

Nordic early childhood education policies and virulent nationalist trends

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ABSTRACT

This article was initiated by our discomfort regarding recent policy developments in Nordic early childhood education (ECE) where previous decades' policies on creating solidarity, equality and universal access to social welfare and promoting democratic participation are seemingly waning. While from a global perspective, these policies might seem inclusive and democratic, if understood within the context of Nordic policy frames and broader policy changes in Sweden and Denmark, their undemocratic coercive moves and racist undertones become visible. By focusing on the intersections of language and place in selected policies, we respond to the questions: 'what is the problem represented to be' and 'what are the solutions offered?' (Bacchi, 2012). We argue for the urgency of further research as the identified policy shifts indicate the prevalence of a more virulent form of nationalism in the Nordic ECE space threatening its Nordic democratic values.

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'It is important to intervene very early if we are to ensure that all children in *exposed housing areas* have a good start in ECE that strengthens children's learning, Danish language, and knowledge of Danish traditions, values, and norms' (Ministry of Children & Social Affairs, 2018a: 1, *Our emphasis*) Denmark

'It must be mandatory for the municipalities to offer preschool to children who need preschool to get a better language development in Swedish. Direct enrollment means that the municipalities, *without the parents having applied for it*, must offer the child a place at a preschool...' (p.18-19 SOU 2020:67, *Our emphasis*, Sweden)

Introduction

The Nordic welfare model represents a 'passion for equality' (Hernes, 1987) that has been institutionalised as a political commitment to publicly funded and universally available care services that care for all needs and the whole population (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Fritzell et al., 2001). Universalism means that 'good quality services are designed for all citizens, and in practice a large majority of citizens also use' them as their right and based on their free decision (Anttonen, 2002: 71). Nordic welfare states have also been funded on the ideal of fair distribution of wealth, considered as the hallmark of a good and cohesive society. The ideal aspired by Nordic welfare state is 'low income inequality, low poverty rates and small differences in levels of living and

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gender equality' (Fritzell et al., 2001, 5). The universal right to ECE provision enshrines these Nordic values and applies those in sharing child education and care between families and public institutions in which 'child-centeredness' seeks to uphold 'the naturalness of childhood, equality and egalitarianism, democracy, freedom, emancipation' (Karila, 2012; Einarsdottir et al., 2015: 98). Democratic values appear in ECE policy and the curricula in two forms. First, they can be *collective*, promoting cooperation, equality, solidarity, shared responsibility, the appreciation of diversity and respect of the other; and second, *individual* democratic form, as the right to have a choice, influence and participation in decisions and taking responsibility (Einarsdottir et al., 2015). The above quotes offer a glimpse into some of the changing discourses that have been circulating in early childhood policy in Denmark and Sweden during the last few years. For a moment, these discourses might seem inclusive if one looks at international ECE provisions. On the first look, they may even fall in line with Nordic ideals, but if read against the backdrop of democratic values, they indicate some worrying trends. They intervene in parents' free decision to enrol their child in ECE and in this way restrict democratic decision making for some parts of the population.

In this article, we place under careful consideration some changing ECE policy discourses in Denmark and Sweden, and seek to explore whether they threaten long held Nordic democratic ideals. Our exploration of ECE policies is situated within the broader policy discourses within the Nordic countries. These welfare policies perceive growing diversity as a threat to the normative cultural homogeneity as a product itself of nation-building processes. This constructed image of a homogeneous nation so far managed to preserve cohesiveness and togetherness, and hence social security, also legitimising the Nordic welfare state itself and Nordic national identities (Keskinen et al., 2019). Therefore, we understand that nation-building and expressions of Nordic ideals and national identities play crucial roles in the framing of policy environments, including ECE.

