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Worldviews and National Values in Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care Curricula

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Abstract

This paper examines how worldviews and national values are displayed in the national (Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) curricula of Sweden, Finland and Norway. The specific interest is to investigate what similarities and differences there are between these three ECEC curricula with regard to the position of religions and other worldviews. ECEC is often the first societal arena for children to enter and to negotiate their personal values, worldviews, and memberships in relation to the values represented in the surrounding social context. Countries employ different policies for dealing with diversity. Home languages for example, are often supported whereas for home cultures and worldviews, the policies and practices are more varied across contexts. By utilising a curriculum analysis informed content analysis, this study examines the curricular ECEC framework in each country context, highlighting the displayed national value preferences connected to worldviews. The study shows that these three Nordic countries have both similarities but also significant differences in the ways in which they approach the inter-relatedness of the aims of national values and worldview.

Keywords

National values; worldviews; diversity; curriculum; early childhood education and care

Introduction

This paper examines the position of ‘worldviews’ and ‘national values’ in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) curriculum guidelines steering the education and care of the 0-5-year-olds in Sweden, Norway and Finland. We will begin by defining two core concepts of this study. With national values, we refer to the expressions or descriptions of particular national and societal aims, preferences or priorities that education is set to bring forth. In the context of this chapter, particularly so in relation to either the ECEC societal or community setting, or the educational contents that the teaching, education and care are to possess or transmit in the ECEC. Through socialization, individuals are bounded to certain civic virtues that are also manifested as normative in national curriculum. (Bondeson, 2007; Kuusisto, 2011) National values are embedded in concepts such as cultural heritage, which relates to our collective history, norms and habits but also orients us to preserve and modify the inherited values, objects and practices (Laine, 2014, p. 142-143). This study examines how at the curricular level, the educational ECEC documents reflect national contexts, transmit assumed national value preferences attached to worldviews, and what similarities and differences can be recognized between these Nordic countries.

The history of Sweden, Finland and Norway is strongly connected to the establishment of Evangelical Lutheran Churches and nation state formation. For many centuries, the Lutheran churches had a hegemonic status and still today Lutheranism is the majority denomination in Nordic countries (Finland 67,8.8%, Sweden 57.7%, Norway 70% of population) even though the membership has declined and the societal landscapes have secularized notably (Statistics Finland 2020). As the protestant influence in Nordic countries has not been merely religious, but also profoundly cultural, the connections of Lutheranism are myriad with national values, cultural and moral norms and political conceptions such as welfare state development (Markkola 2014; Statistics Sweden 2019; Statistics Finland 2020; Sinnemäki et al. 2019; Statistics Norway 2019). It is vital to consider both the historical and the present religious change because in Nordic countries, the religious and national aims have traditionally been strongly intertwined, and today, they are not only more secular but also religiously more diverse (e.g. Berglund 2013; Furseth et al., 2018).

With the notion of ‘worldview’, we refer to both organized worldviews (*Weltanschauung*) and personal worldviews (*Lebensanschauung*) (Naugle, 2002; Kooij et al., 2017). We also use the concept in an inclusive manner entailing both religious and non-religious worldviews. We take worldviews to mean a particular ontological, epistemological and ethical framework which ascribes meaning to the world but also orients people in everyday life, giving space for lived, experimental meaning making (Kooij et al., 2017, Poulter et al., 2016). In the personal level, and particularly so as regards children and youth, these often merge religious and non-religious elements (Kuusisto & Kallioniemi, 2017). Here, however, we focus more on the visibility of religions and worldviews as group beliefs or wider systems of knowledge in ECEC curricula.

‘Nordic’ and ‘national’ in the studies concerning values and worldviews

Finland, Sweden and Norway to an extent hold shared Nordic heritage, culture and moral ideals (Wagner, 2008; Einarsdottir and Wagner 2006). These include an ideal of good childhood, comprising a pervasive understanding of child-centredness (Wagner, 2008; Kristjansson 2006). When it comes to studies on ECEC curriculum and its value basis in the Nordic setting, there is a good body of literature on the values more generally. For instance, Einarsdottir et al. (2015) have looked into how the different Nordic ECEC policies frame values education with a special focus on the values of democracy, caring and competence. Einarsdottir et al. (2015) note that previous studies emphasise the shared cultural heritage and ideological basis of the Nordic countries as one of the two central aspects defining ‘Nordic childhoods’, that is, the Nordic welfare model, emphasizing social inclusion, and the child-centredness, emphasizing, alongside with other values, “solidarity with Nordicness” (see also e.g. Wagner & Einarsdottir 2008). In their research on democracy and child, Emilson and Johansson (2018) illustrate how recent research has altered from initially normative and political argumentation to a more critical approach towards democracy addressing issues of complexity, communication and shared life in pluralism.

