




Educators' and Parents' Perspectives About Belonging in Early Years Education in Europe

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Abstract

The overall goal of this project is to gain a broad picture of belonging and the politics of belonging in early education settings (In Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland the children attend school from 6 or 7 years. In the Netherlands children attend compulsory school at 4 years of age. Using the terms early education settings and (pre)schools with parenthesis we refer to educational institutions (preschool, day-care, compulsory school) involving children between 4 and 6 years) in five European countries: Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. By 'belonging' we refer to children's sense of feeling safe and 'at home'. By 'politics of belonging' we refer to societal structures and processes of safeguarding communities and their borders among children (and educators) in their early education settings. Educators ($n=648$) and parents ($n=1,598$) were surveyed about their perspectives about, and pedagogies for, belonging. Results indicated that, in general, parents and educators felt positively about belonging in their (pre)schools. Even so the study shows that experiences of belonging cannot be taken for granted, and a number of parents and educators worry about children being excluded and alienated. The study also revealed a relation between the educational level of educators and the complexity of pedagogic methods educators used to support children's belonging in early education settings.

Keywords Politics of belonging · Preschool · Children · Parents · Educators · Early education settings

Résumé

L'objectif global de ce projet est d'obtenir une vue d'ensemble de l'appartenance et des politiques d'appartenance dans les contextes d'éducation préscolaire de cinq pays européens : la Finlande, l'Islande, les Pays-Bas, la Norvège et la Suède. Par « appartenance », nous faisons référence au sentiment de sécurité et de « chez soi » des enfants. Par « politique d'appartenance », nous faisons référence aux structures et processus sociétaux de sauvegarde des communautés et de leurs frontières parmi les

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enfants (et les éducateurs) dans leurs contextes d'éducation préscolaire. Les éducateurs ($n = 648$) et les parents ($n = 1\,598$) ont été interrogés sur leurs perspectives et leurs pédagogies concernant l'appartenance. Les résultats ont indiqué qu'en général, les parents et les éducateurs ressentaient positivement leur appartenance à leur (pré) école. L'étude montre néanmoins que les expériences d'appartenance ne peuvent pas être considérées comme acquises et qu'un certain nombre de parents et d'éducateurs s'inquiètent du fait que les enfants soient exclus et aliénés. L'étude a également révélé une relation entre le niveau d'éducation des éducateurs et la complexité des méthodes pédagogiques utilisées par ceux-ci pour soutenir l'appartenance des enfants dans les milieux d'éducation préscolaire.

Resumen

El objetivo general de este proyecto es obtener una imagen amplia de la pertenencia y las políticas de pertenencia en entornos de educación temprana en cinco países europeos: Finlandia, Islandia, Países Bajos, Noruega y Suecia. Por "pertenencia" nos referimos a la sensación que tienen los niños de sentirse seguros y "en casa". Por "políticas de pertenencia" nos referimos a las estructuras sociales y a los procesos de salvaguardia de las comunidades y sus fronteras entre los niños (y los educadores) en sus entornos de educación temprana. Se encuestó a educadores ($n = 648$) y padres ($n = 1.598$) sobre sus perspectivas y pedagogías sobre la pertenencia. Los resultados indicaron que, en general, los padres y educadores se sentían positivos acerca de pertenecer a sus escuelas (pre)escolares. Aun así, el estudio muestra que las experiencias de pertenencia no pueden darse por sentadas, y a varios padres y educadores les preocupa que los niños sean excluidos y alienados. El estudio también reveló una relación entre el nivel educativo de los educadores y la complejidad de los métodos pedagógicos que los educadores utilizaron para apoyar la pertenencia de los niños a entornos de educación temprana.

Introduction

Societies of today comprise increasing diversity due to (im) migration, globalization, and pluralism. Families come from different circumstances and various ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds and they possess differing experiences, abilities, and resources. As this broad diversity increases, concerns grow about children's experiences of belonging and feeling 'at home' (Yuval-Davis, 2011, 10). This study examines these concerns by exploring educators' and parents' perspectives about, and pedagogies for, belonging in early education settings across five European countries.

There is a difference between how we understand 'belonging' and the 'politics of belonging'. 'Belonging' indicates an emotional relationship and connectedness to and identification with a community often involving a sense of feeling safe and 'at home'. Many researchers view belonging as a universal human need evident in all cultures and crucial both for children's sense of self and their relations to

other people and the environment. Belonging is often described as an existential issue—a human desire to be interconnected with others (May, 2013; Stratigos et al., 2014).

‘The politics of belonging’ refers to ‘the doing’ of belonging and concerns the (power) processes and structures of safeguarding communities and their borders, which works to determine who is inside and outside a community and who has the right to participate and influence decision-making (Yuval-Davies 2011). The politics of belonging may therefore lead to a sense of belonging—feeling safe and ‘at home’ but can also awake the opposite: feelings of alienation and not belonging. Inherent in these descriptions of belonging and the politics of belonging are the concepts of inclusion and exclusion. In this study these terms are understood as conditions often underpinning and creating possibilities for belonging. Yet they are not the same. Inclusion concerns being part of involved in a community, in play, etc., but does not necessarily mean that children feel at home and that they belong.