While nationalism is prevalent in all modern nation states and is historically closely connected to education, it mostly appears in its banal forms (Billig, 1995) signalling the nation in daily life (e.g. Benei, 2008; Zembylas, 2009). Modern child institutions are in the service of the nation and the national ideals, values and interests sculpt education to shape young citizens' becoming within, feelings towards and belonging to the nation. While nationalism in this way is a natural part of ECE policies, curricula and children's ECE life, issues might arise when nationalism takes more exclusive or coercive forms. This can happen as a response to events that are perceived as threatening, such as increased migration which are often seen as a threat to the cohesiveness and social security of the Nordic states (Bieber, 2018; Keskinen et al., 2019). As a result, policies might be framed to exclude, marginalise or coerce certain groups into assimilation with a view (hidden or explicit) of recreating the constructed cultural homogeneity. In relation to the Nordic welfare states and their policies, countries sought to address growing diversity with 'more restrictive models of inclusion in Denmark, to more liberal approaches in Sweden ... However, in recent years, the policies have converged towards stricter measures in all [Nordic] countries' (Keskinen et al., 2019: 7). Within these contexts, we are concerned about ECE policies that may contribute to the 'waning' of the universalist and democratic Nordic welfare state (Keskinen et al., 2019) and its transfiguration to a Nordic welfare *nation* state limiting universality and democratic participation on ethnic grounds (Bergmann, 2017).

Welfare state ideals, democracy, and nationalism

Historically, the state's interest in children and childhood has always been about a nation's future, therefore childhood and children's lives are intensively governed, regulated, and managed, for instance through education. As future citizens, children represent for the state, for example, investments into economic competitiveness, democratic order, future parenthood, or the nation's survival (Millei & Imre, 2015, Rosengaard, 2018). Welfare state ideals, as we explained above,

have typically been perceived as the fair distribution of wealth which is considered as the hallmark of a good and decent society and something that creates cohesiveness. Egalitarianism, hence, is crucial in creating a good society where every individual can fulfil his or her potential regardless of inherited privilege and social class. Social citizenship and personal freedom in a Nordic social democracy are coupled with a discourse of community and social responsibility expressed also in forms of solidarity. Solidarity, in this way, builds on the argument that everyone contributes to collective welfare provisions and that no one is allowed to fall to the very bottom. Solidarity is a 'commitment to living together in peace, free from inter-communal violence; acceptance of people of diverse ethnicities, languages and religions as legitimate members' (Banting & Kymlicka, 2017, 4). Other values enshrined in the Nordic welfare state are inclusivity and universalism, the latter referring to the idea that all citizens have equal access to rights and social benefits, regardless of their wealth or abilities or for that matter ethnicity (Esping-Andersen, 1999). The Nordic welfare state ideals were built on a view of the national citizenry as based on homogeneity; an understanding that is increasingly challenged today considering the rapidly diversifying societies.

In the Nordic welfare states, 'the outspoken societal values include first and foremost the view of the nation 'resting on' democratic societal values. This includes numerous references to the children's own active participation in the ECE community' (Kuusisto et al., 2021, p. 54). However, the ideal of democracy in education has always contained tension. On the one hand, democracy is taken as a processual phenomenon aiming at equality, equal access to rights and being able to make an influence (inclusivist concept of democracy). On the other hand, democracy can be understood as a static phenomenon aiming at consensus or sameness and ensuring children's socialisation into an unquestioned national order and identity, so that 'those who are already on the inside include others into their sphere' (Biesta, 2007, 18). The latter is argued to be an exclusivist concept of democracy (Kampmann & Prins, 2022). Those who are deemed as located on the 'outside' of this sphere are questioned in their ability, capacity and motivation to contribute to the common good. In turn, solidarity towards this very group of people depends on the evaluation whether and how much they are able to contribute if at all, whether they are seen as deserving.

