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ABSTRACT

This study explores how children construct their belonging in culturally diverse early childhood settings in Finland and Iceland. Belonging is understood as a holistic phenomenon that is constructed through various relations. The study is a multiple-case study, influenced by ethnographic approaches, conducted with children in two preschool settings, one in Finland and one in Iceland. The children were invited on walking tours with researchers and tablet computers, and participatory observations were utilised. The findings explore the daily moments in which belonging becomes constructed, involving movements, timing, touch, and play, relationally generated moments between children, and their material relations.

Introduction

This study focuses on children's belonging constructed through material relations in culturally diverse early childhood education (ECE) settings in Finland and Iceland. Children's material relations are seen as a significant part of their engaging in building a community with other children and adults (Davies, 2014). The concept of belonging is here understood as a holistic and relationally shaped phenomenon, constructed even without a shared language in children's daily lives. In all Nordic countries, the population has become increasingly diverse in recent decades due to rapid growth in international migration. In Iceland and Finland, this development occurred later than in other Nordic countries, where migration has been a major driving force behind population growth for some years (Karlsdóttir et al., 2018; Official Statistics of Finland, 2020; Statistics Iceland, 2019). Migration can pose a challenge to educational systems but can also play a critical role in creating inclusive societies that appreciate diversity.

The national curriculum guidelines for early education in Finland and Iceland emphasise democracy, participation, care, social relations, and play (Einarsdóttir et al., 2015; Piškur et al., 2021). In Finland, the National Core Curriculum of Early Childhood Education and Care 2022 (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022) and the National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education 2014 (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014) both highlight children's rights to be members of a group and to have a sense of belonging in early education settings. Similarly, the Icelandic curriculum guidelines for preschool emphasise democratic preschool practices and the

preschool as a community where all children are respected and feel that they are part of a group (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011).

This study is part of a larger European research project: "The politics of belonging: Promoting children's inclusion in educational settings across borders" (NordForsk, project number 85644), and here the focus is on deepening understanding about children's perspectives about their belonging in early educational settings in Finland and Iceland. In this article, we focus on how children's belonging becomes constructed within material relations and through various ways of expression. Participation in early childhood education and care plays an essential role in learning to live together in a heterogeneous society (OECD, 2020). ECE settings, here called *preschools*, can strengthen social cohesion and inclusion in several ways and serve as meeting places for families. They can contribute to developing language competence in children, both in the language of society and in their home language. Through social-emotional learning, preschools can enable children to learn empathy while also learning about their rights, equality, tolerance, and diversity (European Commission, 2019). Being able to speak the majority language of a country has been identified as a significant factor in promoting a sense of belonging (e.g., Kirova, 2016; Sadownik, 2018; Valentine et al., 2008). However, it has been pointed out that there is a need to critically reconsider the spoken language "within a wider, multi-sensory and more-than-human milieu" in young children's lives (Hackett et al., 2020, p. 1) and not only concentrate on language when exploring immigrant children's relation-making processes (Kirova, 2016). This study aims to explore moments of everyday life in Finnish and Icelandic preschools in order to understand the meaning of material relations for children's belonging by using ethnographic methods in multicultural ECE settings. Especially, our gaze is on the meaning-making processes of children's material relations, instead of only their spoken language.

Theoretical framework

The concept of belonging and material relations

We approach children's belonging as a dynamic and always emergent phenomenon. As argued in multiple scientific fields (e.g., psychology, education, sociology), belonging is a complex and vague concept (Antonsich, 2010; Lähdesmäki et al., 2016; Johansson & Puroila, 2021). Belonging is frequently theorised through two interrelated binaries: the sense of belonging and the politics of belonging. The sense of belonging refers to personal attachment to other people, places, and communities (e.g., Allen, 2019; Baumeister & Leary, 1995), while the politics of belonging is collectively constructed through multiple power relations, tensions of values, and societal perspectives (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