Previous research on the position of religions or worldviews in the ECEC curriculum in the Nordic countries is scarce, especially as regards its connection with national values. Lappalainen (2006; 2009) has done some interesting work in the Finnish ECEC and the role of Lutheranism in the nation construction, and Reimers (2020), Puskás and Andersson (2019) have examined cultural and religious traditions in the day-to-day of Swedish ECEC settings. As regards curriculum studies, research has mainly focused on schools or on values more generally than in relation to religions or worldviews. For instance, Poulter et al. (2017) has examined linkages between religious education and citizenship education in Finnish school. Linde (2001) has edited a volume on Swedish ethnicity and value basis in school curriculum, including reflections on Christianity and humanism and cultural diversity, and Norberg (2001) has examined national values in multicultural Swedish school. Norberg (2001) points out that schooling has always been a means for transmitting values to younger generations and promoting civic identity, and that in a multicultural society, the challenge is how to promote rudimentary values without excluding some of the citizens.

We consider researching curricular text important in understanding the teacher’s role in an instrument of curriculum, although we are aware that a teacher’s own understanding and self-reflection plays an important role in implementing certain values. van Krieken Robson (2019a, 2019b) notes how in British context, early childhood practitioners are required to mediate specific politically set national values and how their response is complex and multi-layered. Through so called performative values education practitioners were to mediate specific values through their pedagogical practice, “moral pedagogies” (van Krieken Robson 2019a). In her view, this approach would necessitate a critical stance from the teachers to consider their epistemic beliefs about how children learn (van Krieken Robson 2019a, 2019b). This is also in line with our previous work on the necessity for the teachers to reflect on their own value positions and positioning of children within pedagogical relationships (e.g. Lamminmäki et al., 2020; Rissanen et al., 2016; Rissanen et al., 2020).

New Nordic Diversities

Societal change, and transnational movements have contributed to the Nordic countries to see their 'old' diversities complemented with 'new' ones (Vertovec 2015; Dervin 2013 for diversities as plural), which have also influenced ECEC practices and policies. In all of these three countries, immigration has intensified rapidly during the last decades, even if the variation both between these countries and within different areas in each is notable. ECEC units have become increasingly diverse, which is manifested in both child groups and in the educational partnership with families. Importantly, ECEC is often the first societal arena for children to enter and negotiate their values, worldviews, and religious memberships. (Kuusisto & Garvis 2020).

In terms of societal structures and policies relating to migration and integration, different countries have employed different strategies for dealing with diversity, for instance as regards support for children's home languages. However, although languages are to an extent supported, much less is known about the encountering of their cultural and religious or worldview identities in ECEC. Societal, religious and worldview landscapes have been greatly influenced by many factors other than increased immigration. The Nordic societies have become increasingly secular or post-secular (see Franck & Thalén 2020 for post-secular as a notion), and there is a growing interest in new religious movements and spirituality. Secularisation and post-secularisation vis-à-vis plurality of worldviews create multiple understandings of the current state of the Western societies where two types of pluralisms occur: multi-religious pluralism referring to the emergence of global systems of religions, and secular-religious pluralism meaning the coexistence of religious and secular spheres (Casanova 2018). The current religious landscape in the Nordic countries is shifting rapidly from more or less traditionally Christian-based societies towards secular, yet religiously diverse societies (Poulter et al., 2016).

In terms of their religious and worldview diversity, Sweden, Norway and Finland have seen a transition from relative religious homogeneity to increasing diversity. The Evangelical Lutheran majority churches in these countries still have large percentages of the populations as their members; however, there is a steady decline in besides the membership, also religious beliefs and practices. Furthermore, there is a growing number of people without a religious affiliation, which is likely to illustrate the increasing secularization at the individual level. At the same time, there is a growing interest in new religious movements and alternative spirituality (Furseth et al., 2018).

The change of societal landscape is particularly relevant when it comes to children or families' religious worldviews, which they may find to be in contrast with the widely secularized Nordic societal landscape. Religion—also Christianity—can be encountered as 'the other' in the Nordic context where secularised and culturalised Lutheranism is entwined with nation-construction (Thomasson, 2015; Poulter et al., 2016; Lappalainen 2006; Berglund 2013; Inglehart–Welzel Cultural Map and the World Values Survey 2015; Sinnemäki et al., 2019). This hegemonic worldview position may sustain exclusive structures and practices in the ECEC and may also generate feelings of otherness for the children and their families belonging to minorities (Poulter et al., 2016; Kuusisto, 2011).

From the perspective of the young children attending ECEC, inclusion is an urgent matter of democracy, equality, social justice (Kuusisto, 2017) and human rights (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; Poulter et al., 2017). Although there is a growing body of

literature on migration of families and even in relation to ECEC contexts (e.g. Vandenbroeck et al 2009), surprisingly little is known about the intersectional influences on the intertwined minority positions of migration and religion in these settings (Kuusisto & Garvis 2020). Furthermore, also within any particular society, different minorities have differing positions among the 'old' and 'new' societal diversities (Vertovec 2015) as well as national policies and ideological hegemonies (Poulter et al 2016).