When key welfare state values, such as democracy, are used as a static phenomenon also limiting its collective (e.g. solidarity, equality, respect) and individual expressions (rights and decision), there is cause for concern. The static view of democracy with its assimilative ideals and actions is mobilised when challenges to the cultural norm of the homogeneous nation present, such as in the form of migration. The challenge to the (perceived) status quo, mobilise more virulent forms of nationalism that might draw on the static view of democracy and assimilationist ideas and action in a quest to 'to reassert the will of an imagined community' to re-establish the status quo (Bieber, 2018, 520). Nationalism, when it underpins the running of everyday life and education, often goes under the radar and as such it is *latent*, still representing a constant force and flow that productively forms identities, values, and feelings for one's nation (Bieber, 2018), for example, as part of the curriculum and pedagogies (Millei, 2019b). This latent form of nationalism makes the community of the nation (with its exclusions and inclusions also on ethnic grounds) (Anderson, 2006), makes children patriotic as they learn to feel and identify as a member of a nation as well as that reproduces ideals about this community of the nation, such as the cultural norm of homogeneity or the ideal of democracy. Besides this latent form, nationalism can take more intensive or '*virulent*' forms, when there is a need to regain the status quo with more force and where intensity of nationalism can 'be measured through a number of indicators, such as latent or structural factors, exclusionary citizenship, socio-economic marginalisation, and more virulent and immediate factors including media discourses, support for nationalist parties and violence against particular groups' (Bieber, 2018: 521). From public discourses that intensively address perceived threats, virulent nationalism can move into policy making. Today in many policy contexts virulent nationalism operates on axes

of inclusion and exclusion based on the concept of descent, narratives of nativeness, deservedness or set of national values (Bieber, 2018).

In his exploration of the international political arena, Bieber (2018) asks the question: 'Is nationalism on the rise?' Bieber (2018, 520) observes an increased prevalence of nationalism worldwide, but he argues that it 'is less attributable to a shift of global attitudes, but rather of the political and social articulation of these attitudes', such as 'protectionism, isolationism, xenophobia and anti-elite discourse'. Bieber explains that it is a mark of a more virulent form of nationalism if changes in attitudes lead to policies supporting those. We pay attention to the expression of these attitudes in our analysis of ECE policy to detect whether there is a shift in nationalism to a more virulent form in the two countries' ECE policies, and how this might affect the ideals of democracy expressed in those.

The Nordic welfare state and early childhood education in Sweden and Denmark

There are many similarities across the ECE systems of Denmark and Sweden. Both countries have a long tradition for state-subsided ECE and their ECE pedagogical traditions are inspired by social pedagogical and reform pedagogical traditions. They both have a strong focus on play and everyday life and emphasise the values of democracy, equality, inclusivity, and universalism (Karila, 2012; Millei, 2019a, Thingstrup et al., 2023; Riitaoja, 2013). They both have a national ECE curriculum with a decentralised municipal management structure resulting in local variations of both the curriculum and provision (Urban et al. 2023).

ECE attendance is high in Denmark and Sweden, most children up to six years of age attend ECE for most of the day, 5 days a week¹. As such, ECE is a regular part of children's lives so much so that ECE has become a value in itself and broadly regarded as an important part of children's development and a good childhood. It is the first educational site of children and is considered as the foundation for life-long learning and as an important site where children are educated and socialised as members of democratic societies and national citizens (Åkerblom & Harju, 2019, Millei, 2019b; Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017). ECE is, thus, a key site for struggles around values and interests related to national identification, nation building, and the education of the national citizen (Lappalainen, 2009; Rosengaard, 2018, Jacobsen, 2022) and hence provides an important site for the study of how recent changes affect key welfare state values such as democracy.

In recent years, Sweden has seen an ongoing political discussion related to concerns about the lack of enrolment in ECE of foreign-born children, children with a 'foreign background' (referring to their parent/s being born outside of Sweden but themselves being Swedish citizens), and children with a disadvantaged socio-economic background (Garvis & Lunneblad, 2018). Therefore, it has been a prioritised agenda for the current and previous governments to increase the enrolment rate of these groups. This agenda is motivated by an underlying argument that being enrolled in ECE is an effective tool for achieving equality in education and equal participation in society. One effect of this concern is an increased focus on Swedish language for pre-school education in educational policy documents. As a result, the previous government (2021-2022), consisting of Social Democrats, the Centre Party, the Liberals and the Green Party, promoted a discourse on language that clearly prioritises the majority language. One example is the committee directive *More children in the pre-school for better language development in Swedish* [Fler barn i förskolan för bättre språkutveckling i svenska Dir. 2019:71] (The Government, 2019) where a special investigation with the same title SOU2020:67 (Ministry of Education, 2020) was commissioned to propose measures, such as 'direct enrolment' as in the opening quote, to increase participation in pre-school for newly arrived children, children with mother tongue other than Swedish and children living in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Direct enrolment means that families with a foreign background are directly contacted

