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Making differences and reflecting on diversities: embodied nationality among preschool children

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This paper focuses on embodied practices in processes of nationalization among preschool children at the age of 6. It analyses how children define themselves and others, how they characterize and frame Finnishness through embodiment. The analysis is based on an ethnographic study in two preschool classes. It is argued that nationality works in a gendered way as a source of inclusion and exclusion in children’s peer relations: those children who manage to perform Finnishness by continuously proving their cultural flexibility through ‘proper’ embodiment are included more fluently. The analysis suggests that, particularly in the context of Finland, where cultural diversity is only recently recognized, multiculturalism as a pedagogical framework is insufficient for the promotion of equality in education.

Introduction

Finland is a sparsely populated Nordic country in which the majority of the population is white. Until the 1970s Finland was mainly a country of emigration. Moreover, the country’s geopolitical situation has had its influence on immigration policy, which has been relatively strict and exclusive. The break-up of the Soviet Union, however, was a turning point in Finnish policy: on the one hand, the eastern border opened for immigration; on the other, Finland attained membership in various European organizations, particularly the European Union and the European Council (Lepola, 2000). Immigration started to increase markedly and the schooling system faced with a new situation: although the number of immigrant families was, and still is, low compared with most European countries, Finnishness as a self-evident category was now problematized. The concept of multiculturalism gradually began to receive more space in the educational discussion and in curriculum planning as well.

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This paper explores embodied nationality and ways in which nationality is constructed, performed and challenged among 6-year-old preschool children in a country where cultural diversity has been recognized relatively recently. The analysis aims to integrate both ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ approaches by investigating ways in which meaning systems are constructed in children’s peer relations and the structure of education (cf. Wyness, 2000). Although my central focus is on children’s peer-group relations, I frame the analysis by examining discourses on nationality in curriculum documents. Curriculum documents produce symbolic representations of education and define and legitimate social practices of school (Goodson, 1994). In this sense a national curriculum works as one important landmark of nation-space, as I shall demonstrate.

This paper is based on my ethnographic study in two preschool classes near Helsinki in 2000–01. In Finland children start compulsory schooling the year they reach 7 years of age. Although preschool education for 6-year-olds is not compulsory, approximately 95% of the children participate. Preschool education is most often provided by kindergartens administered by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

**National curriculum as a script in the performance of the nation-space**

Gordon and Holland (2003) explored the concept of nation-space by focusing on nations as bordered territories, as organized sets of social relations, and as mental constructions. Compulsory state-organized schooling has been important in the construction of Western nation-states (Popkewitz, 2001). In Finland, school has had special relevance as a part of the national project; the national educational system was given the task of establishing the national culture and identity as well as maintaining the status of an independent and sovereign country in a vulnerable geo-political situation (Gordon *et al.*, 2000a).¹

The Finnish schooling system has traditionally been based on an overemphasized idea of cultural homogeneity. In the beginning of the 1990s, immigration began to increase and this idea became challenged. In a situation in which the self-evident framework of cultural homogeneity rapidly collapsed, educational discussion adopted a liberal version of multiculturalism. According to Anthias and Lloyd (2002, p. 12), this means that the dominant group within the state is able to set the terms of the agenda for participation by minority ethnic groups. Such an agenda involves a bounded dialogue where the premizes themselves may not be open to negotiation. ‘Tolerance’ has been emphasized as an educational target, and individuals who were defined, for one reason or another, outside of the Finnish national sphere were conceptualized as objects of that tolerance. Hage (2000, p. 90) argues that ‘tolerance’ can be understood as a nationalist practice of inclusion which reserves the power to position the other as an object within a space that one considers one’s own.