In recent years, several studies have focused on children's experiences of belonging in early childhood settings (e.g., Boldermo, 2019; Juutinen, 2018; Stratigos, 2015). Children's belonging has been studied from the perspectives of daily encounters, pedagogical, and material practices, and as a part of values and values education (Juutinen, 2018). Belonging has been connected to the concepts of participation, solidarity, and children's peer relations (Einarsdóttir & Ólafsdóttir, 2020). Belonging has also been explored in relation to what happens "in-between" children, objects, and spaces and how this relates to children's sense of belonging (Clark & Nordtömme, 2019). In addition, the role of objects, bodies, actions, and words in the politics of belonging has been emphasised by Stratigos (2015). Thus, belonging has been studied from different perspectives and in relation to different concepts.

Recently, special emphasis has been on studying belonging among immigrant children to provide insights into their everyday lives in relation to the formulation of belonging within the educational setting. Using concepts of suitability, home, and belonging, Kalkman and Clark (2017) explored how immigrant children reflect both their present and former places of childhood through role-play. Sadownik (2018) has emphasised migrant children's competences, such as language and play, in relation to fostering their belonging and active participation in early childhood settings.

Furthermore, Juutinen and Kess (2019) have explored the educator's role in early education in supporting diverse children's right to belong.

In the previous research reviewed above, belonging is conceptualised from diverse perspectives, but all highlight the importance of children feeling (i.e., *sense of belonging*) that they belong within their educational community and the role and responsibility of educational settings (i.e., *the politics of belonging*) in fostering children's participation and right to belong, also at the societal level (see Yuval-Davis, 2011). In addition, the need to understand children's agency more broadly than as an ability to speak the dominant language has been pointed out (Guo & Dalli, 2016), as well as the need to explore the interaction between various dimensions of belonging, which can be relational, cultural, temporal, and sensory (May & Muir, 2015).

One way of approaching belonging as a holistic phenomenon is to emphasise the meaning of people's relations by including the material environment, as elaborated by May (2011) who argued that belonging is a process of formulating a sense of connection between people, culture, places, and material objects. Lähdesmäki et al. (2022) also highlight the meaning of materiality in constructing belonging: "It is commonly expressed and constructed through material objects, physical environments and embodied practices" (p. 101). Boldermo's (2019) study highlights children's use of places and artefacts as "materially mediated manifestations of belonging" (p. 12). Recent research as well emphasises the role of materiality and environment influencing children's inclusion and exclusion in play situations (Juutinen et al., 2018; Moore & Lynch, 2018). In our previous ethnographic studies, we have been challenged by children to understand belonging as something that is seldom verbalised but often becomes shaped in various ways in their daily lives (Einarsdóttir et al., 2022). These experiences have encouraged us to seek theoretical viewpoints that deepen our understanding of multiple relations meaningful to belonging, such as materiality.

In this study, our interest is to explore children and their relation to the material environment as part of their belonging in ECE settings. We approach belonging as emerging between children, material, and places through various non-verbal and verbal processes of shaping a sense of connection (see also Lähdesmäki et al., 2022; Lenz Taguchi, 2010; Rautio, 2014). The research question is:

> How do children construct belonging through material relations in their early education settings?

Methodology

This research is a multiple-case study influenced by the ethnographic approach. Hence, the study was conducted with children in two preschool settings and focused on how children construct belonging in their settings through material relations. The research process was prepared in collaboration between researchers from two countries, Finland and Iceland, with an agreement on research methods and ethical issues. The methods were decided on and coordinated beforehand, with the intention of supporting the children's right to express themselves in the preschool community while, at the same time, keeping their best interests in mind (United Nations, 1989).

The participants and the context

The study was conducted in two preschools, one in Finland and one in Iceland, in the spring of 2019. These preschools were chosen because they had a high proportion of children with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. There were 20 children and four educators in the Finnish preschool group, and 19 children and four educators in the Icelandic group. However, the data presented in this study are from four children: a boy and a girl from each preschool. The four children were chosen for the study because they had diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and all communicated in their native language with their families at home. For the purposes of this study, narrowing the amount of data by focusing on only four children allowed us to analyse the material and explore the construction of belonging in more depth.