In sum, there is an abundance of literature related to nation construction and Lutheran heritage in the Nordic countries, however, what is lacking is a better understanding of the interconnectedness of the religious-cultural heritage to the prevailing diversification of worldviews particularly in ECEC settings. Therefore, we find it timely to examine how the Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish ECEC curricula construct national values and cultural heritage today in relation to societal worldview diversity. More precisely, this study is set to explore the following questions:

1. How are worldviews and national values displayed in the ECEC curricula of Sweden, Finland and Norway?
2. What similarities and differences are there between these three ECEC curricula as regards the position of religions and other worldviews?

Material and Methods

Methodologically this study derives from the comparative research tradition within educational sciences. Comparative designs can help to identify educationally significant aspects both on unique national levels of educational policy and practice, and as regards research with cross-cultural, international development horizon of education (Bråten, 2013).

Curriculum studies such as the here presented one, are critically important in gaining a deeper understanding of the cultural practices demonstrating politically sanctioned ways of thinking about the community and the individual, reflecting values and assumptions, goals and intentions of education in a national setting (see e.g. Popkewitz 1997; Zilliacus et al 2018). When looking at political, social and historical claims behind educational ideals, it is crucial in curriculum thinking to identify the question of what knowledge is most important which should thereby be in the centre of analysis (Autio 2017, p. 48-49). By locating these ideas through analysis and further, operationalising them as tools in an analysis of an across-country comparison, examination is taken a step further.

The continuing struggle over the ECEC curricula in contemporary research and debate in both national and international settings is recognised (Wood & Hedges, 2016). Wood and Hedges (2016) attempt to examine the critical questions about the content, coherence and control related to ECEC curriculums. Wood and Hedges (2016) suggest a working theories approach to assist in exploring the ECEC curriculum in a more fruitful way, including the asking of critical questions as a vital step in developing new theoretical frameworks in curriculum studies.

Building on the theoretical and methodological grounds discussed, the present study examined the Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish ECEC curricula, focusing on the national framework curriculum document for the education and care (for ages 1 to 5) from each

country. In the first step of the analysing process, the curricula documents were approached from the curricular analysis viewpoint through discussing and comparing certain assumptions, values and concepts as framed in each of the national settings. For the second step, the document contents related to national values, religions and worldviews were analyzed with a qualitative content analysis. Cohen et al. (2011, p. 564-569) describe content analysis as a process through defining the elements of an eleven-step process. They summarize the process into coding, categorizing—as in “creating meaningful categories into which the units of analysis—words, phrases, sentences, etc.—can be placed” (Cohen et al., p. 564), comparisons between these categories and making links between these, and finally, drawing theoretical conclusions from the text. In the final process of the conclusion phase of content analysis, the above named ‘working theories’ approach was applied to the data. This was done in order to explore the ECEC curriculum content further by asking critical questions about the contents (Wood & Hedges, 2016). The research team discussed the analysed curricular contents and asked critical questions about the national findings. Finally, the research group drew conclusions on the basis of the analyses and the reflective discussions in order to outline and connect the parallels to the above presented theoretical framework.

Results

This section presents an analysis on the Swedish, Finnish and Norwegian ECEC curricula from the perspective of presence of religions and worldviews and the connections of these to national values. The analysis is first presented country by country, making connections to the others where applicable. Overall findings are discussed further in the Conclusion.

Swedish ECEC curriculum

The Swedish *Curriculum for the Preschool*, Lpfö 18 (Skolverket 2019), which took force in July 2019, begins with a section *The fundamental values and task of the preschool*, setting the ground for *Fundamental values*. These values state that the preschool, as a part of the Swedish school system, builds on democracy. Citing *The Education Act* in Sweden, the purpose of education is defined to be ensuring that children “acquire and develop knowledge and values” (Skolverket 2019, 5). It is further highlighted that education should convey respect for human rights and “the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based” (Skolverket 2019, 5).

This foundation is complemented with a description of what, in the level of preschool practice, should follow from this value basis, namely:

No child in the preschool should be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of the gender, transgender identity or expression, ethnic origin, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation or age, of the child or any person with whom the child is associated, or to any other abusive treatment. All such tendencies should be actively counteracted. (Skolverket 2019, 5.)

This *Fundamental values* section is the only one that mentions religion explicitly in the Swedish ECEC curriculum. From the ECEC staff, the here explicated stance requires an active counteraction towards any non-discrimination. Thereby, the curriculum contributes

towards safeguarding also the rights of children who are in religious or worldview minority positions. The value basis also emphasizes that the preschool should “reflect the values and rights expressed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)” (Skolverket 2019, 5), which also just became a part of Swedish legislation in the beginning of 2020. Succeeding the mention of the CRC, the curriculum text states that education should be based “on what is deemed to be the child’s best interests” (Skolverket 2019, 5). In CRC, religion holds a somewhat more visible presence than in the curriculum; whether the legislative enforcement will hold some practical consequences to Swedish ECEC, remains to be seen.

As regards “Understanding and compassion for others”, the Swedish curriculum guides the adults’ work in preschool in stating: “Everyone who works in the preschool should promote respect for the intrinsic value of every person”. Furthermore, education should provide children the opportunities to develop empathy and compassion, and be characterized by openness and respect “for differences in people’s perceptions and ways of life” (Skolverket 2019, 5). This could be read to include respect towards the diversity of worldviews and the different ways of life, also those related to religious traditions, though not so specified.