The prevalent (2000) preschool curriculum is characterized by ambivalence between national and multicultural ideologies. On the one hand, special attention is paid to the education of cultural minorities and immigrant children and, on the other hand, Finnish national values and cultural heritage are emphasized more than
Making differences and reflecting on diversities

I argue that movement towards a neo-conservative educational ethos in Finnish national preschool curriculum is evident. In the 1996 National Board of Education document, the Declaration of Human Rights, the Declaration of Children’s Rights and the Principle of Sustainable Global Development were explicitly mentioned as starting points of the national curriculum (cf. National Board of Education (NBE), 1996, p. 8). In the 2000 document this international perspective was overtaken by a national focus: basic values of the Finnish society and national legislation were mentioned as primary starting points. International declarations and conventions are no longer explicitly identified in the current curriculum document (see NBE, 2000, p. 7). The idea of a homogeneous community with shared values is implicitly written into the aims of the recent document: the presupposition is that it is possible to define action, based on ‘Finnish national values’. In order to explore the impact of such constructions of national and multicultural ideologies expressed in curriculum documents, I have conducted ethnographic research in two preschools, located in kindergartens.

Kindergartens ‘Reed’ and ‘Birch Bark’ as contexts of children’s peer-group relations

I conducted my research in two preschools located in an expanding urban district. Both districts were characterized by a large proportion of families with children and a relatively large number of immigrant families. Average income and educational levels were lower than the city’s average. However, parents’ educational and professional backgrounds varied in both preschool classes; some of them were professionals, others had completed compulsory schooling and, some were more or less permanently out of the labour market.

I refer to my research kindergartens by the pseudonyms ‘Reed’ and ‘Birch Bark’.2 The gendered division of labour in both kindergartens reflected general patterns in the labour market in the Finnish society. The staff in both places was female, with the exception of one male teacher in Birch Bark. Occasionally some males worked as trainees. Staff with immigrant background worked mainly as teacher assistants, cleaners, kitchen workers and trainees.

Birch Bark emphasized multiculturalism in its curriculum. It was officially recognized as a representative of professional multicultural education. The staff of Reed told me that they have experienced some pressure by local authorities to profile their kindergarten as multicultural. The staff in Reed were ambivalent about multiculturalism, because they were looking forward to increasing their professional competence concerning issues of multiculturalism, but they worried, however, that there would be extra work for them. In interviews, the staff at Reed expressed worries about Finnish cultural heritage under the pressure of multiculturalism. The director of Reed emphasized that the basic task of the kindergarten is to carry out Finnish early childhood education. When Reed organized a summer school for Somalian children, a Finnish kindergarten teacher was appointed to secure the ‘Finnishness’ of classroom practices carried out by Somalian teachers. Despite various multicultural happenings, language
clubs and summer school for children with immigrant background, the two kindergartens in my study emphasized Finnishness as a reference point.

**Methods and methodology: ethnography as negotiating space**

My analysis is a dialogue between the empirical data and postcolonial and feminist theorizations that problematize concepts such as nation, culture, identity, ethnicity, multiculturalism, and citizenship (see Yuval-Davis, 2000; Anthias, 2002). Although Finnish history is a history of the conquered, rather than that of the conqueror, a colonial way of thinking is easily mobilized, particularly in relation to ethnicity or ‘race’. Colonial reasoning and representations have their influence on thinking, regardless of whether or not the national community has a colonial past (Lappalainen, 2003, p. 82). They have, for example, been mediated through literature, art and media (McClintock, 1995). When I worked with my data I explored the ways in which sense is being made in children’s peer relations and in educational practices (see Davies, 2004).

In current childhood studies, children are perceived as active agents who contribute to the construction of social orders (James and Prout, 1998; Mayall, 2002). Therefore, I decided to use an ethnographic approach, because it provides more space for children to contribute to the research process (James, 2001). Methodologically, my reading is poststructuralist in the sense that I focus on the construction of discursive categories and their inclusive and exclusive effects in relation to subject formation and access to various forms of agencies and performances (see Davies, 1989; Søndergaard, 2002).

A preschool class is a space, which is thick with events. For the ethnographer this ‘multiprocessing’ of events might cause a paralysing sense of chaos. In order to make sense of what is going on I have used *episodes*. Strandell (1994, p. 32) defines an episode as a course of events limited by time and space and a particular group of people. Episodes outlined my observation and worked as units for further analysis.