The participating children in the Icelandic preschool were Isabella and Jacob, both five years of age. Isabella was born in Portugal and had attended the preschool for nearly one year. According to the preschool teacher, she had adjusted well, had friends, and communicated quite well in Icelandic. Jacob had a Spanish background. He had been in preschool for one year, and the preschool teacher said that he also had adjusted well and had friends, but that he did not communicate much verbally at preschool. The children in the Finnish preschool were Maria and Adam, both aged five years; both had been in the preschool for a year. They spoke some Finnish but also used their home languages (Arabic and Somali) occasionally with other children with the same linguistic backgrounds in the preschool. The confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants was ensured by giving all the children pseudonyms and taking measures to hide their identities (Bertram et al., 2015).

The municipalities where the preschools were located, the educators, and the children's parents (often collectively called gatekeepers), gave their informed consent before the children themselves gave their assent. Thus, the gatekeepers were informed about the aim, purpose, and process of the study and determined whether necessary steps had been taken so that the children could make their own decisions about taking part in the research or not, giving their assent (Dockett et al., 2012). The study was explained to the children in a child-friendly way, and they gave their oral or written assent. The children's assent was considered an ongoing negotiation with them about their participation in the research process; in other words, they could opt out at any time (Bertram et al., 2015; Dockett et al., 2012).

Methods

The study was conducted by three researchers, and an ethnographic period of the study, as well as research data, was created in Finland by Jaana and in Iceland by Sara. Both spent a few weeks with the children in the preschool before the data gathering began so that they could get to know the children well enough to gain their trust and learn about their educators and the culture of the preschool settings. The children became accustomed to have the researchers around and taking part in daily activities. This reduced the interruption that they caused and the power imbalance in the relationships between the researchers and children (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; O'Reilly, 2012). Steps were taken to address barriers that might prevent the active participation of children with diverse linguistic backgrounds. Therefore, multiple methods were used (Bertram et al., 2015). The children were invited to take part in walking tours with tablet computers; at other times, participatory observations were utilised (see also Holm, 2018). We were inspired by the research approaches that consider using photography together with children, as well as emphasises children as co-researchers (see also Barker & Smith, 2012).

The children were offered tablet computers to take photos during a walking tour. They led the tours and took photos of whatever interested them in the preschool. Jaana and Sara followed the children and communicated with them. The children were also invited to show them the photos afterwards for further discussion. The tablet computers were therefore seen as tools for the children to communicate in various ways, providing them with a visual voice, while the photos served as a stimulus for communication (see also Dockett et al., 2017; Magnusson, 2018; Rissanen, 2020). The communication with the children both during and after the walking tours was recorded on the tablet computers. The children shaped the research method during the process by, for example, switching from going on walking tours with the researchers to inviting them to participate in play activities.

To gain insights to the meaning-making processes of children's material relations and the construction of belonging, we were open to children's initiatives to shape the data collection and the encounter with the researcher. Since the concept of belonging is complex, we did not make assumptions or guiding questions about the belonging, but more let the children lead the encounter and wandering in the preschool setting. Some of the children did not want to participate in walking

tours with the researcher using the tablet computer for various reasons, such as if it disturbed their play or they wanted to communicate differently. Therefore, in collaboration with the children, the researchers decided to conduct participatory observations to better understand how belonging becomes constructed in the children's daily lives in the preschool. Jaana and Sara observed the children's play activities, participated in the play with the children when they were invited, and documented their actions with photos, videos, and field notes. The participatory observations were a powerful way of engaging with the children while respecting their independence, interests, and ability to make choices (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). In addition, Jaana and Sara each wrote a research diary that helped when reviewing the entangled and multidimensional research process. The recorded discussions with the children during the walking tours and the conversations afterwards were transcribed and analysed, as were the field notes and research diaries.