Swedish preschool education is to give children “the opportunity to reflect on and share their thoughts about life-related issues in different ways” (Skolverket 2019, 6), where the “life-related issues” can be seen to include children’s existential and life questions. In several ways, children’s own ideas are highlighted, such as in: “The preschool should encourage children to express their thoughts and ideas and should create the conditions for this” (Skolverket 2019,6).

Societal diversity is acknowledged in the curriculum in many ways. “the Increasing internationalisation of Swedish society” is said to place “high demands on people’s ability to live with and understand the values that derive from cultural diversity” (Skolverket 2019, 6). This is an interesting formulation, as it highlights the demands of diversity and the necessity for gaining competences for dealing with it. The sentence that follows continues by stating that “preschool is a social and cultural meeting place that should promote children’s understanding of the value of diversity” (Skolverket 2019,6). As a means for reaching this, it is mentioned that awareness of “different living conditions” can help the children to develop their understanding and empathy towards other people’s “conditions and values” (Skolverket 2019, 6). The special position of the the five minorities with a national minority status—Jews, Roma, Sami, Sweden Finns and Tornedalers; the Sami as an indigenous people; and the minority languages of these groups—are specifically recognized here.

As regards the importance of *objectivity and comprehensiveness*, the curriculum also highlights the importance of openness to diversity in ECEC. The curriculum states that ECEC should be “open to different perceptions” and that “Everyone working in the preschool should at the same time uphold the fundamental values set out in the Education Act and in this curriculum, and clearly dissociate themselves from anything that is in conflict with these values” (Skolverket 2019, 6). This is in fact a very interesting formulation, as it requires not only acting according to particular pedagogical guidelines, but actually for the staff to actively ‘dissociate from’ anything that is not in line with the societal ECEC value basis.

The objective nature of preschool education is particularly emphasized both in the Swedish (Skolverket 2019) and Finnish (Finnish National Agency for Education EDUFI, 2016) curricula. The Swedish curricula emphasizes that education should be non-denominational and the children “should be given the opportunity to form their own views and make choices based on their own preconditions”, and that they “should not be unilaterally influenced in favour of one or other point of view” (Skolverket 2019, 6). The important role of adults as role models in preschools is also emphasized as a part of this objectivity (Skolverket 2019, 6). Encountering every child “with respect for them as a person and for the way they think and understand the world around them” is also highlighted (Skolverket 2019, p. 7). When it comes to related educational contents, the curriculum states as the preschool’s task to include “transferring and developing a cultural heritage – values, traditions and history, language and knowledge – from one generation to the next. The preschool should also make sure that different cultures are visible in education.” (Skolverket 2019, p. 9). The place of religion in preschool practice in Sweden has been studied by Puskás and Andersson (2019; 2021) and Reimers (2020), illustrating the wide variance in the actual interpretations of this national cultural heritage, and the different understandings of (non-)religion in relation to that. Supporting children’s own thinking is mentioned here in several different ways, also including the ethical aspects and the “opportunity to marvel” (Skolverket 2019, 11). In the section *Norms and values*, there is a direct reference to the national values, or “the common values of our society”, including empathy and an ethical dimension to work out children’s “position on different ethical dilemmas and fundamental questions of life” (Skolverket 2019, 13). This resonates well with the contents of education on worldviews in many countries, especially the contents on ethics and life questions (e.g. Pirner et al., 2018). Children’s life questions have had an important role in ethics education and education on religions in schools Sweden (Almen et al., 2000). Previous research raises the role of life interpretations (livstolkning) personal and existential questions, in relation to child development (Ristiniemi et al., 2018).

Previous international research literature emphasizes the significance of classroom as a ‘safe space’—also as regards the dialogue among diverse values, religions and worldviews in school (e.g. Weisse et al. 2016). In similar lines, the Swedish curriculum mentions “a democratic climate in the preschool, where children have the opportunity to feel a sense of belonging” (Skolverket 2019, 14). This further resonates with previous research on the importance of ‘identity safe space’ in education (Suad Nasir & Al-Amin 2006). Furthermore, it reflects the Nordic ECEC values emphasizing children’s democratic participation and encouraging them to express their views (e.g. Johansson, Emilson & Puroila 2018).

The emphases on democracy and the importance of taking into account the children’s own views are visible in how the Swedish preschool curriculum writes about the nature of knowledge. The Swedish curriculum sets the starting point in epistemological pluralism in stating that the “different aspects of knowledge are natural starting points” in discussion. Furthermore, it is highlighted that “Knowledge is not an unambiguous concept” and that knowledge is expressed in many forms, where preschool “should focus on providing space for different forms of knowledge and creating an approach to learning in which these forms are balanced and become a whole.” (Skolverket 2019, 11.)