I observed Reed and Birch Bark for one school year, conducted interviews and collected a range of data. I participated in the everyday life of these preschools, e.g. sport activities, music and art. I hung around in the playground and joined in games, if someone asked me to do that. I attended preschool celebrations, parents’ evenings and staff meetings. At Reed I was asked to give a presentation in a staff meeting concerning multiculturalism, which I did. I collected written material such as official documents, brochures, and children’s drawings. Coffey (1999) notes that physicality of the fieldwork and spanning bodily boundaries are essential, particularly when children or childhood is studied. I am a relatively small-sized female, which helped me to negotiate a position somewhere in between the children and teachers (cf. Corsaro, 1985). For example, when children were present I avoided adults’ places, such as staff rooms. I paid close attention to my embodiment, observing teachers’ ways of moving, talking and dressing. My aim was not to estrange the adult from my body, but rather the teacher, so that the children would not associate me with the teachers.

I participated, observed and also conducted interviews and collected video materials. My data include written fieldnotes (72 days in Reed and 38 days in Birch Bark),

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photographs, videotapes, and interviews with 26 children, six teachers and 12 mothers. The video material consists mainly of institutional celebrations at preschool, such as the national Independence Day, Christmas and the end of term. When interviewing children I used relatively unstructured methods. Children chose the places where they wanted to be interviewed, and my aim was to provide them with opportunities to control and direct the flow of the discussion (see James, 2001). I offered them the possibility to come to the interviews with one or two friends in order to decrease the uneven balance of power between children and adults (see Connolly, 1998). Conversely, this made the power relationships among children more visible: when they negotiated their interview participation with each other, the children who had established their position in peer-group relations had more space to influence the composition of the interview group than those in the marginal position. Most of the interviews were conducted with pairs. Three children (two girls and one boy) wanted to come to the interview alone. One of the interviews included a group of three girls and one boy. Three boys refused to participate.

When the data were transcribed, I read through all the textual material I had generated and coded all my fieldnotes and interviews. The process of coding was informed by my commitment to post colonialist and feminist theorisations. Concepts like nationality, ethnicity and gender worked as central organizing principles of coding; under these ‘core codes’ I generated sub-codes which represented a more concrete level. Through this coding process I identified ‘key’ episodes for more detailed exploration, but the whole ethnographic data generated through fieldwork has its impact on my thinking.

‘We eat Finnish food at home anyway’: making boundaries at the lunch table

Yuval-Davis (2000, p. 173) argues that ethnic and national collectivities are constructed around boundaries, which separate worlds into ‘us’ and ‘them’. Boundaries of collectivity can be drawn in general political debates, as well as in everyday life too. Butler’s (1999) concept of performativity is applicable when nationality in educational context is analysed (Lempiäinen et al., 2003). Butler (1999, pp. 177–178) argues that gender is produced through discursively constrained performative acts, and through repetition of those acts. According to Oinas (2000), Butler’s main relevance is in her way of rejecting social determinism and the idea of an authentic, essential subject. Contrary to professional educational discourse, in which nationality is considered as an essential component of identity, through the concept of performativity nationality can therefore be understood as continuously produced and reproduced through embodied practices in particular space and time (Lappalainen, 2002; Lempiäinen et al., 2003). Nationality can be understood as a process of becoming.

Gordon and Holland (2003) suggest that embodiment, different compositions of space (e.g. decoration) and food are significant elements that shape national constructions. At preschool, festive lunches were important in national traditional celebrations, such as Independence Day and Christmas. Food acted as a pedagogical tool in multicultural education as well, e.g. Somali, Mexican, Russian and Chinese food
traditions were presented during the International weeks at Reed (cf. Lappalainen, 2003). Food is meaningful when differences are constructed in the everyday life of preschool; this is also argued by Ronström et al. (1998) who have studied constructions of Swedishness in preschool context in Sweden.

Nationality and ethnicity were often discussed when we had our meals; and in this way nationality often actualized through food. For example Yussuf, Razid, Amal and Zahra, all with a Somalian background, did not eat pork. Special meals had been reserved for them, and they were marked by capital letters ‘ISLAM’ or ‘MUSLIM’. In Birch Bark the teacher’s helpers, whose task it is to tell us what we would be served for lunch, used to finish the menu list by saying ‘and for Somalian children there is …’ Nationality became conceptualized as equivalent to religion and vice versa (Lappalainen, 2004). Children who had acted as teacher’s helpers during lunch were usually accorded the privilege of sitting at a table of their own as a reward for serving the meal. When Yussuf, Amal or Razid acted as helpers, they were sometimes passed over and were left without this privilege, because special meals were set on the table where other children with Somalian background sat. At Reed, helpers did not describe what Zahra was offered. Although meals were assigned in Birch Bark the same way as in Reed, they were not called out; however, sometimes attention was paid to Zahra’s meal, as in the following episode. Hierarchical categories of ‘we’/‘other’ and ‘child’/‘adult’ are involved in the discussion that ensued in the following episode.