Analysis of the research material

The analysis proceeded in multiple phases. *First,* we went through all the research material and transcribed conversations and observations written in Finnish or Icelandic. All three authors had several discussions, both face-to-face and online, about their overviews and experiences with the children in the everyday life of these two preschools. *Second,* we narrowed the research material to these four children with diverse backgrounds to understand the construction of belonging within material relations on a deeper and detailed level. *Third,* we translated the case descriptions (including discussions with the children, their photos, and our observations) into English and proceeded with a joint analysis. *Fourth,* the analysis applied ideas from MacLure's (2013, p. 171) perspectives on *wonder*, which she explains in the following way:

> Wonder is a liminal experience that confounds boundaries of inside and outside, active and passive, knowing and feeling, and even of animate and inanimate. If I feel wonder, I have chosen something that has "already" chosen me. Wonder is in this sense indissolubly relational – a matter of strange connection. (p. 181)

We paused at the moments that somehow "talked" to us or touched us in relation to how children construct their belonging within materiality. In these moments, we were especially open to children's material relations, moments that were shaped by the children in various ways, verbally and nonverbally. Photos were not interpreted as showing things that represent belonging, but they were more understood as children's one way to communicate and express themselves. So, the process and the context of photographing are meaningful alongside with the final photo (see also Barker & Smith, 2012). However, these moments could not be preplanned since they emerged unpredictably in the analysis process, especially in our discussions when we went back and forth in these moments, analysing the layers of relations between children and materiality (MacLure, 2013).

Findings and discussion

The findings include four moments, one from each of the participating children, that illustrate children's material relations as part of their construction of belonging. These four moments in the following narrations shed a light on the children's construction of belonging in their early childhood settings. They are discussed in terms of the theoretical premises of this study: children's belonging constructed through their material relations.

First moment: on the move – the corridor and rooms

On the second morning of the data construction period, Maria asked Jaana if she could participate in taking photos on a walking tour. First, Maria wanted to go into the small room off the long corridor, and Jaana showed her how to use the tablet computer. After taking a few test photos with the

camera, she wanted to go to the gym hall and asked Jaana to take photos of her while she was climbing on the stall bars and the ropes.

> Next, Maria wants to leave the small gym hall, and we enter the corridor; Maria says that maybe the six-year-olds are coming to the gym hall next. Maria takes photos from the long corridor and then says that she wants us to look at the photos. So, we sit down by the table in one of the playrooms next to the corridor, and Maria wants to sit on my lap. Maria is laughing while having a look at the photos; she searches for the photo of Susanna, her preschool teacher. Also, she wants to hear her own voice from the recorder, so I stop the recording, and we listen to the tape again. Suddenly, Maria wants to go and see the children in the other playgroup, the group where the children were one to three years of age. She walks down the long corridor, taking photos along the way, and shows me the door to the group of younger children. We look through the glass door, and Maria wonders where the children are because the room is empty. Maria explains (by using some Finnish words and her body language) that maybe they are eating breakfast in the other room because their coats are in the locker room. So, they cannot be outside, she tells me. Maria continues walking along the corridor, peeks into the big kitchen, and points out to me that our cook, Tiina, is there making lunch. (Jaana's notes)

Maria was one of the few children who moved around in the entire preschool unit while taking photos and talking with Jaana. Usually, the children were not allowed to enter the long corridor and the other rooms of the preschool without permission from the educators. The walking tour with the tablet computer, therefore, offered a possibility for Maria to explore the preschool's corridor and other rooms, as well as the materiality of the environment. Often, educational settings are understood as places made for children but in relation to processes of belonging, the meanings of places to the children themselves become significant (see Juutinen, 2018; Rasmussen, 2004) in addition to the children and their material relations. Maria's body and movements indicated that belonging was entangled with herself, the younger children's unit, and the preschool cook through the material environment where they were located along the corridor and the gym hall (see also Hackett et al., 2020). Boldermo (2019) argues for seeing children's use of spaces and artefacts as a way of expressing belonging; here, Maria played with a tablet computer and recorder, and explored the stall bars and ropes. Thus, belonging was constructed within the broader community, among children of diverse ages, and with the preschool teacher as well. Since Maria was able to move around with the tablet computer, the agency of belonging emerged within the moment.