This study extends previous small-scale qualitative research by exploring at scale, the politics of belonging with respect to educators’ and parents’ perspectives about, and pedagogies for, belonging in early education settings across five European countries: Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. Children’s belonging in early education contexts is explored through the eyes of educators and parents (Johansson and Rosell, 2021). Educators and parents responded to questions about belonging in early education contexts in general and, more specifically, in relation to their own child (parents) or their (pre)school group of children (educators).

In all participating countries, inclusion is a principle which underlies both political decision-making and interactions within the (pre)school community (politics of belonging) and the possibilities for belonging (feeling at home) that may occur. The countries participating were all part of an international research project supported by [Removed for blind review] aiming for knowledge development about belonging and politics of belonging in early education settings.

The Politics of Belonging

Our theoretical framework enables us to take the position that political processes for belonging in early years education are intersectional, complex, and power-loaded phenomena about crossing, defending, and defining borders for various communities. The politics of belonging are essentially tied to power and (in) equalities, with dominant groups defining the boundaries of belonging (2010). Intersectionality relates to the (un) just ‘distribution of power and other resources in society /.../ and the differential hierarchical locations of individuals and groupings of people on society’s grids of power’ (Yuval-Davies 2015, 9). In exploring the politics of belonging, it is important to take into consideration how situated knowledge constructs different ways of seeing the world (Yuval-Davis, 2011, 2015). Levels of intersectionality of importance for understanding and promoting belonging in early years education settings involve: (1) levels of influence, (2) different analytic facets, and (3) intersectionally just pedagogies (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

Levels of Influence

The politics of belonging takes place at, and is influenced by, Macro (political), Meso (institutional), and Micro (individual/interactional—including pedagogy) levels of influence or structures (Yuval-Davis, 2011, 2015). In early years educational settings, communities are created by various individuals including children, educators, and parents. These communities are constituted by societal structures, borders, and processes aiming to define who is inside and who is outside, and the different mandates and social positions the participants may possess. These everyday negotiations of bordering may be implicit and explicit, yet they are examples of political boundary making (i.e. politics of belonging) in early education settings (Johansson and Rosell, 2021; Tillett and Wong 2018). Educators, parents but also the youngest children in early education settings are involved in such political processes about who is inside/outside various communities in the settings.

Different Analytic Facets

Situated knowledge related to the politics of belonging emerges at the *intersection* of various analytic facets; the social positions (and categorisations) people occupy or relate to in their daily lives (gender, age, ethnicity, language, etc.), the emotional identifications (attachments) and narratives people tell about themselves and others, and the *value systems* people relate to in their communities (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Together these facets offer a portrait of the politics of belonging helping us to understand how societal structures and processes for belonging are entangled in early childhood educators' experiences of their daily work and how such structures and processes influence parents' experiences of belonging in their children's (pre)school.

Intersectionally–Just Pedagogies

The intersectional facets related to situated knowledge also underpin our theoretical framework related to intersectionally just pedagogies for belonging. Intersectionally just pedagogies, take a critical theoretical perspective of teaching and learning and address equality and children's sense of belonging. Souto-Manning and Rabadi-Raol (2018) argued that intersectionally just pedagogies are founded upon the idea that inequities are never based on single factors. Instead, inequalities are created by interconnected social locations, power relations, and experiences.

The challenge for educators is not only to develop their cultural competence, but also to develop a critical meta-awareness of oppressive conditions at stake in early childhood contexts. Tillett and Wong (2018) advocated for critical reflection with respect to belonging in early education settings, which suggests that teachers need to engage in what Thompson et al. (2013) refer to as critical pedagogical discourses. Such critical discourses require educators to be critically meta-aware of oppressive conditions which are evident in early childhood contexts. This requires that children and educators engage in critical reflection about different power relations and

inequalities. It also means high expectations for all children, trust in all children's capacity, and a critical understanding of the monocultural nature of mainstream curricula, teaching, and assessments. Our study takes these ideas into account as a critical framework for the development of the study and for understanding belonging in early years education.

The Study

Drawing on our theoretical framework with respect to the politics of belonging, we wanted to understand more about educators' and parents' perspectives about, and pedagogies for, belonging. This involves both the politics of belonging (the doing; e.g. constructing and defending borders, power positions, values, etc.) and the possible feelings of identification and belonging (possible results of doing). The following research questions guided the study:

- (1) What are parents' and educators' perspectives of belonging? and
- (2) What are the pedagogies for belonging identified and prioritised by educators and parents?

Contexts

The context of this study is early education settings in Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. The study was developed in these contexts because of a common interest in exploring belonging in early years education and to apply belonging as a political and emotional issue. Rather than comparing between countries, the study aims for cross-contextual knowledge formation.