Meri (the teacher) explains that borsch is Russian soup with cabbage, carrots, turnips and beetroots, which is normally eaten with sour cream. There are plates of ham, bread and cheese on the table. A plate of cheese is in front of Zahra and the sign ‘MUSLIM’ marks it. Zahra’s meal is waiting on the meal cart with the others:

Juulia (a girl with Finnish background): Why does Zahra take that one?
Meri: Maybe there is some meat in this soup.
Pekka (a boy with Finnish background): What kind of food do you eat, Song?
Song (a boy with Vietnamese background): Rice.
Pekka: Yes, but what kind?
Riikka (a girl with Finnish background): Well we, at least, eat Finnish food at home.
Meri: What is Finnish food?
Pekka: Pasta is Italian.
Meri: Pekka, do you eat rice at home?
Juulia: We eat rice sometimes at home.
Meri: I think, Song eats just the same food as you used to do, but Song’s mother can make all kinds of delicious things, things that I can’t make.
Riikka: Why does Zahra have cheese?
Meri: Zahra’s religion is such that she can’t eat meat.
Zahra: Because Somali people do not eat it.

Meri: And some other people don’t either. I have a friend who is a vegetarian, and she doesn’t eat meat. When you’ll become adults you can choose what you eat. It’s important to eat everything when you are a child; that’s how you get vitamins and grow up. Pekka, how about macaroni, is it Finnish food?

Pekka: No, Italian.

Meri: Well … how about rice?

Pekka: Song, Do you eat potatoes at home?

Song: Yeah.

(field notes in Reed)

When making my interpretations, I am interested in the ways how sense is made (see Davies, 2004). I found it interesting that children question the interpretational framework used in the educational context. Belonging to a national collectivity is defined through eating in this episode. Zahra’s background is Finnish–Somalian. When she discussed her family and neighbourhood with me, she usually mentioned their ethnic or national backgrounds. When I asked her to say what her own nationality was she defined herself as a Finn. In the episode above, Zahra defined herself as Somalian, although nationality was not relevant for Zahra all the time, it was part of her interpretational repertoire whilst religion was not expressed as such. Yet her food was labelled as ‘ISLAM’ or ‘MUSLIM’, although Zahra defined herself through nationality, as a Somalian.

In the educational context, religion and health are regarded as relevant reasons for a special diet. Religious and health discourses are institutional resources that are mobilized when an explanation for Zahra’s food is demanded by other children from Meri. Meri’s comment ‘when you become adults …’ illustrates children’s position in the educational system and society as subservient (e.g. Mayall, 2002). ‘Proper’ citizenship is attained when culturally defined chronological age of adulthood is reached. Till then, children are referred to as dependent and in need of guidance and discipline (see Gordon et al., 2000b). Zahra’s emphatic comment ‘Somali people do not eat it’ challenged the explanation offered by the official school. The meal was constructed as a national matter by her. I have elsewhere (Lappalainen, 2006) argued that there is a tendency in the preschool context to represent Finnish society and culture as more secular than it actually is and to emphasize the religious character of cultures considered as ‘other’. Lutheran traditions are embedded in Finnish cultural customs, and hence often taken for granted. Conversely, customs and traditions of immigrant families are interpreted as expressions of religion.

When Zahra dissociated from the religious discourse, she took distance from the discourse that seemed to limit her agency. In the preschool context rather fundamentalist interpretations of Islam were considered as representative of its customs, traditions and practices. These were seen as limiting children’s possibilities to participate in preschool activities. Although Zahra was not the only Muslim child in the kindergarten, she did not have Muslim peers in the preschool class. She was one of the
quietest among the girls, and relatively marginalized in peer-group relations. As a client of social workers and as a member of an ethnic minority, she did not fit into the concept of ‘normal child’ in the professional discourses (see Popkewitz, 1998; Arnesen, 2003). When she raised her voice it was a strong expression of agency.