Second moment: in time – the blocks and planks

Jacob did not use much verbal communication, neither when he took part in the walking tours nor when accessing play with the other children. However, during the walking tour, he took photos of the hollow block area and told researcher Sara that this was his favourite activity. The nonverbal behaviour was also evident in Jacob's play and everyday activities. One morning when Jacob arrived at the preschool, all the children were already playing on the outside playground. Jacob said goodbye to his father, sat down, and watched the other children play. He observed the actions of the other children playing on the slide and running around the playground. He seemed to wait until he saw the right moment to join without using words. A similar example was observed when Jacob was accessing play with other children in the hollow blocks area inside the preschool setting:

> Jacob walks into the hollow block area. Four boys – Almar, Alexander, Baldur and Lukas – are building a two-floor house. Almar is standing inside the house on the first floor, and he tells the other boys, who are standing outside the building, how to pile the blocks. Jacob stands by the doorway for a while and observes the boys' activities. He moves closer to the boys, keeps on observing them, and then climbs into the house and back again. Then, he gets a plank, holds it for a short while so the other boys can see what he intends to do, and then climbs into the building. He puts the plank on the building, helping the other boys make a roof. He smiles and watches the other boys. Then Jacob gets a new plank and keeps on building with the other boys. The boys collaborate on building with the blocks and making a three-floor building. They take turns climbing into the building and piling the blocks. (Sara's notes)

This moment caught our "wonder" when we realised that Jacob was included in the boys' play activity without any verbal communication. By observing play situations like above, the construction of belonging happened through children's actions, silent negotiation and materiality, blocks, and planks, all encountered on a certain timeline. Jacob added the blocks and the planks at the right moment to the building, and bodily gestures, like smiles from the other boys, confirmed mutual understanding. Belonging and joint play happened without any verbal communication between the children, but through multiple objects and strategies. These findings are in line with Clark and Nordtömme (2019) suggesting that material in children's play matters; children relate to the material and the material also invites a response. Sadownik (2018) also raises the question of language in relation to active participation in the preschool setting; as Kirova (2016) points out, play offers possibilities for genuine dialogue without shared language. This moment indicates how body language, materiality, and timing all construct belonging in this play situation. Components of belonging were silent, took place through children's material relations in fleeting moments of daily life, and were important parts of children's belonging emerging in certain moments.

Third moment: through touch – the tablet screen

For a few days, Adam had been asking Jaana when it would be his turn to take photos with the tablet computer. He spoke some words in Finnish and had challenges in finding a friend to play with during free time. One morning, he came in from the outdoor playground before the other children, and Jaana helped him to take off his outdoor clothing. He touched Jaana's hand and said, "Warm," meaning that his hand was warm. Then he took Jaana's hand and placed it on his sunglasses and said, "Cold, why?" Adam was excited about taking the photos. He quickly took his outdoor clothes off and put them in the locker, showed his nametag, and then suddenly hugged Jaana with a smile on his face.

> Jaana explained to Adam how to use a tablet computer to take photos. Adam explored the tablet computer carefully, placing the screen near his face and then further away, looking at the screen and then peeping over it, as though he were observing how things would look. Adam walks to the glass door that leads to the outside playground and says, "Look! There is Adrian. Look, Jaana!" (Adrian is Adam's twin brother). Adam takes many photos of his brother through the glass door. They smile at each other. Adam turns around and walks to a locker room and takes photos of Abdul and the preschool teacher and says to them, "Look!" and shows them the photos he has taken. Adam enters another playroom and says to me, "My room." In the preschool, children are divided into three permanent small groups that have their own rooms for lunch and other activities with their own preschool teacher. Adam walks to the other room, saying to me that this belongs to Selma's small group (Selma is another preschool teacher). He takes photos of the rooms, then he enters the room where Abdul and some other children are drawing by the table. Adam says, "Pencil? My notebook?" He finds his notebook in the drawer and takes some photos of the notebook. (Jaana's notes)