In combination with the earlier descriptions of objectivity and non-denominational nature of education, this would entail that preschool should not give a monopoly for any particular, for instance secular Lutheran knowledge, from which other epistemologies

would be relegated (cf. Poulter et al 2016). This even if parts of the Lutheran sociohistoricity would be introduced as a part of cultural heritage. Thereby, in ECEC the children should gain tools to actively evaluate different ways of producing knowledge, each of which would make a valued contribution in the discussion.

A holistic view on the child's care and education and respect to each child as an individual connects with the Nordic EduCare ideal, approaching Education and Care as a holistic approach in ECEC. It also resonates with the idea of 'pedagogical love' and warm care to all children, whatever their background (see also Van Laere et al., 2018). In terms of the imperatives regarding the ECEC personnel in the Swedish curriculum (Skolverket 2019), the role of adults as value educators and role models is given particular significance. More precisely, the curriculum states, "the approach of all those working in the preschool and the way they behave and talk about something affects children's understanding of and respect for the rights and obligations that apply in a democratic society" (Skolverket 2019, p. 6). Furthermore, the ECEC work team is instructed, among other things, "to make children aware that people may have different values that determine their views and actions while at the same time reinforcing the fundamental values" (Skolverket 2019, 14).

Where the Norwegian and Finnish curriculum guidelines nominate their own section on a content area related to religions and worldviews, as mentioned above, the Swedish one only explicitly refers to religion once in connection to non-discrimination. However, the recognition of children's own views are visible throughout the document, as are democracy, empathy, understanding of diversity, and supporting children's "ability to listen and reflect on other people's perceptions and to reflect and express their own beliefs" (Skolverket 2019, 14). Thereby, many of the emphases actually are present in the Swedish curriculum, too, although not as broadly or explicitly as what we will see in the below presented Norwegian and Finnish curricula. This is especially so when it comes to religions and worldviews.

Finnish ECEC curriculum

The most recent Finnish ECEC curriculum (The Finnish National Agency for Education EDUFI 2016) took force in 2016, after which it went through a minor revision due to implementation of the new Act on ECEC (540/2018). The underlying principles are closely connected to an intrinsic value of childhood, shared democratic values, constitution, and the Rights of the Child. Equity, equality and diversity are listed as fundamental aspects of education, and children ought to be able to develop their skills and make choices independently regardless of their cultural background or other reasons. (EDUFI 2016,33)

ECEC seeks to provide all children with equal opportunities, which is stated in the curriculum as a need of understanding and respecting the general cultural heritage and the linguistic, cultural, religious, and ideological background of children. (EDUFI 2016,23). The principle of equal opportunity has always been a fundamental cornerstone in Finnish educational thinking and policy in balancing the socio-economical factors in children's background. It is interesting that it is here coined with the recognition of diverse identity markers of children. Furthermore, when preparing an individual ECEC plan, every child's background ought to be taken into account (EDUFI 2016,20). However, it remains questionable what taking into account in relation to equal opportunities means. When

thinking about the power relations between majority's and minorities religious and worldview positions in Finnish educational context it is evident that without criticality, certain positions become otherized, they are listened but not heard (Poulter et al., 2016).

Cultural heritage in the Finnish ECEC curriculum is something that is formed through a shared, national foundation but complemented with individual interpretations and recognitions of multiple traditions. Finnish cultural heritage is based on the appreciation of national languages and also cultural, linguistic and philosophical diversity in that is visible in the community itself and in its environment. (EDUFI 2016,59) Thereby, the curriculum ethos follows well the new Act on ECEC (540/2018), where the goal for education is to prepare “children to understand and respect the general culture heritage and linguistic, cultural, religious and worldview background of every individual.”

Finnish curriculum perceives cultural diversity positively as a resource, relating to everyone's own language, culture, religion and worldview as a fundamental right. Interestingly, cultural tradition is understood as something that is being under constant negotiation. The role of education is to help to communicate, shape and update cultural values, customs and norms (EDUFI 2016, 51). Nevertheless, the document also acknowledges the socialization element in passing on cultural heritage and values and traditions, which are considered important to the following generation (EDUFI 2016, 51).

At the heart of the promotion of cultural values in the Finnish curriculum is the formation of cultural identity (e.g. Laine 2014) and supporting children's diverse cultural identities. Experiences, knowledge and skills in cultural heritage—as something simultaneously both stable and changing—gives children tools for adopting, using and changing culture (EDUFI 2016, 40). Cultural competence is understood as significant transversal competence consisting of knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and will. According to the document, cultural competence relates to the interaction and communication: ability to listen, identify and understand different perspectives and to reflect on one's own values and attitudes (p. 54.). Interaction with people with diverse cultural backgrounds and worldviews is considered entailing respect for cultural background and worldview of others as well as those of one's owns. (EDUFI 2016, 58)

The Finnish religious education model in compulsory school education is non-confessional and non-binding. Yet, the model is based on belonging to certain religious community and therefore, teaching is organized in groups according to children's “own” worldview tradition. The underlying principle is to first familiarise with one's own home tradition, offering the basis for understanding other worldviews. Although this instruction model does not apply to ECEC where worldview education is taught to whole group together, a similar central idea in Finnish religious education philosophy in compulsory school of knowing one's own roots is visible also in the ECEC curriculum: a child's local community serves as starting point for developing wider understanding of diverse worldviews. As regards epistemologies and understanding of the foundations of knowledges as plural noted in the Swedish ECEC curriculum, the Finnish curriculum states that children and adults should actively discuss different ways of thinking and acting, resulting to new ways of acting together. (EDUFI 2016,74)