Another participant in the food episode was Song, whose parents moved to Finland from Vietnam. Pekka and Riikka had the mutual understanding that it is a question about nationality. By asking ‘what kind of food do you eat, Song?’ Pekka tried to evoke an answer that refers to Song’s nationality. Juulia, a Finnish girl, challenged Pekka by commenting ‘we eat rice at home sometimes’. When rice did not define nationality clearly enough, potato was evoked to do that. Health education is an important theme in official, national citizenship education. The importance of food is emphasized in child welfare clinics, kindergartens and schools. The potato is officially presented as a basis for proper nutrition in, for example, educational posters, which are common in healthcare centres and educational institutions. Nutrition is a national matter: citizens are responsible to the nation for their proper diet. Pekka’s question, ‘Song, do you eat potatoes at home?’ can be interpreted as an attempt to mark boundaries of national belonging. The next episode suggests that eating manners are relevant as well, when children negotiate the borders of Finnishness.

We munch hamburgers as a snack

Mei Mei (a girl with Chinese background): In Somalia people eat with their hands. People there are so poor they haven’t money to buy forks and knives and plates.

Sirpa (a researcher): We are eating with our hands just now.

Mei Mei: Yes but it’s an exception.

Sirpa: How about pizza?

Mei Mei: You can eat it however you like with a fork and knife or with your hands. I used to eat it first with a fork and knife and then with hands. My big brother eats one hamburger in five minutes. He bolts his food, it’s a bad habit … at least in Finland.

Sirpa: How about in China?

Mei Mei: Chinese have that kind of habit.

(field notes in Birch Bark)

One detail of neo conservative educational discourse in Finnish context has been the emphasis of good manners. In preschool practices good manners were negotiated during meal times. Table manners are, however, culturally differentiated, and connected to national customs. The incident above from my data demonstrates such a connection. Mei Mei who usually defined herself as Chinese was well informed about the demands of Finnish middle-class table manners. In the episode above she refers to Somalia, which she sees as connected to poverty and misery. This is not surprising, e.g. in learning materials hegemonic representations of Africa underline such poverty and the lack of material resources (Lappalainen, 2003, Gordon & Lahelma, 2003). The portrayal of African children as poor and hungry worked in the
Finnish preschools as a pedagogical device that was used when children’s morality was seen in need of improvement: when unwillingness to eat meals was disapproved of, starving children in Africa were evoked. Hall (1997, p. 226) argues that people, who are observed as ‘others’ because of their skin colour or ‘race’, are often represented in the media as victims or losers. Similarly in these preschools, Africa was often constructed as a major of ‘difference’.

When commenting on table manners, Mei Mei performed her own cultural flexibility. When I interviewed Mei Mei, I asked her to talk about Finns. Mei Mei answered, ‘Finns don’t usually learn to eat Chinese food and Chinese people don’t learn to eat Finnish food ... except me!’ Mei Mei’s parents originated from China. Mei Mei defined herself as ‘half’ Chinese and ‘half’ Finnish. To be half was a resource and a competence for Mei Mei. Nationality became conceptualized as a cultural heritage in this particular moment. Hall (1992) argues that national culture is a discourse: It is a way to construct meanings, which organize our actions and construct our identities.

Mei Mei fluently operated with concepts of culture, nationality and citizenship. She was a popular girl who became heard in children’s peer relations. However, her belonging to the Finnish national collectivity was challenged in the festive lunch that was served to the children on the occasion of celebrating Finland’s Independence Day. One of the boys asked whether she was Somalian. Mei Mei answered by saying that she has a Finnish passport, thus emphasizing state citizenship. In a situation in which Finnish nationality was the special focus of celebration, and Mei Mei’s belonging was questioned, she decided to choose a criterion that emphasized her belonging to the national collectivity (Lappalainen, 2002). This illustrates how children reflectively take up and further develop various subject positions in their everyday lives.

‘You have too much brown’: colour-based gendered nationality

Strange bodies are precisely those bodies that are temporarily assimilated as the inassimilable within the encounter.