Adam carefully experimented with the tablet computer, as though he was looking at the world through the camera lens and occasionally over it. As Magnusson (2020) points out, a child's relationship with a camera is one way of making the world "visible emerged" (p. 6). Adam chose to take photos of his brother and his friend Abdul. He also wanted to show them and the preschool teacher the photos from the tablet screen, simultaneously touching and zooming the screen in and out. In addition to the use of the tablet computer, touch was a meaningful part of emergent belonging; touch took place between Adam and Jaana, and also between him and materials, such as sunglasses and notebook. When scrutinising children's material relations, things meaningful to belonging were caught through the camera lens (see also Rautio, 2014). Lockers, name tags, and notebooks were entangled in the moments of constructing belonging to a certain preschool community, its people, and material environment (see also Jensen, 2018; Juutinen, 2018; Lähdesmäki et al., 2022; Stratigos, 2015).

Fourth moment: in play – the kitchenware and the role-play area

Isabella did not want to take part in the walking tour or take photos in the preschool setting. She responded to Sara by saying, "No," and shaking her head when she was invited to take part in the walking tour. However, she welcomed Sara to observe when she was playing with another girl, Andrea, in the role-play area of the preschool setting, where they can dress up and organise free play. The area was small and included materials such as tables, chairs, shelves, a kitchen stove, and kitchenware. Isabella and Andrea were making a restaurant, setting the table, and discussing the process of their play:

> Andrea says, "We are making a soup," and Isabella responds, "The soup can also be a different kind of food." The girls keep preparing the food and comment that the restaurant has not yet opened. Isabella said, "I need more glasses. I need one; I need three glasses." Andrea hands her three glasses, and she puts them on the table. The girls add a blanket to the floor to make another table in the restaurant. They set the table (blanket) and prepare for a meal there. Sara asks, "Are you expecting guests?" Andrea answers that they have not yet opened and offers Sara soup. Isabella adds, "Or something else to eat?" Sara accepts the girl's offer by responding, "Yes, please." The girls decided to give her rainbow soup. They help each other to prepare the soup by putting small plastic blocks of different colours into a bowl with a spoon. Andrea brings the soup to Sara, and Isabella brings her a cup with a drink to go with the soup. Then the girls leave the room to get pencils and papers and start to write a menu for the restaurant. Isabella shows Sara the menu she has written. *(Sara's notes)*

Even though Isabella declined to take part in taking photos with Sara, she invited Sara to be part of the girls' role-play. This invitation opened the opportunity to be part of the construction of belonging. Kalkman and Clark (2017) highlighted the collective aspect of role-play, which can be explored as an opportunity to understand the formulation of belonging (see also Kirova, 2016). In the restaurant play, having access to space and appropriate material, such as cups and tables, was an important part of the shared moment and the formulation of the play. Action around the restaurant play and material, such as small, various-coloured plastic blocks, a blanket, and a menu, all became part of the role and set the scenery for belonging to emerge. Thus, material is meaningful in relation to the construction of joint understanding and collaboration in play. Stratigos (2015) suggests that objects, bodies, actions, and words all play vital parts in belonging and are shaped in the early years. In addition, this observation indicates that play is an important part of how children's belonging is constructed in preschool by exploring the relationship between self and society (May, 2011). Another meaningful perspective here is methodological: Isabella did not want to join the study as the researchers had planned but suggested another way of participation. By welcoming Sara to take part in her play with a friend, belonging emerged in the relations with materials and space in a secure base with a friend (see also Kalkman & Clark, 2017). Isabella's sense of belonging emerged through personal attachment to her friend and Sara and to places in the setting and through a shared experience of their community (Allen, 2019).