In Finland, children enter compulsory school the year they turn seven. The Finnish educational system for children below school age consists of early education services for birth to five-year-old children and pre-primary education for six-year-old children. In Iceland, children enter compulsory school at six years of age. The educational system for children below school age consists of playschools attended from 12 months to six years of age. In the Netherlands, it is mandatory for children to start formal schooling at five years of age, but many children start at four. ECEC services are provided for children between two and half to four years of age in childcare centres and playgroups. *Norwegian* children commence compulsory schooling at six years of age. Kindergartens in Norway provide ECEC for children from birth to five years of age. And finally, compulsory schooling in Sweden commences at six years of age. The preschool in Sweden accommodating prior to school ECEC is aimed at children between one and five years of age.

Procedure

Initial survey items were developed based on the underpinning theoretical perspective of politics of belonging, relevant literature, and central aspects of pedagogy. Items related to educators' and parents' own experiences of belonging (e.g. I feel

that I belong to my early years community); supporting groups of diverse children (e.g. supporting groups of diverse children so that they feel a sense of belonging can be challenging for me as an educator because there are not enough resources in my ECEC setting); reasons why children might be excluded (e.g. my child is excluded from the peer group by some children because of his/her cultural background); children's competence (e.g. children are too young to take responsibility for including each other); concerns around diverse groups of children in the (pre) school (e.g. I worry about how I can best support children with diverse abilities and/or backgrounds in my ECEC group); goals for a sense of belonging (e.g. it is important in my ECEC group that all children are included in peer groups); pedagogical ideas, goals, and strategies (e.g. as an educator I mainly focus on children's learning about belonging through interacting and playing with each other); and support (e.g. in my ECEC setting extra resources (e.g. financial, professional) to support groups of diverse children are available).

Once initial survey items were developed, face validity interviews were conducted with educators and parents in each of the participating countries to determine if the survey items appeared to measure the constructs of interest. Following face validity testing and initial refinement, a pilot of this version of the survey was conducted in each participating country and initial descriptive analyses were conducted. Following this analysis, data were presented to the research team and each scaled question was discussed.

The final version of the survey was created in English and translated for each country following WHO guidelines (see Tsang et al., 2017) to achieve different language versions of the English surveys that were conceptually equivalent in each of the participating countries. This process involved forward translation, assessment of the translated items by an expert panel in each of the participating countries then back translation of any words or phrases identified by the expert panel as problematic. Finally, the surveys were pre-tested with focus groups of parents and educators.

The final survey was distributed across municipalities in each of the participating countries. To ensure a demographic spread, the surveys were distributed proportionally between large cities, smaller communities, and rural areas. After contacting and receiving approval from the education administration at the participating municipalities, emails were sent to the principals or (pre)school directors who invited parents and preschool staff to participate in the survey and provided the link to the online survey. In the Netherlands, information about the study and the survey link was also distributed via Twitter. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and responses were anonymous. Each participating country followed the national ethical guidelines. An information sheet for participants was included in the survey, and participant consent was demonstrated by submission of the electronic survey.

Participants

There were 648 educators and 1598 parents participating in the survey. For educators, 94% ($n=610$) were female with most aged between 41 and 60 years of age (see Table 1). Most parents were also female ($n=1,203$; 75%), with the majority being between 31 and 40 years of age ($n=984$; 62%), indicating that

Table 1 Demographics for educators and parents

	Educators		Parents	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Sex–female	610	94	1203	75.3
<i>Age last birthday</i>				
Under 20	9	1.3	3	0.2
21–30	102	15.8	316	20.2
31–40	145	22.4	984	61.5
41–50	177	26.3	248	15.9
51–60	165	25.6	11	0.7
> 60	46	7.0	1	0.1
<i>Country currently working/residing</i>				
Finland	157	24.2	513	32.1
Iceland	143	22.1	300	18.8
Norway	155	23.9	301	18.8
Sweden	181	30.0	465	29.1
The Netherlands	27	4.0	31	1.9

parents in this study were younger than the educators. Thirty percent ($n = 181$) of educators currently work in Sweden, and 32% percent of parent participants ($n = 513$) resided in Finland (see Table 1).

Educators' experience and qualifications are presented in Table 2. Thirty-six percent of educators ($n = 236$) indicated they had 20 or more years of experience, and 37% ($n = 241$) were classified as a preschool/early childhood teacher.

Table 2 Experience and education of educators

	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Years of teaching</i>		
< 5	155	23.9
6–10	86	13.3
11–15	96	14.8
16–20	85	13.1
20+	236	36.4
<i>Qualifications</i>		
Secondary	109	16.8
Graduate diploma or Graduate	72	11.1
<i>Certificate</i>		
Preschool/Early Childhood teacher	241	37.2
Social Pedagogue	40	6.2
Bachelors	66	10.2
Masters	43	6.6

Table 3 Work and employment of parents

	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Highest qualification</i>		
Compulsory or vocational	560	35.0
University or postgrad	925	57.9
Employed	1404	89.9
Full time	1195	82.1
<i>Income status</i>		
High	221	13.8
Medium	1050	65.7
Low	288	18.5

For parents, most held a university or postgraduate qualification ($n=925$; 58%) and were employed full time ($n=1,190$; 84%) (see Table 3). Most parents ($n=1,050$, 66%) were classified as being on a medium level of income.