A specific part in the Finnish ECEC curriculum, “Me and my community”, connects religions and worldviews to national and cultural values. Interestingly, neither Christianity nor any other religion is explicitly named, because in the curricular discourse, religions are

understood as a sub-category of worldviews. To avoid the misconceptions and to emphasize the inclusivity of the term worldview, the document states that non-religious worldviews should be investigated like any other worldview (EDUFI 2016,111). Ethical thinking, worldviews, past, present and future, and media, are reflected from the context of child group, family and community. Worldview education aims to support transversal competences related to children's cultural competence, interaction and expression (EDUFI 2016,112).

Similar to the Norwegian curriculum (see below), the roles and responsibilities of the teachers in relation to values and worldviews are described rather explicitly in the Finnish curriculum. The staff are models of interaction and encountering with cultural differences in a positive manner, as also mentioned in the Swedish curriculum. The ECEC personnel are to hold an open and respectful attitude towards families having their diverse of languages, cultures, worldviews and religions, traditions and views on education (EDUFI 2016,46). Importantly, the professional requirement here does not only relate to content knowledge on worldviews but the professional approach and reflexivity: ECEC staff is addressed a moral norm to develop an ability to see things from different perspectives and put themselves in the place of others. (EDUFI 2016, NCCECEC 2018, p. 74) This is important as regards critical reflection on religions and worldviews as sensitive subjects (Poulter et al 2016).

Norwegian ECEC curriculum

Norwegian ECEC provision is steered by Kindergarten Act (2005, took force in January 2006), which recognizes two major worldview traditions, Humanism and Christianity, as having the influential role in providing the value basis for ECEC:

“The Kindergarten shall be based on fundamental values in the Christian and humanist heritage and tradition, such as respect for human dignity and nature, on intellectual freedom, charity, forgiveness, equality and solidarity, values that also appear in different religions and beliefs and are rooted in human rights.” (Kindergarten Act 2005, Section 1.)

Interestingly, in the Kindergarten Act (2005, section 1), Christianity and Humanism are seen as bearing those shared values of liberal-democracies. The Framework Plan for the Content and Task of Kindertartens (2017) is a regulation under the Kindergarten Act. It provides a more detailed provision on the purpose and content of ECEC. Similarly to the Swedish and Finnish ECEC curricula, the Norwegian curricula emphasises the democratic societal values “on which our society is based” (The Framework Plan, 2017 p. 9). ; “Kindertartens shall help the children to understand the shared values and norms that prevail in society”(The Framework Plan, 2017 p. 21). Furthermore, according to the Norwegian Framework Plan for the Content and Task of Kindertartens (2017), Christian values again are seen as ensuring the rights of the child; sll kindertartens shall adopt the core values set out in the Kindergarten Act and in international treaties ratified by Norway such as the UN Convention of 20 November 1989 on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (ILO Convention 169). Therefore, it is clear that the Christian values are the core values in the Norwegian ECEC curriculum and that these “shall be promulgated, practised and manifest in every aspect of a kindertartens’s pedagogical practices” (The Framework Plan, 2017 p. 7).

As Christianity and Humanism are stated as core values of ECEC, The Framework Plan (2017) also emphasises that the preschools shall “promote democracy, diversity and mutual respect, equality” (p. 5). However, there are no clear definitions for Christian and Humanist heritage and traditions. Therefore, every preschool or teacher may define it differently—which again raises the question as regards the individual or local vs. national power in the actual interpretation of curricula.

‘Ethics, religion and philosophy’ is included as a separate content area in the Norwegian Framework Plan (2017, p. 54 -57). This learning area is described as follows:

“Ethics, religion and philosophy help shape the different ways in which we view the world and other people, and they have an impact on our values, norms and attitudes. This learning area focuses especially on kindergartens’ social mandate and core values in a society with a multitude of world views.” (The Framework Plan, 2017 p. 54)

The Framework Plan (2017) includes indication towards pedagogic tools for this thematic area. However, there are no further explanation on which particular tools to use for what and how:

“Kindergartens shall introduce the children to the stories, traditions, values and holidays of different religions and world views and to discover how cultural expressions are valuable in the own right. Kindergartens shall create an interest in the diversity of our society and an understanding of other people’s life-worlds and ways of life.” (The Framework Plan, 2017 p. 54)

Though providing an idea of the pedagogical framework more generally, this also leaves a lot of room for interpretation and for how actually these themes will be introduced in ECEC.