Summary and conclusion

We summarise the study by highlighting its theoretical and methodological contributions. Our aim was to explore moments of everyday life in Finnish and Icelandic preschools in order to understand the various relations that are meaningful to children's belonging, and thus contribute to the current theoretical discussion on belonging and the participation of immigrant children in early childhood settings. Recent research by Piškur et al. (2021) notes that the concept of belonging is rarely mentioned in ECEC curricula by concluding that the curriculum guidelines from five European countries do not provide a sufficient framework for promoting children's belonging in ECEC. When pausing in these often quite silent moments, the children who participated in this study constructed their belonging in the early education settings in various ways: They moved around in the environment; expressed themselves through bodily gestures and silent negotiation; observed the material environment; experimented with materiality; and played with friends. The findings shed light on the dynamic nature of belonging: It is constantly vibrant, never finished, and continually

shaped in material relations (Juutinen, 2018; see also May, 2011; Yuval-Davis, 2011). In addition to these notions, we highlight the need to critically explore children's multiple ways of telling and producing knowledge in their material relations (see Hackett et al., 2020; Rautio, 2014). This also entails seeing the power of materiality: Access to certain places and the use of various materials are often controlled by educators and not seen as things through which the children themselves can actively construct their belonging and membership in the community (see also May, 2011). Thus, it is important for educators to include children's multiple perspectives and expressions about how they construct their belonging in early education settings. Our study considers children's material relations as one part of constructing membership to ECE settings and the communities around them.

At the societal level, shared language has been shown to play an important role in children's belonging in society; however, this study indicates that it is too limited to consider children's verbal communication only (see Kirova, 2016). In Finnish and Icelandic early childhood education curricula, emphasis is placed on each child's right to be part of the preschool community, to be respected, and to feel belonging in their own way. When it comes to children's belonging in the preschool community, it is critical to recognise children's various ways of expressing themselves as strengths rather than as weaknesses and to use their different experiences, knowledge, and competences as the foundations for preschool's pedagogical practices. As Yuval-Davis (2011) notes, belonging is produced through social practices in the preschool settings, offering an arena for personal and collective perspectives to belong or not to belong. It is important to recognise relations between children and materiality as significant to the construction of belonging and its influence on children's possibilities for participating in their communities (see also Guo & Dalli, 2016; May, 2011). Good quality education can help immigrant children to adjust to their new environment and strengthen their sense of belonging in the new country, while quality education can contribute to their sense of belonging through valuing and embracing their culture, language, and home background. Quality education can also influence native children's perceptions and help them to appreciate commonalities and to value differences (European Commission, 2019; UNESCO, 2019).

The participating children welcomed us to take part in their daily lives in their preschool settings, giving us an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of their belonging to the preschool community despite their nonfluency in the majority language. We conclude that by examining the daily encounters between children and materiality more closely and by not focusing exclusively on spoken language, an awareness of children's competences and capabilities can be developed and taken into account in pedagogical practices in early childhood education settings (see Magnusson, 2020).

Limitation of the study lays in in the methodology. We tried to investigate children's experiences and views on belonging through walking tours, their discussion about their photos and participatory observation. We analysed the material and aimed to recognise belonging and non-belonging in their various expressions. However, the complexity of the concept of belonging makes us wonder if we were interpreting the children's views accurately. Therefore, we choose to represent the findings through stories or moments so the reader can form their own opinion. Finally, it is necessary to acknowledge that the researchers in this study were also part of the construction of the concept (i.e., the belonging). We were very much aware of our roles as researchers when entering the daily life of the preschools, bringing tablet computers and our notebooks with us. These perspectives guide our understanding of how our research equipment, such as the tablet computers, becomes part of the relations and the meaning-making processes of children's belonging. It creates a methodological and ethical responsibility to recognise how chosen methods contribute to producing the concepts and the worlds that are created through research practices (St. Pierre et al., 2016). Also, our decision to focus on non-verbal communication, children's sense of connection, their acting with materiality, leads that our interpretations construct belonging by drawing one possible picture of the entangled and emergent phenomenon.

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