Findings

The findings are presented below in two main sections in response to the two research questions:

- (1) What are parents' and educators' perspectives of belonging? and
- (2) What are the pedagogies for belonging identified and prioritised by educators and parents?

Educators' and Parents' Perspectives of Belonging

Four key findings about educators' and parents' perspectives of belonging were related to: societal and institutional resources, children's inclusion, educators' knowledge with respect to children's belonging and parents' perceived contributions related to inclusion.

Societal and Institutional Resources, Structures, and Environments

The first key finding provides insights into educators' and parents' perspectives of how societal and institutional resources, structures, and environments support or hinder belonging (see Table 4). It is interesting to note that just over half of the educators felt that there were insufficient resources in their (pre)school to support diverse groups of children, while less than one-third of the educators were happy with the resources available. Educators were asked whether the (pre)school structure (buildings, physical environments, program) restricts children's experience of belonging and a quarter of the educators replied that they did. However, most educators disagreed. Parents were less likely than educators to feel that the (pre)

Table 4 Societal and institutional resources, structures, and environments

	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)
Educators			
There are not enough resources in my (pre)school (Pre)school structures (buildings, physical environments, program) restrict children's experiences of belonging	190 (29.1)	105 (15.6)	358 (54.9)
The group size is too large. In my country, there is a positive attitude towards inclusion of diverse groups of children	400 (60.5)	94 (13.9)	167 (25.3)
	161 (24.4)	76 (11.3)	424 (64.1)
	111 (16.7)	84 (12.7)	359 (69.2)
Parents			
There are not enough resources in my (pre)school (Pre)school structures (buildings, physical environments, program) restrict children's experiences of belonging	538 (33.8)	490 (30.1)	566 (35.5)
The group size is too large. In my country, there is a positive attitude towards inclusion of diverse groups of children	1,106 (68.9)	249 (15.3)	251 (15.7)
	692 (43.2)	284 (17.4)	625 (39.1)
	282 (17.7)	349 (21.4)	885 (55.4)

school structure inhibited the opportunities of children to belong or participate. When exploring societal (political) structures, while just over half of the parents agreed that there was a positive attitude towards inclusion of diverse groups of children in their country, a number of parents disagreed. In terms of environments, parents and educators pointed to group size as a hindrance for belonging. About a third of parents felt group sizes were too large, whereas over half the educators felt that supporting groups of diverse children so that they feel a sense of belonging was difficult due to the size of the group.

Children's Inclusion—Positive Views and Concerns

The second key finding relates to educators and parents reporting their perspectives about children being included or excluded in preschool and the peer group community, with two main views expressed by educators and parents. These findings are presented in Table 5.

First, educators' and parents' responses indicated that they believed it was rare for children to be excluded based on varied backgrounds and positions. Most parents felt that their child was included—and indicated they trusted the educators to help their child be part of the (pre)school community. Many parents agreed that when their child arrived at (pre)school in the morning, there was always a peer to welcome them, that their child had many friends in (pre)school, and that their child felt confident to contribute to the peer group community. On the other hand, some parents reported that there was no peer welcome for their child on arrival, and some parents reported that their child did not have many friends in preschool and did not feel confident to contribute to the peer group community. This indicates that friendships for all children cannot be taken for granted. It is also notable that very few educators felt that children were excluded in the (pre)school due to social positions such as their cultural background, language, disability, social status, and/or religious background. Similarly, few parents felt their child was excluded due to cultural background, language, disability, social status, and/or religious background.

Second, educators and parents both shared concerns over children being excluded from peer groups. For children who need special support, nearly half of the educators raised concerns about the challenges such children experienced in being part of their peer group community. Most educators and parents agreed that diverse children do not create instability in groups, though there were parents who were worried about how their child was supported to experience belonging in the (pre)school.

Educators' Knowledge and Children's Belonging—a Matter of Confidence and Trust?

The third key finding is related to educators' perspectives about competencies and knowledge needed to promote children's belonging in early education settings (see Table 6). Even though most educators felt they had the competencies and knowledge they needed to support diverse groups of children, more than a quarter of