Ethics education also holds an important role for integrating children's own life questions (see also Almenet et al., 2000; Ristiniemi et al., 2018) to ECEC in the Norwegian setting:

”By talking about and wondering at existential, ethical and philosophical questions, the children shall be enabled to formulate questions, listen to others, reflect and find answers. This way, kindergartens shall help steer the children towards critical thinking and sound judgement.” (The Framework Plan, 2017 p. 54)

With regard to the aims of this learning area, the Framework Plan (2017, p. 54-55) states that by engaging with ethics, religion and philosophy, kindergartens shall enable the children to, among other skills and contents, “learn about the fundamental values of the Christian and humanist traditions and familiarise themselves with the religions and world views represented in kindergarten” and “learn about, comprehend and reflect on fundamental norms and values.”

With regard to ECEC learning environment, the Norwegian document states: “kindergartens shall help create a learning community that values different expressions and opinions.” (The Framework Plan, 2017 p. 47). When it comes to the roles and responsibilities of ECEC staff, it continues to include (The Framework Plan, 2017 p. 55), for instance, that staff shall “make room for the children’s own discoveries, conversations, experiences and thoughts concerning religion, world views, ethics and existential

questions” and “identify everyday value conflicts, reflect on own values and attitudes and be conscious of how these are expressed when working with the children.”

When it comes to other aspects of inclusion, the Norwegian Framework Plan is in line with the way the Swedish curriculum emphasises the special position of the minorities with an official status: the children speaking Sámi have a distinctive status. According to the Norwegian Kindergarten Act (2005, section 3), “Sámi kindergartens shall promote the children’s Sámi language skills, strengthen their Sámi identity and promote Sámi values”—in these preschools Sámi is the main language of instruction. Furthermore, the Framework Plan states: “Sámi kindergarten children shall be supported in preserving and developing their language, their knowledge and their culture irrespective of where in Norway they live.” (2017, p. 25). Again, though, what exactly Sámi values are is left open.

Similarly to Swedish and Finnish curricula, the importance of children’s own questions are brought up in the Framework Plan (2017, p. 9):

“Kindergartens shall demonstrate how everyone can learn from each other and promote the children’s curiosity and sense of wonder about similarities and differences. Kindergartens shall help ensure that all children feel they are being seen and acknowledged for whom they are and highlight the place and value of each and every one of them within the group.”

An interesting distinct feature to the Norwegian Framework Plan (2017, p. 1) is the reference to the Kindergarten Act exempting private ECEC units from adhering to the clause regarding Christian and humanist traditions:

“In their statutes, the owners of private kindergartens are at liberty to determine that the values referred to in Section 1 of the Act shall not be based on fundamental values of the Christian and humanist heritage and tradition.”

This means that whether or not an ECEC unit opts for a different approach to the objectives clause or adopts particular objectives regarding its worldview, it is obliged to uphold those values described in the objectives clause which are set in the human rights law. All ECEC units, whatever their ownership structure, are obliged to function in keeping with the shared values of respect for human dignity and nature, freedom of thought, compassion, forgiveness, equality and solidarity.

Discussion

This study set out to examine the national values and cultural heritage, and within that, especially the position of religions and worldviews in the three Nordic national ECEC curriculum documents (Finland, Sweden, Norway). In so doing, the findings illustrate the degree to which the present societal diversity of worldviews and religions is reflected by or taken into account in the ECEC curricula of these secular-Lutheran (Poulter et al 2016) Nordic societal settings. Especially interesting are the above presented curriculum extracts stating, what values are regarded as foundational in each of these countries, and by which means are these to be transmitted to children in their ECEC settings. Increasing societal diversity (Vertovec, 2015; Lamminmäki-Vartia et al., 2020; Kuusisto & Garvis 2020) has broadened the ways in which worldviews and values are handled in ECEC curricula, as illustrated in different ways across these documents.

The above analysis entails, in line with a curriculum studies baseline perspective, the document guidelines on framework, contents, means and undercurrents for the educational ECEC practice. This itself is a result of both societal history and presence—including the continuous tensions between these, too—with their political struggles and conflicting interests, reflecting a variety of imaginaries of what the ‘national’ values and cultural heritage actually mean. As Reimers (e.g. 2020), Puskás and Andersson (e.g. 2019) have illustrated, in practice, teachers’ interpretations regarding what cultural heritage entails vary notably.

The analysis illustrates that the outspoken societal values include first and foremost the view of the nation ‘resting on’ democratic societal values. This includes numerous references to the children’s own active participation in the ECEC community, taking children’s initiatives into account and educating them to empathy towards diversity in this national framework of values. As noted by Emilson and Johansson (2018), notions like ‘democracy’ may mean different things for different people. This raises the question of how the practitioners actually interpret the document contents, also in relation to the politically reconstructed national values. Some idea of practical implementations can be perceived from previous work by us Lamminmäki-Vartia et al. (2020), Rissanen et al., (2016; 2020) and others, such as the work by Reimers (2020) and van Krieken Robson (2019a; 2019b).