by the municipality with a place in an ECE centre for their children, which place must be held open for the child for a month even if other parents are applying for that place. There was an associated agenda to strengthen ECE's work with children's Swedish language development with little focus on mother tongue education. The prioritisation of Swedish represents a move away from previous decades' multilingual ambitions towards a stricter and assimilationist agenda. While offering language development through ECE might seem as an inclusive approach from a transnational perspective (Thingstrup et al., 2023), in the case of Nordic ECE it is a negative change as this move abandons multilingualism related to democratic participation. The 'direct enrolment' of children with a foreign background is currently discussed in Parliament (April 2024) providing an important case study for the understanding of the political discourse in Sweden, and that is why we chose to study it further.

In Denmark, this tendency goes further back, and 2001 is often mentioned as a year which marked a break away from previous years' more diversity-oriented policy in favour of a focus on early intervention and learning in a narrow sense of the word, and explicit socialisation efforts towards Danishness. Childhood is increasingly talked about as a field of investment with a focus on risk prevention, the argument being that interventions earlier in life are more effective than those made later. The present prime minister (2019-), Mette Frederiksen (Social Democratic Party), launched her political campaign by calling herself the Children's prime minister taking an approach to inequality characterised by a 'resoluteness' ('beslutsomhed' in Danish) (Socialdemokratiet, 2018, p. 6). She announced the ambition that society should take over to a greater extent cases where parents are unable to 'lift the parenting role' (for example, with an ambition to increase the number of forced placements of children in foster care). Ethnic minorities were not explicitly mentioned, but implied with words such as 'foreign background' and 'socially disadvantaged homes' as in the following quote that gives reason for the need for these children's participation in ECE:

Time spent in nursery and kindergarten is crucial for our children's development. But it is also here that you clearly see that children have different prerequisites for thriving, learning and developing, and that some children have special challenges *due to their background*. It can be challenges with everything from motor skills and *language to being able to participate in communities*. And this is especially true for children who come from *socially disadvantaged homes or families with a foreign background*. What they have in common is that the longer time passes, the harder it becomes to ensure them the same good starting point as other children. ((Socialdemokratiet, 2018, p 18, our emphasis)

Her platform is illustrative of the restrictive and tough discourse on and approach to immigration and 'foreigners', which is endorsed by most parties in the parliament (cf. Hervik, 2019: 532). Like Sweden, a central theme in policy discourses has been language with a focus almost solely on Danish (Holm & Ahrenkiel, 2018, Kristjánsdóttir, 2018) going as far as restricting employment on language competency (Uekusa 2022). Another theme has been place, with a critique of social housing areas (originally set up to house people in need) for accommodating too many non-Western immigrants and creating 'parallel societies' (Uekusa 2022) (this is the official statistical category, in itself deserving an analysis) and with differentiated legislation resulting in what Seeman (2021, 586) terms as 'an unprecedented spatialization and ethnicization of social citizenship' and democratic participation, for example, in ECE.

The policy texts from Sweden and Denmark that the analyses of this article build on were chosen because they epitomise more intensive reactions going as far as producing policy against the threat posed by ethnic difference. The Swedish text is a committee directive titled, *More children in the pre-school for better language development in Swedish* (Fler barn i förskolan för bättre språkutveckling i svenska), Dir. 2019:71. The Directive was followed by an investigation with the same title (SOU 2020:67). The aim of the investigation was to propose actions on how to increase participation of the targeted groups of children in the directive's efforts. Moreover, the Directive has already impacted on local language policies (Classon and Åkerblom, forthcoming) and on the ways in which municipalities present their concerns and challenges about

language diversity in their preschools using the same wording in their problem constructions (Olin Almqvist et al., forthcoming).