Table 5 Children's inclusion—positive views and concerns

	Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Neither agree or disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> (%)
Educators			
Children in need of special support have difficulties being part of the peer group	273 (41.6)	111 (16.9)	273 (41.5)
Children with minority languages have difficulties in participating in peer interactions	277 (42.3)	116 (17.7)	262 (39.9)
I am concerned about the amount of time required to support children with diverse abilities and/or backgrounds	171 (25.7)	60 (9.0)	434 (65.2)
I believe groups of diverse children create instability in peer groups	426 (64.4)	103 (15.6)	132 (19.9)
Some children in my group exclude other children because of:			
Cultural background	525 (84.4)	78 (12.5)	19 (3.0)
Language	426 (66.3)	160 (24.9)	57 (8.9)
Disability	461 (76.7)	106 (17.6)	34 (5.7)
Social status	533 (83.2)	71 (11.1)	37 (5.9)
Religious background	586 (94.1)	9 (1.4)	28 (4.5)
Parents			
My child is included in the (pre)school community	52 (3.3)	72 (4.5)	1,468 (92.1)
I trust the educators to help my child to be part of the (pre)school community	89 (5.5)	40 (2.5)	1,482 (81.9)
My child has many friends in (pre)school	122 (7.6)	126 (7.7)	1,352 (84.6)
When my child arrives in the morning there is always a peer to welcome him/her	331 (20.6)	250 (15.6)	1,023 (63.7)
My child feels confident to contribute to the peer group community	89 (5.5)	132 (8.2)	1,390 (86.3)
I believe groups of diverse children create instability in peer groups	1,134 (70.4)	214 (13.3)	262 (16.3)
I worry about my child being excluded from the peer group	1,232 (76.7)	112 (7.0)	262 (16.3)
My child is excluded from the peer group by some children because of:			
Cultural background	1,313 (96.5)	34 (2.5)	13 (0.9)
Language	1,285 (93.7)	47 (3.4)	39 (2.8)
Disability	1,241 (95.0)	41 (3.1)	24 (1.8)

Table 5 (continued)

	Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Neither agree or disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> (%)
Social status	1,330 (96.0)	40 (2.9)	16 (1.1)
Religious background	1,325 (97.9)	14 (1.0)	14 (1.0)

Table 6 Educators' knowledge and children's belonging—a matter of confidence and trust

	Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Neither agree or agree or <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> (%)
Educators			
In my team we have not enough competencies to support children with diverse abilities and/or backgrounds	397 (59.7)	109 (16.4)	159 (23.9)
I worry about how I can best support children with diverse abilities and/or backgrounds	257 (38.6)	76 (11.4)	332 (50.0)
Parents			
My impression is that the educators do not have the competencies and knowledge to support	1,044 (65.2)	305 (19.1)	252 (35.5)
I worry about how my child is supported to feel a sense of belonging in his/her (pre)school group groups of diverse children	1,171 (72.6)	118 (7.3)	325 (20.2)
I trust the educators to help my child to be part of the (pre)school community	89 (5.5)	40 (2.5)	1,482 (91.9)

the educators felt that they did not. In addition, we found that half of the educators worried about how they could best support children with diverse abilities or backgrounds. This implies a lack of confidence in their own competence but could also indicate a lack of (societal) resources to support children's belonging.

Although many parents felt that the educators had the competence and knowledge to support diverse children's feeling of belonging, some parents also worried about how educators could best support their child to be included in the peer group community. Even so, most parents expressed their trust in educators being able to help their child to be part of the (pre)school community.

Parents' and Educators' Perceived Contributions—Identifications, Influencing Positions, and Doubts

A fourth key finding is that parents and educators felt they were able to contribute to and belong in the (pre)school community (see Table 7). Most educators agreed that they included parents in decision making about goals and practices for including their child with diverse needs and the educators believed that parents felt confident to contribute to the (pre)school community. Nearly all the educators felt that they too belonged to their (pre)school community and that they were involved in discussions about goals and practices for belonging and including all children in their (pre)school. Finally, many educators identified that the values of the families related to diversity and the values of the (pre)school related to diversity aligned.

Most parents appeared to agree with educators in these matters. They indicated that they felt they belonged to the community of their child's (pre)school group and that the educators listened to their opinions about including diverse groups of children. However, a number of parents thought that not all parents felt comfortable

Table 7 Parents' and educators' perceived contributions identifications, influencing positions, and doubts

	Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Neither agree or disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> (%)
Educators			
I include parents in decision-making about goals and practices for including their child with disabilities	44 (6.7)	98 (15.0)	510 (78.2)
My impression is that families with diverse (pre)school community	132 (19.9)	119 (17.9)	412 (62.1)
I feel like I belong to my (pre)school community	21 (3.2)	20 (3.0)	624 (93.8)
I am involved in discussions about goals and practices for including all children in my (pre)school	42 (6.4)	33 (5.0)	581 (88.5)
The family values and (pre)school values related to diversity align in my (pre)school	45 (6.9)	208 (31.9)	400 (61.3)
Parents			
As a parent, I feel that I belong to the community of my child's (pre)school group	165 (10.2)	182 (11.3)	1,268 (78.5)
The educators in my child's (pre)school listen to my opinions about including groups of diverse children	94 (5.9)	457 (28.5)	1,053 (64.8)
My impression is that not all parents feel comfortable raising concerns regarding the inclusion of all children at my child's (pre)school	486 (30.4)	751 (47.0)	361 (22.6)
I feel confident to contribute my opinions and ideas to the (pre)school community	144 (9.0)	104 (6.5)	1,357 (84.5)
The family values and (pre)school values related to diversity align in my child's (pre)school	59 (3.7)	207 (12.9)	1,334 (83.4)

about raising concerns regarding the inclusion of all children at their (pre)school. Even so the majority of parents agreed that they felt confident to contribute their opinions and ideas to the (pre)school community and most parents felt that their family values related to diversity aligned with those of their child's (pre)school.