(Ahmed, 2000, p. 54)

Ahmed (2000) argues that ‘the stranger’ is already recognized as the ‘body out of place’. She emphasizes the connection between the forming of the boundaries of bodies and the forming of particular social space—homeland. When analysing young people’s constructions concerning their nationality, Gordon (2000) notes that Finnishness is conceptualized as self-evident whiteness, and colour is a trait assigned to ‘other’ ethnicities. When I asked children how they know that someone is Finnish, skin colour was often mentioned and they also referred to it in their own conversations. For example, I once heard Mei Mei ask Amal, ‘Are you Finnish?’ When Amal answered with a nod, Mei Mei responded, ‘It’s not possible, you have too much brown’.

Some of the children were seen as outside of the Finnish ‘colour scheme’; they were encountered in terms of the stranger (Ahmed’s, 2000, term). Joanna has a
Finnish–African, French-speaking background. She regularly defined herself as French, even though she had lived her whole life in Finland and she had very little knowledge of the French language; her relatives lived in the Benelux countries. Joanna based her national belonging on lingual collectivity, but not on Finnish language. ‘Being French’ offered a wider range of possibilities as a source for positive self-definition (cf. Lahelma, 2004). In an interview, Joanna told me about her summer holiday in the Spanish Canary Islands. As the nicest thing about it, she told me: ‘There were other people who looked like me’. When I tried to ask more clearly what she meant, she seemed surprised: ‘skin and hair of course’. Children have interpretational resources to negotiate with and resist exclusive categorization, but as Joanna’s comment illustrates, ongoing negotiation requires emotional energy. In my data, Finnish embodiment appears to be so tightly standardized that exclusion based on the category of ‘darkness’ is stronger than inclusiveness afforded through categories of state citizenship or the Finnish language.

Ethnicity and gender intersect in children’s peer relations in multiple ways and Finnishness seems to be gendered and exclusive in relation to skin colour (cf. Lahelma, 2004). Racist encounters in the playground happened more often among boys. For example, Antti, a boy with Finnish background, actively avoided black boys, whom he supposed to be Somalian because of their skin colour. But Antti did not react to the presence of Amal, a girl whose family has moved from Somalia. In my data physical violence or rude verbal harassment did not exist. Racist encounters took place through a complicated mixture of physical avoidance, facial and bodily expressions, and delicate verbal argumentation. As Nayak (2001) posits, the intersection between gender and power is integral to analyses of racist encounters. I argue that white Finnish masculinity operates in a defensive way against non-white masculinities, which are defined as ‘other’.

Mac an Ghaill (1999) emphasizes the importance of locating masculinity by examining the locally situated interplay between class, gender, ‘race’/ethnicity, and age in order to comprehend how institutional contexts produce, normalize and regulate emerging forms of sexuality. The official preschool emphasized heterosexuality as a proper mode of sexuality, and particularly boys’ behaviour was the centre of attention (Lappalainen, 2002). Connell (1987, p. 183) suggests the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which is constructed in relation to femininity and other, subordinated, forms of masculinity. Antti included Adelina, a girl from Kosovo, into the ‘sphere’ of Finnishness. Dark-haired Adelina was a girl who used her own language at times and performed her non-Finnish nationality, for example, through dance. Antti defined her as Finnish although added that ‘some people say that she comes somewhere from Kosovo’. Adelina was in many informal and official situations considered to be exceptionally attractive by other children and teachers. For example, once when we played a game called ‘Guess who’s my friend’, the teacher expressed the characterization: ‘She’s beautiful’. A group of children answered immediately: ‘Adelina’. That was the correct answer. In Antti’s talk, Adelina was recognized as a female but not as a Kosovian. Hegemonic masculinity comprizes the idea of whiteness, heterosexuality and power as well as the right to ‘manage’ national space (Renold, 2002; McLeod &
Yates, 2003; Lahelma, 2004). When Antti included Adelina among the Finns, he unwittingly performed such power.