The Danish texts analysed are *The Act on amendments to the ECE Act on Child and Youth Benefit* and the explanatory notes accompanying this Act (Ministry of Children & Social Affairs, 2018b) as well as the Agreement paper (Ministry of Children & Social Affairs, 2018a) between the then-government (right wing), the Social Democratic party and the right-wing party, The Danish Folk Party, that preceded this Act. The agreement paper and the subsequent Act (that was passed later the same year and still applies) introduce an obligatory learning service for 1-year-olds who live in what is described as ‘exposed housing areas’ and proposes the solution of mandatory pre-school for children from these housing areas to attend ECE for a minimum of 25 h per week, which policy trumps on parents’ democratic right to decide about their children’s participation in ECE. All quotes from policy texts have been translated by the authors from Swedish/Danish.

Our analytical approach to ECE policies

To analyse the selected policies, we asked: ‘what the problem is represented to be’, and what solutions are proposed drawing on Bacchi’s work (e.g. Bacchi, 2012, Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). This gave us a way to select statements from the policy papers that connected with different expressions of Nordic democratic ideals. The aim of the analysis was to examine policy texts’ formulations of democracy, such as collective and individual, or variations of democracy expressed as a processual phenomenon moving towards the creation of more equality or democracy as a static phenomenon seeking to recreate the norm of cultural homogeneity. With the analysis we wanted to understand whether formulations of democracy in these policy texts keep in line with Nordic values or whether in some ways they depart from those, and whether we could detect that they intensify by using assimilation to counteract difference to uphold the norm of homogeneity of the ideal nation, and in turn gesture towards a virulent form of nationalism.

Early language learning: A tool for equality or forceful integration?

The importance of learning the majority language for children, who are labelled as foreign born or born in Sweden/Denmark from immigrant parents, is pinpointed in both the selected Swedish and Danish documents. In the Swedish Directive, the problem is constructed as lower participation of ‘children with an immigrant background’ than Swedish born children in ECE. The problem is that migrant children are at risk of not benefitting from ECE, which as pointed out in the document is a ‘tool to achieve equality’:

...it is further highlighted that participation in ECE activities can be an effective tool to achieve equality in the field of education for children in difficult conditions, i.e. for some children with an immigrant background. ECE activities can contribute to children developing language skills, both in language used in ECE and in the first language. (The Government, 2019).

As illustrated, the argument is that the development of language skills in Swedish through participation in ECE, will help the children to learn Swedish and their first language as well. Language is considered to be an important aspect of school success in this policy, and for that reason, and as in the opening quote, a mandatory ECE with a focus on language development is suggested. Making the enrolment mandatorily offered, even if phrased as a responsibility of municipalities, is a careful wording of by-passing free parental decision-making regarding enrolment. In this above quote, ECE activities can be argued to be contributing to the development of multiple languages, which at first sight could be interpreted as a multilingual stance supporting both host and home languages. However, there are no explicit instructions in the Directive as

to how to carry out the mentioned support for diverse mother tongues (Lundberg et al., 2023). The majority language is always mentioned as 'the language' of ECE, consequently children who are not proficient in Swedish are seen as lacking 'language'. This kind of discourse on language development clearly highlights the importance of majority language as a ground for better educational outcomes and as an important tool of integration into society. This is in line with the strengthened focus on the Swedish language competencies in the revised version of the ECE curriculum, Curriculum for the Pre-school Lpfö18 (National Agency for Education, 2018) that entered into force in July 2019. The problem with this policy is not with the principle of supporting Swedish language development for integration. The problem is how this principle appears contextually and therefore twists the principle. The policy combines lower enrolment of children from foreign backgrounds with the need for Swedish language and offers a solution: mandatory enrolment of those children to ECE by-passing parental choice and deliberation. While Swedish born children's parents have a democratic right to decide about the enrolment of their children to ECE, these democratic rights are by-passed for foreign background parents. This policy seems to be therefore less about language competencies. Some Swedish-born children also need Swedish language development and probably many children with a foreign background speak Swedish as their first language. In this policy, the problem representation takes issue with the foreign background, labelling children as lacking language.