Educators' and Parents' Perspectives of Pedagogies for Belonging

In this study we advocate for an intersectionally just pedagogy in which children are supported to reflect on their own and others' opinions, make judgements, and provide reasons for these judgments. In this section we address educators' and parents' perspectives of pedagogies for belonging, referring to the second research question. Educators and parents ranked pedagogical principles and practices according to how important they felt each of them were, as seen in Table 8 below. We first explore the key findings about the principles that all children should be accepted as they are and that learning takes place through interacting and play followed by the findings related to pedagogical practices of role modelling.

Pedagogical Practices–Role Modelling

In terms of practices, findings showed that nearly half of educators ranked role modelling as the most important pedagogical practice for children to learn about how to include others. Parents agreed that educators should role model inclusion of others. Perhaps this is an indication that principles and practice differ. While both parents and educators prioritised the principle that children's interactions are of key importance for children's learning, in specific pedagogical practices, both parents and educators prioritised role modelling. The next most common pedagogical practice ranked as important by parents was that educators should support children to work together to solve problems related to the inclusion/exclusion of others at (pre)school. Fewer parents and teachers felt it was most important that educators should encourage children to listen to others' points of view (see Table 8).

Responses with Respect to Level of Education: Education Level Matters

The final set of findings show some interesting relationships between level of education and perspectives of children's learning for belonging for educators. There were significant differences in the extent to which educators placed importance on the pedagogical practice of striving to create opportunities for children to create their own peer groups, depending on their educational background ($\chi^2(6, n=606)=18.23, p=0.006$), with a quarter of those with a Masters degree considering this practice highly important compared to only ten percent of the total sample of educators completing that question. It seems that educators with Bachelor or Masters degrees felt it was important to create opportunities for children to create their own peer groups.

Another interesting finding is that educators with different educational backgrounds varied in the extent to which they placed importance on the practice of

Table 8 Ranked as most important by parents and educators

	Educators		Parents	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Principles				
All children are accepted as they are	292	47.2	662	42.5
All children are included in peer groups	173	27.5	384	24.5
All children have a mutual friendship with at least one other child	72	11.6	259	16.7
Climate is characterised by togetherness	47	7.8	113	7.3
All children experience cultural sensitivity	23	3.7	76	4.9
Peer groups are characterised by generosity	20	3.3	72	4.7
Goals				
Develop understandings about diversity	332	51.2	887	55.5
Understand and discuss their own and other's emotions related to diversity	190	30.4	491	31.5
Discuss, reflect on and make judgements about many perspectives related to diversity	85	13.8	186	12
Learn specific facts about diversity	73	11.9	210	13.5
Priorities				
Children's learning about belonging through interacting and playing with each other	416	68.1	913	59.5
The needs of an individual to belong	333	56.4	774	51.1
The needs of the whole group to belong	299	51.3	791	52.3
Role modelling to help children learn about belonging	219	39.3	658	43.9
Specific pedagogical practices				
Role model for children about how to include others	297	47.4	632	41.2
Support children to work together to solve problems related to the inclusion/exclusion of others at (pre)school	175	27.8	204	13.2
Encourage children to listen to others' points of view	115	18.6	193	12.7
Provide children with information about diversity	80	12.3	148	9.8
Encourage children to reflect on their own and others' opinions, make judgements, and provide reasons for these judgements	75	12.0	103	6.7
Encourage children to describe their emotions about being excluded/included	66	10.6	138	9.0

Table 8 (continued)

	Educators		Parents	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Try to create opportunities for children to create their own peer groups	64	10.6	92	6.1
Encourage children to participate in discussions	42	6.9	38	2.5

encouraging children to reflect on their own and others' opinions, make judgements, and provide reasons for these judgments ($\chi^2(6, n=623)=21.64, p=0.001$). Twenty-seven percent of respondents with Masters degrees and 18% of Social pedagogues considered this to be highly important compared to 12% of the sample as a whole. Interestingly no significant differences existed for parents' educational level and this priority ($\chi^2(2, n=1533)=0.832, p=0.660$). Parents with university as their highest level of education were more likely to prioritise developing understandings about diversity ($\chi^2(4, n=1598)=109.49, p<0.001$), but there is no evidence that they believed children should engage in making judgments and providing justifications as was noted for social pedagogues and educators with Masters degrees.

Discussion

First, we present a summary of the key findings, followed by a discussion of these findings with respect to the relevant literature, research, and theoretical position taken in this study. Findings are discussed with respect to the research questions:

- 1) What are parents' and educators' perspectives of belonging? and
- 2) What are the pedagogies for belonging identified and prioritised by educators and parents?

Educators' and Parents' Perspectives of Belonging

Four key findings about educators' and parents' perspectives of belonging were related to: societal and institutional resources, children's inclusion, educators' knowledge with respect to children's belonging, and parents' perceived contributions related to inclusion.

A lack of Societal Resources

These key findings reveal a somewhat diverse picture with respect to societal structures and material resources supporting belonging. It appears that positive societal attitudes about diversity and inclusion cannot be taken for granted. Societal attitudes towards diversity and inclusion can refer to values for (in) equality and social (in) justice. Only just over half of the parents agreed that there was a positive attitude towards inclusion of diverse groups of children in their country with nearly a fifth of parents feeling that there was not a positive attitude towards inclusion in their country.

