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# Doing “belonging” in a Swedish preschool

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In Sweden where approximately one quarter of the children have a migrant background, preschool teachers comply with two seemingly contradictory ideas formulated in the curriculum: national cultural reproduction and intercultural awareness. The article is built on a case study that explores how a newly arrived refugee child in an ethnically diverse Swedish preschool is incorporated into a tradition that can be seen both as an ordinary preschool experience and as a means of national cultural reproduction. The article shows that the practice of a cultural tradition provides for a common integrative framework as well as development of a sense of belonging to a preschool group. At the same time, the case highlights that it is of particular importance that preschool teachers critically reflect on taken-for-granted practices and revisit their understandings of diversity and inclusion.

In Sweden, more than 80 percent of all children between 1–5 years are enrolled in preschool education (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013, p. 10). Thereby the Swedish preschool can be seen as an important socialising agent that prepares children to conform with the fundamental values on which the Swedish society is based (Alvestad & Pramling Samuelsson, 1999). In the past decades, Sweden has moved from an ethnically homogeneous (Swedish, Christian) society into a multicultural, multilingual, and multireligious society where roughly one quarter of the preschool children have a migrant background (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2014). Nevertheless, the values and traditions promoted by the state or through teachers’ practices, as explored in this article, do not necessarily reflect this change.

The aim of the study was to gain new insights on how children in an ethnically diverse Swedish preschool are incorporated into traditions that can be seen as a part of the ordinary preschool experience as well as a means of national cultural reproduction. More specifically the aim was to explore how a child who had no previous experiences of a particular Swedish tradition “did” the tradition for the first time. The main argument is that through implementing the Swedish curriculum goal

related to cultural reproduction, preschool teachers contribute to the development of a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging is further reinforced by the teachers’ support of multilingual practices and the common experiences shared by peers.

The Swedish preschool curriculum stipulates both that “[t]he task of the preschool involves . . . passing on a cultural heritage—its values, traditions and history, language and knowledge—from one generation to the next and that “[a]wareness of their own cultural heritage and participating in the culture of others should contribute to children’s ability to understand and empathise with the circumstances and values of others. The preschool can help to ensure that children from national minorities and children with a foreign background receive support in developing a multicultural sense of identity.” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 1998/2010, p. 5). Thus, similarly to preschool teachers in New Zealand, preschool teachers in Sweden face the challenge of how to balance the mainstream culture and the different cultural heritages of immigrant and minority children (Mitchell, Bateman, & Ouko, 2015). Also, the Swedish preschool curriculum and the New Zealand curriculum *Te Whāriki* emphasise the importance of acknowledging and respecting children’s membership in different cultures as well as

developing in the children a sense of belonging (Swedish National Agency for Education, 1998/2010; Ministry of Education, 1996). This is why knowledge of how teaching and learning in a culturally diverse early childhood setting in Sweden is implemented may contribute to a reflection on the challenges of a culturally responsive pedagogy in New Zealand as well.

### Theoretical and conceptual framework

The article combines the theory on banal nationalism (Billig, 1995) with insights into how adult-initiated routine activities may contribute to creating a sense of belonging. The concept of banal nationalism draws attention to national reproduction in everyday settings. Banal nationalism is constantly perpetuated in routine habits, such as using national bank notes, stamps, or the national flag, in mundane and unreflected ways (Billig, 1995). This everyday nationalism also involves a (re) production of a cultural heritage grounded in normative ideas about the nation's traditions, reflected in a cultural canon or code (Anthony & Ziebert, 2012). Thus a nation's cultural heritage includes codified traditions identified as "national", such as Waitangi Day in New Zealand or the Lucia tradition in Sweden.

Tradition can be defined as "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past" (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 1). Within the preschool setting, this continuity is detectable in the holidays and traditions that are celebrated. As in many other countries, the major state holidays in Sweden are tied to Christian traditions and many Swedish preschools develop activities around holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and midsummer. The concept of tradition is seen here as subordinate to the concept "cultural heritage" that, according to the Swedish preschool curriculum, ought to be transmitted from one generation to the next. Thus, the Lucia tradition discussed in this article is seen as part of the Swedish cultural heritage that, according to the curriculum, is to be passed on in Swedish preschools.