In the Danish policy document, *The Act on the amendments to the ECE Act and Act on Child and Youth Benefit*, research evidence is used for each step to give weight to claims:

It is assessed that children residing in vulnerable neighbourhoods have a greater risk of not developing age-appropriate Danish language skills than children residing outside these areas. This is justified, among other things, by the fact that children living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods receive lower grades in Danish at the 9th and 10th grade final exams than children from the rest of the country. This applies both to children of non-Western origin and to other children. (Ministry of Children & Social Affairs, 2018b: 6)

Similarly to the Swedish policy, the problem in the Danish policy is about those children who live in particular neighbourhoods which is associated in the document with lower Danish skills. Thus, difference here is geographically instead of ethnically defined. While children might in general have issues with language learning in vulnerable neighbourhoods, here Danish language is explicitly mentioned and hence the statement produces certain children as having the problem: those from non-Danish speaking families. While the last sentence of the quote adds a qualification that seemingly disestablishes the division between Danish speaking and other children (all children are equal in the Nordic welfare state), the sentence within this discursive context instead works as further delineation of the group that is deemed as a problem, which is the 'children of non-Western origin'. The distinctions and differentiations constituted in this document uses research evidence to legitimate its claims, making these divisions and problems real, incontestable and without bias. On this evidence that supports non-Western origin children's need for Danish language skills, the document justifies the implementation of mandatory ECE enrolment for very young children:

The bill implements the part of the agreement that concerns mandatory learning [ECE attendance] for 1-year-old children in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The bill aims to ensure that more children from disadvantaged neighbourhoods attend day care, which can, among other things, support their Danish language skills and general readiness for learning, so that they are better equipped for life at school, the education system and the labour market. (Ministry of Children & Social Affairs, 2018b: 7).

Referring to scientific evidence and the causal relationship created between early language skills and later school and labour market participation, mandating ECE attendance appears as a common sense or sensible action to follow. Again, parental decision making is by-passed. Moreover, mandatory attendance also prepares these children for democratic participation as their duty: to learn in school and succeed at work. The solution presented is to integrate children into an unquestioned national order since they are described as having questionable

ability, capacity and motivation, if they have any of those at all, to contribute to the common good. Equality of opportunity, in school and the labour market, is used here to justify a highly intrusive policy into families' lives who are stripped from their decision over their very young children's early preschooling.

The proposal for the obligatory enrolment of one-year olds into ECE in Denmark is similar to Swedish calls for mandatory ECE and arguments supporting that. In the January agreement (JA, 2019), which is a political agreement between the Social Democrats, the Centre Party, the Liberals and the Green Party, it is stated in point 52 that the children of new arrivals must have the right to a compulsory language ECE from the age of three with at least 15h a week within the framework of the regular ECE. This statement argues with 'the right to education' and at the same time proposes to make ECE compulsory for a selected group, as an obligation. In both contexts, the reasonings used in early interventions based on economic arguments are hoped to ensure the integration of children with a foreign background into society. While this might appear as a noble intention and common-sense solution, this policy discourse reproduces difference and keeps labelling children who might not need development of language competency as permanently lacking, in language, in motivation and in ability to contribute to the Nordic societies. Hence their forceful integration and the lack of their participation in paid work are justified and reasons for that are individualised, even though people with a migrant background might be disadvantaged on the labour market due to lack of opportunities or systemic racism in these societies (Keskinen et al., 2019). ECE is used as a tool to make these children useful members who do not burden the society. Importance is placed on learning the Danish and Swedish languages early on which are brought in connection with better educational outcomes and achieving equality. Equality in society ensures full and democratic participation in society and as a collective democratic responsibility, participation in welfare state contributions (rather than burdening the state). ECE on the surface of these discourses is positioned as a powerful tool to create a cohesive and equal society however these discourses operate at the same time to create and maintain divisions, to justify coercive measures and maintain exclusions.