National dressing: recognition of tradition

Young people represent social and cultural differences through styles of dressing (Tolonen, 1998). Preschool children are less likely to have similar opportunities to choose their clothes, but they were nevertheless aware of the differences made through clothing. Clothes represented ‘otherness’ and ‘sameness’, as in the following interviews:

Sirpa: What do you think, what kind of people live in Finland?

Emma (a girl with Finnish background): Hmm, Finnish.

Anna (a girl with Finnish background): Here are people from other countries as well. In our neighbourhood, there’s a Somali family, it’s a black family, and guess what.

Sirpa: Hmm, I can’t guess.

Anna: Their mum, she has to have a dress, a Somali dress and she has to have a hood on her head. (Anna used the word hood, I interpreted that she actually meant veil)

Sirpa: Really? Do you have any idea why she has to have a dress and veil?

Anna: It’s because of their daddy. He demands she must have a dress and hood when she’s outside, then nobody can see she has a mouth.

Emma: Yes that’s why, and in the parties as well, then nobody can’t see that she’s beautiful.

(Interview in Birch Bark)

Anna’s first response problematized the connection between physical space and nationality that is often considered as self-evident. However, boundaries of the nation-state as social and mental space are staked out in this episode (see Gordon & Holland, 2003). Yuval-Davis (2000, p. 175) argues that gender relations are often seen as constituting the ‘essence’ of cultures as a way of life to be passed from generation to generation. Emma and Anna suggest that the Somalian mother in their neighbourhood covers her face not because she wants to but because her husband demands her to do that. The subordinated position of a Somalian woman is constructed as a self-evident fact by the girls. The myth of a ‘strong woman’ is an elementary part in the process of identity formation in Finland and in Scandinavian countries, in general, as well. Nordic countries are celebrated as models of gender equality (e.g. Lahelma & Öhrn, 2003). In the school context, other countries are constantly represented as more unequal. In this context the most easily available discourse is to conceptualize a covered face as a symbol of subordination.

Appropriate dressing was part of the successful performance of both Finnishness and gender. Incongruous performances were registered in the field of informal relations: In the next episode Song is not included in Finnish Christmas traditions:

It is early morning just before Advent. Eero, Miikka and Pekka (all boys with Finnish background) have come before me. All of them have Christmas elf’s caps. Miikka has red
clothes and Eero has on a traditional elf suit. (He looks like those elves in the most traditional Christmas cards.)

Even Meri (the teacher) has a Santa Claus cap.

Song runs in with his smiling face and colourful pixie cap on his head.

Pekka: I wonder what kind of elf’s cap that is!

Song stops at the door and his face turns serious.

Meri leads Song into the class and Song takes his seat beside Pekka.

Pekka: You have a Lappish cap!

Meri: Elves can have different kinds of caps.

(field notes in Reed)

Here Song’s performance is considered wrong in the context of Finnish Christmas traditions. Boys with Finnish background often excluded Song, as well as two other non-white boys. Often exclusion happened through such questioning their knowledge of traditions. There is an expectation that knowledge of Finnish traditions is to be performed through situationally defined ‘proper’ embodiment. Song became conscious of the exclusive power of national traditions. He put a great deal of effort in to being accepted by other boys. After the first Advent weekend, Song had the most luxurious elf’s cap with flashing lights and jingle bell sound effects. Little by little, he moved closer to the centre of the social space of the preschool class. In the beginning of the preschool year he often sought out my company, but by the end of the year I saw him playing more often with the other boys. However, the risk of exclusion always existed (Lappalainen, 2004). For those children who were in the centre, other children positioned within the margins were a kind of ‘friend reserve’, their company was welcome if the alternative was to be left alone.

Conclusions

Embodiment is an important aspect of nationalization (e.g. Yuval-Davis, 2000). The discussion of symbolic meanings of children’s bodies is relevant in this context. For example, Christensen (2000, p. 43) suggests that images of children’s bodies—that are both similar to and different from the images of adults—simultaneously represent continuity and hope for another and ‘better’ future. When the institutional level is explored, schooling has been acknowledged as central to the construction of national representations and subjectivities of individuals (e.g. Meyer et al., 1997). In this paper I have mainly focused on how nationality is embodied. But nationality was also conceptualized as cultural heritage, lingual community and state citizenship.