"Belonging" is another concept that establishes a relationship between the preschool curriculum and the arena of practice. Both the Swedish preschool curriculum and *Te Whāriki* (Swedish

National Agency for Education, 1998/2010; Ministry of Education, 1996) emphasise that a sense of belonging is essential for learning and for creating a democratic climate within which the children's families, regardless of background, feel involved in the education of their children. At the theoretical level the sense of belonging has been conceptualised in several different ways, two of which are particularly relevant for this study. On the one hand, the sense of belonging can be understood as identification with a particular ethnic or national community one shares an affinity with, without ever meeting all of the community's members (Anderson, 1983; Guibernau, 2013). On the other hand, the sense of belonging has also been defined in terms of inclusion in a group and attachment to individuals with whom one gets into close and regular contacts with (Gordon, O'Toole, & Whitman, 2008). Used in this sense, belonging has been found to be an essential basis for development and learning (Peers & Fler, 2014). In today's multicultural societies, the challenge for many early childhood teachers is how to foster a common sense of belonging at different levels ranging from peer groups to multicultural nations.

### The context and the participants

The fieldwork was conducted in a preschool class which consisted of 14 five-year-old multilingual children. Three of the children were Arabic-Swedish emerging bilinguals and six children were Romani-Swedish emerging bilinguals. A further five children spoke Swedish and another language at home. The preschool group had two preschool teachers, Shirin and Maria, and a teacher assistant, Saime, who spent three hours in the group every week. The three teachers represent three diverse ethnic and professional backgrounds. Maria has a Swedish background and has worked as a preschool teacher since 1981. Shirin migrated to Sweden from Syria in 2002. In Sweden, after finishing a preschool teacher training programme, she was offered a permanent position in the preschool where she had worked for three years at the time of the fieldwork. During an interview, Shirin explained that she chose to work in this particular preschool because there were families living in the area who were from Syria and because the preschool valued her language skills in Arabic. She described herself as "a link between the newly arrived refugee families and the preschool". The teacher assistant, Saime, has

a certificate and nursery teaching and is familiar with the Swedish preschool curriculum, but is employed as a peripatetic teacher whose duty is to provide mother tongue support in preschools such as this preschool where there are Romani-speaking children. Saime has established contacts with the Romani-speaking families and helps Maria and Shirin when there is a linguistic barrier between the Romani-speaking families and the preschool.

### Material and method

The data for this article are drawn from a case study carried out in 2013, with the main data collected mainly from participant observation. The study followed the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (2011). Information about the study was given to the teachers, children, and parents and written approval was obtained from the parents and the teachers. The children were asked to give an oral consent. In the study, both the teachers and the children were given fictitious names. The researcher visited the group three days a week over a five-week period. During the first days of the fieldwork, the researcher became acquainted with the children, teachers, and the routines of the class, and made field notes capturing events and interactions between children and their peers, and teachers and children. During the second part of the fieldwork, video observations of routine activities and formal interviews with the teachers were carried out. Post-fieldwork interviews during which the teachers reflected on their practices were carried out six-months later. The empirical material consisted of policy documents, field notes, video material (23.5 hours), and the interviews (2.5 hours) with the teachers.

The study used case study methodology (Gerring, 2007). The case was confined to the spatial boundaries of a preschool, and the temporal focus was on the time period when the group was preparing to celebrate a particular tradition. The study was designed as an "instrumental case study" (Stake, 1995, p. 3) where particular local experiences help to shed light on a broader phenomenon; that is, how children with a migrant background are incorporated into the national traditions and customs celebrated in Swedish preschools.