It is also interesting to reflect on materiality involving the idea that places and material and other resources can bring to the forefront experiences both of alienation and familiarity. Belonging to a place is a matter of interpretation. In this case it appears that the (pre)school environment gave rise to feelings of restriction and hindrances (see also Eidsvåg, 2022; Fegter & Mock, 2019; Juutinen et al., 2018). Both parents and educators pointed to group size as a hindrance for inclusion and feelings

of belonging. Group size relates to quality in early education and better learning conditions and outcomes for children are often linked to a smaller number of children per teacher (Sylva, 2010; Williams, Sheridan, and Samuelsson 2018).

When it comes to buildings, physical environments, and programs, nearly a quarter of the educators felt that these restricted children's feelings of belonging. Even though parents were less likely than educators to feel that the (pre)school structure inhibited the opportunities of children to belong, there were parents who showed concern for this. Our findings can also be interpreted as a matter of distance between policy and practice, where parents and educators feel unheard and that the support of children's belonging is not on the political agenda in their society. This can very well lead to senses of nonbelonging in the society.

Belonging is not to be Taken for Granted

These findings suggest that both educators and parents believed it was rare for children to be excluded due to their varied backgrounds and social positions such as gender, ethnicity, and language. The findings indicated however that inclusion supporting belonging is not to be taken for granted for all children. Both parents and educators shared concerns over children being excluded from the peer group community.

We know from previous research that (pre)school can be a place where children are excluded and that educators and peers, even though the rhetoric is inclusive, likewise can support exclusion processes of children (Puroila et al., 2021a, b; Johansson, 2022; Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, (2021). Johansson and Puroila, (2021) illuminated how children's various social positions (for example being a skillfull player and/or being skillfull in arguing) impacted on their communities and opportunities for belonging, and how power positions were successful in gaining influence. In addition, ethnicity appeared to be a signal for children to join and/or disclaim being part of communities. Berge and Johansson (2021) have shown how, when children from minority language backgrounds have been part of the preschool for longer periods and are more fluent in the national language, they also have greater opportunities to participate and have influence in peer communities, compared to peers with less experience.

Even though parents and educators responded that it was rare that children are excluded because of their background, they also indicated that subtle processes of exclusion may likely be at play among children in the (pre)schools. Both parents and educators in our study seem to worry about these processes of exclusion due to background. Exclusion processes may be embedded in 'discourses of silence' and be difficult to talk about both for educators and parents (Souto-Manning and Rabadi-Raol 2018). Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir (2021, 25) call for 'a critical re-consideration of how the educational policies emphasizing equality, educational continuity, and children's agentic rights are enacted, promoted, or hindered in the intersections between the various levels of /.../ educational systems'. Providing all children with welcoming educational environments is significant.

Educators' Competencies—a Mixed Picture

A diverse picture emerges from these findings. In one way the findings present a positive picture, because both educators and parents acknowledge the competencies of the educators and their ability to support their child's belonging. Even so, there are still a number of parents and educators who worry that the competencies are not sufficient. These viewpoints reflect a gap where possible identifications and positions do not align with parents' values. Views about competence might not reflect actual competence, yet this finding can indicate mistrust and a feeling of unbelonging among some parents regardless of an inclusive rhetoric.

Influencing Positions and Alienations

With respect to the key finding about parents' and educators' overall sense of inclusion, educators felt that they included parents in decision-making about goals and practices around inclusion and the parents in their (pre)school community felt confident to contribute. This indicates possibilities for parents to identify with the preschool community and positions them in a way that means they can influence practice.

The responses also indicated that educators had the impression that some parents were worried about speaking out about their child's well-being and inclusion. There are several possible explanations. The reasons could be based in a sense of alienation and not feeling at home in this kind of community (Johansson and Rosell, 2021; Puroila et al., 2021a, b; Ólafsdóttir and Einarisdóttir, 2021; Johansson and Puroila, 2021). Obstacles to belonging for parents (and educators) could concern relationships between majority and minority languages and different cultural ideologies and beliefs (see also Puroila et al., 2021a; Eidsvåg, 2022; Zachrisen 2017). Findings presented by Eidsvåg (2022) showed that parents with a minority language background felt alienated with respect to their child's (pre)school even though they appreciated (pre)school to be a place for community. On the other hand, Egilsson et al. (2021) showed in an Icelandic (pre)school context that not all parents prioritised their own sense of belonging in (pre)school and being part of various activities. This was not about lack of interest, rather about limited time and a full schedule to manage everyday family matters. Interestingly they did not take a passive position; it was an active decision not to participate in the (pre)school activities for parents.