With regard to the above descriptions of national values, the similarity between these three curriculum documents is evident. In all three countries, the role of personnel as role models and value bearers in encountering diversity was strongly emphasized. However, when it comes to the position of religions and other worldviews in the ECEC, there are notable differences in terms of what is actually written out in the documents. Where the Norwegian and Finnish curriculum guidelines nominate their own section on a content area related to religions and other worldviews, the Swedish one explicitly refers to religion only once, and otherwise only includes references to more general categories like children’s questions, views or identities, to which one can read worldview related contents—or not do so. The national level curriculums thereby leave a lot of space to the ECEC directors’ and practitioners’ interpretations on whether, and if so how, the topics are related to religions or worldviews, and what in fact should be covered in ECEC.

Of the analysed ECEC curricula documents, the Norwegian one perhaps provides most pedagogical tools for the actual implementation of education concerning the national and other values and worldviews. It also holds much more explicit emphasis on religion as such, among these three followed by the more general level Finnish one, which in its most recently revised edition now refers to worldview education rather than education on religions.

Religion and worldview can be perceived as central elements in cultural identity building, also in part strengthening the minority background children’s participation and active agency in the society. From the point of view of inclusion of minority religions and worldviews in ECEC, one can say that these three countries in the ECEC document level adopt a somewhat different approach. This may be related to the fact that although there are many similarities in the worldview landscapes and historicity of these three Nordic countries, they do also have statistical differences in regards to population, cultural and worldview diversity, as well as their chosen educational policy believed to best embrace with ‘old’ and ‘new’ (Vertovec, 2015) societal diversity. The Swedish case for promoting

inclusion seems to be not to lift any religion or worldview so not to lift it above the others, whereas the Norwegian ECEC curriculum privileges openly Christianity as a necessary value position of an inclusive and democratic community. At the curricular level, the Finnish case in turn promotes equality of all worldviews and a necessity for seeing the diverse individual worldview sources as compatible with nationally shared values. An empirical comparison between the national settings would be an interesting further study. Even an analysis of the possible geographical variance in the implementation of the national curriculum within each of the countries would be interesting. For example between the capital city area and the more rural areas, especially those with a history as national 'Bible Belt'. It may be that in some domains, the within-country variance can be bigger than what differences between ECEC practices in the capitals of Stockholm, Oslo and Helsinki are. Geographical differences in intercultural and interreligious sensitivity among teachers and school pupils have been found in previous studies, noting the higher degree of secularisation and diversity in bigger cities. These findings can to an extent be explained by the lack of personal encounters with diversity, in line with Allport's classic (1954) contact hypothesis (e.g. Kuusisto, Kuusisto, Holm & Tirri 2014; Schihalejev et al. 2020).

The special position of some of the minority cultures in relation to the national values, as included within the national cultural heritage, can be seen as both an inclusive and exclusive feature in the curriculum documents. Studies show (e.g. Laine 2014) that it is important to provide recognition to minority groups, children and families in the ECEC to foster the minority cultural identities, which correlate positively with the shared communal and national values. However, this policy is also exclusive as regards the other minority communities that do not hold an official minority; for example the notable Muslim population and the cultures connected to these children and families in the Nordic countries.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to contribute into comparative and international educational policy analysis. Comparative and international approaches provide broader perspectives into examining curricula than just the national level ones. By this means, comparative analyses can provide further understanding for knowledges and their value, all of which is what curriculum studies aim to achieve (Autio, 2017, p. 54). As a conclusion, we will address a few central ideas for further development both in research and practice.

Firstly, according to the findings, the role of the personnel is crucial when transmitting "silent" attitudes and values on religions and worldviews and thus, resulting advantaged and disadvantaged positions for individuals. Personnel as role models of value bearers in encountering diversity relates strongly to topics that are often considered as a private and not belonging to the teacher any longer. It is important that Nordic ECEC contexts offer safe places of encounter for all children from diverse backgrounds, which help them to connect and communicate with the traditional and new worldview diversity. Researching educators' personal stances in terms of practical implications and educator attitudes and the changing professionalism would be an important focus for future research (Lamminmäki-Vartia et al., 2020).

Secondly, since all of these three curricula describe the ideal of national values at very general level, there is a risk that the competency level (or beliefs) of the personnel regarding worldviews and values will be an important predictor for children's understanding of them in the future. Therefore, teacher education in each country has an important role in preparing teachers to critically evaluate the curricular ideals and reflect their personal beliefs in implementing these aims (see also Rissanen et al., 2016; 2020).

Thirdly, another important aspect is to pay attention to what minorities are recognized officially as minorities. There is clearly a difference generated by the historical presence of some of the minorities in the national policy texts. Naturally it is important to support the indigenous cultures and the identities and languages related to these. But one can ask, what will the criteria be in the future: what cultures are to be recognized in the official policies of the national values and ECEC educational system, and on what grounds. Longer term, such policies can for instance, via longitudinal trajectories of experiences of exclusion, contribute towards anti-social or anti-societal attitudes within the society, thereby even fuelling extreme or radical attitudes and behaviours (e.g. Niemi et al., 2018).

Finally, with regard to further research, we are presently working on analysing the age level continuum of curricula documents, that is, an examination of the interplay between national values and worldviews/religions into the preschool and comprehensive school curricula in these countries. These create an interesting comparison from ECEC to their Religious Education or Study of Religions instruction structures in the school side.

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