### The tradition

In the preschool group, as in most Swedish preschools, December is a month of preparations

for the Saint Lucia Day and for Christmas. Saint Lucia Day, celebrated on December 13, marks the beginning of the Christmas season and is a celebration of light—at the time of year when the days are short and dark. Traditionally on that day, the eldest daughter, wearing a white robe, red sash, and a wire crown with nine lighted candles fastened in it, awoke the family, singing a special “Lucia-song”, serving them coffee and saffron buns (Modéus, 2000). In today’s preschool context, the girls usually dress as Lucia wearing a white robe, a red sash and a crown with electric candles in a wreath on the head or as Lucia’s maidens wearing a similar robe with a red or silver sash and carrying a candle. A few decades ago the boys would dress like star boys, dressed in a similar kind of white robe as the girls, and a cone-shaped hat decorated with golden stars, but nowadays other costumes associated with Christmas are more popular. Children can dress as “tomte” (meaning a gnome or pixies) or gingerbread men or women. One of the favorite outfits among boys is the “tomte” outfit consisting of red trousers, a red shirt with a belt or tunic, and a red cap.

Lucia at preschool is usually celebrated with the parents. The preschool celebration usually starts with the procession known as “luciatåg” (Lucia procession) that includes the children singing the Lucia song and a collection of Christmas songs. Thereafter the parents are invited for coffee and traditional saffron buns and gingerbread.

## The case

The preparations for Lucia celebrations started on the first day of December when Shirin introduced the daily song session by saying: “And now we should practice for Lucia. Because it is soon Lucia, isn’t it?” The children were spread on two sofas while Shirin sat on a low chair in front of them and held a folder in her hands. Some of the children put together their hands to a prayer position, which is a usual gesture in connection with the Lucia song Shirin mentioned, while some others started to discuss what Shirin’s announcement implied:

*Girl voice:* It is us who should be Lucias.

*Shirin:* Yes. When your mums and dads will come, we will sing Lucia songs for them, they will come and listen, won’t they?

*Boy voice:* They will be very glad.

*Shirin:* Now we will practice the Lucia songs as much as we can, won’t we?

*Agnes:* Maybe Shirin’s mum and dad will also come.

*Shirin:* They can unfortunately not come, but your mums and dads can.

*Boy voice:* We will dress up as Lucia or tomte.

*Shirin:* But you know, now we have to practice well and truly. Is everybody with us? One, two three ...

The Lucia song Shirin started to sing seemed to be well-known for all the children except for Aseem, who had never experienced the Lucia tradition before. He looked around and tried to imitate what he saw, that the other children were singing the Lucia song with praying hands. After the Lucia song, other Christmas songs were introduced by Shirin in a specific order. The children followed her lead, some of them singing with great enthusiasm; others just mimicking the gestures attached to the verbal message of the songs. During the activity two children were complaining about Aseem not singing along, whereupon Shirin explained, first to Aseem in Arabic what the children were talking about, and then to the whole group in Swedish, that Aseem does not yet know the songs but in time he will learn them and sing along.

At the time of the fieldwork, Aseem had spent six months in the preschool (and in Sweden) and was still considered “the new kid” both by the other children and the teachers. The position of being new was marked, for example, by the interpreting assistance he got from Shirin in Arabic but also by the children complaining about Aseem not singing, even if he was not the only one who did not sing. The singing session lasted for about 15 minutes and finished with the same Lucia song it started with.

The repertoire and order of songs was determined by a folder, compiled by the staff, of traditional Christmas children’s songs, several of which were written in the late 1890s and early 1900s. Thus the songs can be considered as part of the canonic singing repertoire that goes back several generations. At times Shirin reminded the children about the importance of song practice before they were ready to perform in front of their parents. The singing activity was repeated each day for a two-week period. The repertoire was sung in the same order and each day more and more children, including Aseem, sang along. The framing of the activity may appear boring and repetitive for outsiders but the children seemed to enjoy the song practice session and were active participants of it. They

sang, made gestures, and tried to guess which song would come next. The children were also given much encouragement and praise for being active and for their learning achievements.