Principles and Pedagogies for Belonging: a Mixture of Role Modelling and Interaction

The findings above show that both parents and educators thought it was important that all children should be accepted as they are. When ranking specific expectations, over half of parents indicated that it was important that their child developed understandings about diversity to promote belonging. There appeared to be a strong belief in social interaction among children as a prerequisite

when learning (and teaching) for belonging. In terms of priorities, both parents and educators felt that children learn about belonging best through interacting and playing with each other. However, when asked about specific pedagogical practices for teaching children about how to include others, nearly half of the educators ranked role modelling as most important. This indicates a complex relationship between priorities and specific pedagogical practices whereby educators and parents prioritise children's play and interactions as important but endorse role modelling when asked about specific pedagogical practices. While it is appropriate to both engage with role modelling as well as supporting play and interactions, we were surprised that specific practices did not directly relate to their educators' identified priorities and principles. Perhaps this shows that while they held certain principles/priorities, when it comes to everyday practices they are more spontaneous and not always able to act in ways which reflect their beliefs. Previous studies have shown how educators in early years settings work spontaneously with questions of belonging rather than in systematic and pre-planned pedagogical ways (e.g. Juutinen et al., 2018; Puroila et al., 2021a; Sumsion & Wong, 2011). Interestingly, educators in our study were least likely to rank that all children experience cultural sensitivity as most important ($n = 23$; 4%). This indicates a lack of meta-awareness and language for describing (and analysing) the complexity of practices promoting inclusion and the intersectional influences, social locations, power relations, and experiences at stake (see Souto-Manning and Rabadi-Raol 2018).

Education Level Matters

Of interest is that educators with different educational backgrounds varied in the extent to which they placed importance on the practice of encouraging children to reflect on their own and others' opinions, make judgements, and provide reasons for these judgments. A focus on critical reflections is important for supporting a rights-based approach to participation, belonging, and active citizenship in which children are supported to question, critique, and deliberate on social justice and inequality in their contexts (Tupper, 2009 in Scholes et al. 2017). Educators with Masters degrees and Social pedagogues were more likely than other respondents to consider this to be highly important.

Parents with university as their highest level of education were more likely to prioritise developing understandings about diversity, but there is no evidence that they believed children should engage in making judgments and providing justifications as was noted for social pedagogues and educators with Masters degrees. This implies knowledge about meta-reflection and the importance of children reflecting of their own and others' opinions, making judgements and providing reasons for these judgments (Kuusisto & Lamminmaki-Vartia, 2012). This calls for high-level education built on meta-reflection and educators being able to analyse the complexity of practices promoting inclusion and the intersectional influences, social locations, power relations, and experiences at stake (see Souto-Manning and Rabadi-Raol 2018).

Moving Forward: Pedagogies for Intersectionality in ECEC

Intersectionally just pedagogies, as advocated above, support children to reflect on their own and others' opinions, make judgements, and provide reasons for these judgments. Such critical pedagogies identify and allow space for different positions, identities, and values, which are significant when promoting children's belonging. This points to a focus on supporting children to have a voice (in a broad sense). Intersectionality can be promoted through a pedagogical focus on voice, whereby children's situated knowledge and imagination are prioritized to construct different ways of understanding the world (Kuusisto & Lamminmaki-Vartia, 2012; Souto-Manning and Rabadi-Raol 2018; Yuval-Davis, 2011).

The focus on children's voice implies, and indeed demands, a pedagogical approach in which meaningful and critical dialogue takes place between teachers and children. By engaging with, and understanding children's perspectives about difference, teachers can use teaching strategies which reduce stereotypical and prejudicial thinking (Nutbrown & Clough, 2009). This dialogic critical approach enables teachers to take a social justice approach which addresses oppression and shows deep respect towards children and their families in the everyday kindergarten setting (Kuusisto & Lamminmaki-Vartia, 2012). Apart from educators with a Masters degree, such approaches appeared to be rare in our study.

Limitations

It should be noted that this was an exploratory study and the measure used was developed specifically for this work. The survey would need to be tested with different participant groups across different cultures. It is also likely that the participant group in the current study were likely to have a particular interest in inclusion and belonging which should be considered when interpreting the findings. With respect to the parent participants in particular, it is possible that participants reflected active and committed parents with the power and social capital to get involved. Nonrespondents may have quite different views about inclusivity and belonging in the (pre)school. In addition, a limitation of the current study is that children's perspectives were not included and belonging was only explored from the perspectives of adults. However, the study presented in this paper was part of a larger study in which children's perspectives were also sought (see for e.g. Einarsdottir et al. 2022; Einarsdóttir & Ólafsdóttir 2020; Eidsvåg & Rosell, 2021). While we maintained objectivity through our use of peer debriefing across a broad international research team, however, when there were not clear divisions between responses, we emphasised those findings that highlighted the challenges of inclusion and belonging.

Conclusion

In sum this study offers a mixed picture of belonging from the perspectives of educators and parents. On the one hand the findings indicate that many parents and educators value (pre)school as a place where children experience belonging. Even so the study shows that feelings of belonging cannot be taken for granted, and that there are a number of parents and educators worrying about children being excluded and alienated. The study indicates that pedagogies promoting belonging and working against injustice in early years education built on intersectionality and meta-awareness are yet to be developed in early years educational settings.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.


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