural Sweden is and should be. Therefore, preschool teachers need to manage this question in the social microcosm of the preschool – in the interaction with children, parents and colleagues. The accounts of the preschool teachers suggest that they do this to the best of their knowledge and abilities, yet their strategies when managing the challenges indirectly and unintentionally place the challenges onto the shoulders of the children. In other words, it seems that the task and responsibility of managing the challenges of multiculturalism partly rest on the shoulders of the children, because the curriculum and the timidity of adult society have put them in this situation. This is neither in the spirit of the curriculum nor in line with the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child.

Despite there being a voluminous body of research on multicultural preschools, integration and interculturality, we would call for more precise research both on the *concrete everyday* challenges and dilemmas preschool teachers face in preschool contexts characterised by hyperdiversity as well as on the strategies they develop to manage these. Such research is essential for providing adequate preschool training, for providing crucial input in terms of future policy-making and, most importantly, for how preschools work with our future citizens.

Limitations

Through an analysis of their accounts, this study provides indepth insights into the reasoning of a group of preschool teachers in terms of their everyday practice. The accounts stem from focus group interviews, a method that draws upon group dynamics and that is particularly useful when it comes to shedding light upon a given topic. At the same time, and as opposed to individual interviews, the presence of others may influence the participants’ openness, honesty and willingness to share their inner thoughts and experiences – particularly when topics of discussion come across as sensitive or controversial. For this reason, efforts were made to ensure a respectful and relaxed climate in the interview sessions.

We should add, that we have analysed what the preschool teachers say and depict – not what they actually *do*. A possible continuation of this research could therefore be to conduct preschool observations as well as interviews with parents.

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About the Authors

Jonas Stier: School of Humanities and Media Studies, Dalarna University, Sweden

Jonas Stier is a professor of intercultural studies at Dalarna University. He has long experience of intercultural research within a variety of contexts such as preschools, schools and higher education and has written several books in these areas. Moreover, he has strong commitment to public outreach and is a popular lecturer outside academia. Currently, he is serving as the acting pro-vice chancellor at Dalarna University.

Margareta Sandström: School of Education, Culture and Communication, Mälardalen University, Sweden

Margareta Sandström is a senior professor of special education at Mälardalen University. She has long experience of educational/special educational/intercultural research within a variety of contexts such as preschools, schools and higher education and has written several books in these areas. Moreover, she has strong commitment to teacher education

Authors' Address

Dalarna University
Borlänge – Falun
Website: www.du.se
Phone: +4623778620
joi@du.se

Journal of Intercultural Communication, ISSN 1404-1634, issue 48, November 2018.

URL: <http://immi.se/intercultural>