During the post-fieldwork interviews, Maria and Shirin explained that they did not see the Lucia tradition as particularly Swedish, rather as a preschool tradition shared by all other preschools in Sweden. By “doing the tradition” the teachers wanted the children and their parents to experience what, according to them, all other children and parents living in Sweden “had a reference to”. This was important for the children, Maria and Shirin pointed out, “so that the children when they go to school, would not feel excluded, not being able to join in.”

Parallel to the song practice sessions, the children were involved in several discussions about what to wear for Lucia and about their parents’ involvement in the preparations. The parents’ involvement was crucial for several reasons. In this preschool group only a few parents had a Swedish background and thus not all parents had first-hand experiences of how Lucia was celebrated in Swedish preschools. Thus part of the work of passing on a tradition was “invested” in the parents. Involving the parents in the preparations and in the performance in itself was, according to the teachers, part of their strategy to get the parents interested in the preschool’s pedagogical activities. Apart from the invitation written in Swedish in the hall, the parents whose Swedish was not considered strong enough also received oral information from Saime in Romani and from Shirin in Arabic. The information given to the parents included some information about a suitable outfit as well. What one would wear soon became a frequently debated topic in the peer group as well as in child–teacher interactions. The following example is a dialogue between Shirin and Aseem in Arabic that took place in the hall on their way out to the playground:

*Aseem:* I have bought two pair of trousers

*Shirin:* You can put on your new trousers on Thursday when we celebrate Lucia.

*Aseem:* We will celebrate Lucia tomorrow.

*Shirin:* No, not tomorrow, on Thursday. Are you going to sing the Lucia songs loudly?

*Aseem:* Yes, I will sing them without shouting. I will sing them nicely.

The example above and Shirin’s remark show that after 10 days of practising for Lucia, Aseem was well aware of what was expected from him

during the ritual they were about to perform to the parents. It also shows that Shirin, in her professional role, functioned as a linguistic bridge between the preschool, the children, and their parents with whom she shared a cultural and linguistic background. At the same time, as the example with song practice shows, in her role as a teacher Shirin often acted as a promoter of Swedish national norms. Instead of being critical of the taken-for-granted ways of “doing the tradition”, Shirin seemed to have embraced the Lucia tradition and tried to mediate its content to both the children and their families. She talked to Aseem’s mother about the performance (in Arabic) several times. When I asked Shirin what they talked about she answered that she described the different aspects of the rite to Aseem’s mother and explained which outfit Aseem would like to have. Shirin was keen on explaining to Aseem and his mother how the rite would be performed in “a correct way” so that Aseem and his parents could join in “doing the tradition”.

After the initial session when Aseem was unfamiliar with the routine and his peers were complaining about him not singing along, his incorporation into the Lucia tradition went smoothly and joyfully. One day, during the free play period Aseem was discussing what to wear during the performance with two girls, Rose and Julia.

*Rose:* I will be Lucia.

*Julia:* Me too, I have got the Lucia gown.

*Aseem:* I have *tomte* (clothes)

*Julia:* Where are they?

*Aseem:* At home. I come as *tomte*.

*Julia:* (singing) Edvin (another boy in the group) *tomte*. Aseem *tomte*.

The girls switched to Romani and started to talk to each other. Aseem did not understand Romani, he could hear that the girls continued to discuss the same topic because they incorporated the Swedish words “Lucia” and “tomte”. Thus, Aseem could join the conversation again:

*Aseem:* I also *tomte*. *Tomte* is very nice.

*Rose:* Will you have a mustache?

*Aseem:* I will have like this (showing that he will have a beard).

*Rose:* There are also gingerbread figures.

Hela has a gingerbread outfit.

After a short silence, Aseem initiated a role play where he played the teacher’s role. He was

sitting on the chair that the teachers use to sit on during the song session, while the girls were climbing on the sofas.

*Aseem:* I am the teacher now. We have to practice now! We have to practice the Lucia songs!

*Rose:* No, we won’t practice!

*Julia:* We only practice with the big teacher.

*Aseem:* We are practicing for Lucia. (singing voice) Santa Lucia, Santa Lucia.