The official preschool has a tendency to celebrate Finnishness and to emphasize cultural differences (Lappalainen, 2003). Adams St. Pierre (2000, pp. 502–503) argues that a subject, when exhibiting agency, constructs itself by taking up available discourses and cultural practices, while at the same time being subjected and forced into subjectivity by these discourses and practices. Involvement in the national
collectivity is an issue for 6-year-old children in their subject formation. Although the official preschool emphasizes the importance of a coherent cultural identity, some children with immigrant background position themselves in the state of ‘in between’ (Bhabha’s, 1994, term) and conceptualize it as a resource. Children, whose involvement in the particular national community is taken for granted, establish and mark boundaries of the nation-space through exclusive body practices (see Gordon & Holland, 2003).

Performativity characterizes the production of nationalities. Nationality is constructed through acts and repetitions of those acts (Bhabha, 1994, Lempiäinen et al., 2003). I argue that national, ethnic or cultural performances do not necessarily cause exclusion, but nevertheless the risk of exclusion always exists. In preschool, non-white children had to deal with ‘colour-based’ Finnishness and inclusive and exclusive practices related to it. National space seemed to be more inclusive in relation to girls, particularly if their embodiment works as a source of projection of national masculinity. Those children who managed to perform Finnishness ‘correctly’ by proving their cultural flexibility with manners and involvement with cultural traditions were included more fluently. When analysing young people’s ideas of citizenship, Harinen (2001, p. 61) argues that the most important criteria for societal belonging seems to be the continuous presence in a particular country that extends over several generations. Young dual citizens interviewed by Harinen felt themselves ‘outsiders’ because of their lack of collective memory and everyday knowledge of the Finnish national collective. Among preschool children too, traditions were central in the processes of inclusion and exclusion.

Multicultural education incorporates the principle of equal opportunity to learning regardless of children’s race, class gender or ethnic background (Banks, 2001, p. 3). As a research orientation, multicultural perspectives focus on what Popkewitz et al. (2000) conceptualize as ‘equity problematic’ studies. My perspective is constructed in the context of what Popkewitz and Lindblad (2000) conceptualize as ‘knowledge problematic’ studies in which the focus is on systems of reason that are embodied in educational context. Thus the aim of my research is to explore questions of representation (see Hall, 1997). My focus is on analysing how gendered nationality and ethnicity are constructed in children’s peer relations and in preschool education and, how the subjectivities are produced by normalizing certain characteristics of the individual.

I argue that when identities based on national cultures are taken for granted, the hegemonic culture is represented as superior. Popkewitz (2001, p. 200) emphasizes that reasoning serves to qualify and disqualify individuals through differential systems of recognition and distinctions. This, he claims, is a central element in the politics of schooling. The liberal version of multiculturalism expressed, for example, in curriculum documents (Anthias & Lloyd, 2002) is extremely problematic, particularly in Finland where cultural homogeneity has been the self-evident framework until recently. Combined with the idea of childhood as a state of innocence (James et al., 1998) it works in a way that makes it difficult to discuss exclusive practices (e.g. racism) in children’s peer relations. If equality as an educational aim is taken seriously, a move towards an anti-racist educational policy is needed.
In the curriculum document 2000, immigrants are identified as one minority group. However, many of the preschool children referred to as immigrants have been born and have lived their whole lives in Finland. A relevant question for further research is how these young, first generation Finnish citizens remember and make sense of their experiences in educational contexts. They may have some ‘golden’ memories, but they might have painful experiences of exclusion as well.

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Notes

1. Finland gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1917, and civil war erupted soon afterwards. The consequence was a severe cleavage between the winners and the defeated ‘reds’. The developing institution of education was thereafter given the task of producing a homogeneous united nation (Gordon & Holland, 2003).
2. One characteristic of Finnish kindergartens is that they are named after objects in Finnish nature or after traditional cultural artefacts.
3. Yuval-Davis (2000) mentioned, as an example, the debate over whether the ‘Anglo’ and the Francophone Canadians should be members of the same nation.
4. All names are pseudonyms.
5. One popular Finnish kindergarten tradition consists of two children chosen to help the teacher during lunchtime every day. They are supposed to set the table, bring the meal in on a cart and tell the others what is served for a lunch.

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