The girls join in: (singing) Santa Lucia, Santa Lucia.

In this free play situation, Aseem was no longer considered a newcomer by the girls, but as a competent participant of the preparations for Lucia. The preparations also generated a peer play within which Aseem and the two girls reproduced the song session that was built around a particular repertoire. The role play also shows that Aseem’s purposeful observation and enthusiastic participation resulted in a creative re-enactment with his peers. He, like the teachers Shirin and Maria, emphasised the importance of practising. Rose questioned the idea of practising while Julia modified Rose’s statement, implying that Aseem was not a real teacher. Nevertheless, at the end all three children sang the refrain of the Lucia song together.

## Discussion

The case shows that after seven days of practising the songs and discussing the performance, a child is able to participate in a ritual that is considered part of being a preschool child in Sweden. The ritual itself can be seen as both part of a cultural heritage that, according to the curriculum, the preschool has to “pass on from one generation to another” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 1998/2010, p. 5) but also as a socialising agent that facilitates the incorporation of a newly arrived child in the peer culture. The Lucia celebration was a performance of a ritual with a strong focus on practising certain songs in a certain order and performing them for the parents while wearing the appropriate outfit. Much of the practice of passing on this cultural tradition is not reflected on but rather is seen as taken-for-granted preschool culture. In other words, the Lucia celebration is an unquestioned performance of both local preschool traditions and national Swedish traditions.

These findings are in line with studies on how immigrant children are socialised into calendrical rites in other Nordic countries with similar preschool traditions (Lappalainen, 2006, 2009; Pedersen, 2004). At the same time, the case indicates that validity of Pedersen’s (2004) argument that it is important to question the assumption that immigrant children’s performance of calendrical rites and traditions constitutes an unequivocal expression of their degree of belonging. In other words, it ought to be questioned whether participation in a national tradition automatically leads to cultural inclusion and the reproduction of national cultural identity and tradition.

The Swedish preschool should, according to its curriculum, contribute to both national reproduction and to children’s intercultural awareness. The case study presented here is first and foremost a study of how a tradition is reproduced by transmission and repetition (Oring, 2013). However, at the same time, it also raises questions about the role of culturally responsive pedagogy and the curriculum’s emphasis on children’s rights to be heard, and to have their own cultural identity taken into account. The examples above show that while the ritual was performed in Swedish and the children were immersed in songs which represent a continuity with the past, the organisational aspects and the conditions of the performance were discussed in both Arabic and Romani. While the songs were practised and in Swedish, the Romani- and Arabic-speaking children discussed their outfits in the language they felt most comfortable using in the given situation. They also negotiated their participation in the Lucia rite both with their peers, teachers, and parents.

In a preschool where linguistic diversity is not only tolerated but, as the examples above show, also practised (see Puskás & Björk-Willén, 2016), cultural traditions may serve as a starting point for fostering the integration of migrant children. Thus, even if the teachers’ practice in this case study could not be described as culturally responsive, as their primary focus was on transmitting a national tradition, their practice was linguistically responsive and inclusive. The “doing of the tradition” involved both reproduction and negotiation. While the teachers’ practice, as far as the song session was concerned, did not necessarily reflect a multicultural awareness, the planning of the performance fostered an inclusionary practice. It was inclusive in the sense that it provided



access to cultural and social resources that allowed children from diverse backgrounds to share and perform a tradition that was part of being a preschool child in Sweden

At the same time, performing a calendrical rite generally seen as an integral part of the Swedish cultural heritage, raises the question whether practising a tradition gives rise to new forms of belonging. It is not possible to tell whether Aseem's socialisation into the local preschool culture involved incorporation into the majority culture. In a preschool group where none of the children saw the Lucia tradition as their "own", the performance provided a common platform for interaction and play. What we may conclude with certainty is that the performance contributed to the development of Aseem's agency and his position within the peer group. At the same time, the case also indicates that more research is needed about the role of national traditions in providing an integrative framework in educational institutions in which few if any children and teachers belong to the national majority.

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