Spatial separation and segregation from the 'real nation'

As in the Danish document, that identifies children needing language skills according to geographic areas, groups of children who need language skills are also spatially demarcated in both countries. As different qualities of spaces in which children encounter language, the home and ECE are discussed the following way in the Swedish document:

The education committee's report states that for the children who never or very rarely encounter the Swedish language at home, a mandatory preschool with language development is needed so that they can know Swedish when they start school. The activities must be accommodated within ordinary preschool activities with special time set aside for teaching Swedish to newly arrived children (The Government, 2019, p. 2).

Preschool activities can contribute to children developing language skills, both in language used in pre-school and in the first language. Access to affordable, high-quality childcare is also an important factor which enables both women and men with caring responsibilities to participate in the labour market (The Government, 2019, p. 4).

First, the spaces of ECE and home are created as different based on language use. The home is a non-Swedish space that is qualitatively different from the space of the pre-school where Swedish is used and taught. Swedish is the 'language used in pre-school' and the first language is used at home. In Sweden, during the last five years, discourses on language development have changed from displaying a tension between multilingual and monolingual ideals, to a discourse that is more clearly highlighting the importance of majority language and where

multilingualism is seldom mentioned in the documents (Lundberg et al., 2023). Second, the home is populated with parents who have caring responsibilities, and the pre-school is a place where working people's children attend. Coupling the two together, majority and home language spaces and employed and unemployed conjures up spaces of difference and hierarchy in Sweden.

Spatiality is also present in how 'vulnerable neighbourhoods' are connected to 'vulnerable city districts' in some documents and to parents' employment status (e.g. Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 112).

Participation (in ECE) was lower among children from socioeconomically vulnerable groups. Parents who lacked gainful employment (5900 children) and parents of newly immigrated children (3800 children) are the least inclined to use ECE according to the Swedish National Agency for Education. (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 107)

Moreover, areas are also clearly demarcated based on participation rates in ECE, and again this differentiation is legitimised with reference to seemingly objective scientific facts:

When it comes to children's participation in preschool, it can be misleading to just look at a municipality's average participation rate. Areas within the municipality can have both higher and lower participation than the average. ... Ramböll (2014) showed that the average percentage of children who attended pre-school or educational care was ten percentage points lower in the fifteen vulnerable city districts that were included in the study compared to the country as a whole. (Ministry of Education, 2020, p.112)

In the Danish policy, the places of disadvantaged neighbourhoods are explicitly linked to greater risk of exclusion from society. In the Danish text, this can be seen in the following quote:

' [...] it is estimated that children in vulnerable housing areas have a risk of growing up in a parallel society with marginal connections to the Danish society and with limited access to environments where those norms and values are recognised that characterise the Danish society. The objective criteria [behind the definition of an area as a vulnerable housing area] further shows that in vulnerable housing areas there is a relatively high proportion of adults - including parents - who have no connection to the labour market or under education, have a basic education as the highest education, have low income, commit crimes to a higher degree etc. On the basis of this, it is estimated that children in vulnerable housing areas not only have an academic backlog but also to a higher degree than children outside these areas need role models other than their own family and other acquaintances who reside in the area.' (Ministry of Children & Social Affairs, 2018b: 6)

This text states that 'vulnerable housing areas' do not belong to Danish society, they are parallel spaces. Danish society carries Danish norms and values, while areas in the parallel society lack those. The parallel society is inhabited by the unemployed and who do not engage or have education, rather engage in crime. The places this text references are those of social housing areas, a publicly subsidised housing sector which were initially established as essential services in the Nordic welfare states, but which today in general are critiqued for the concentration of social problems. The legislation on obligatory learning services, mentioned above, is also explicitly tied to these areas. The term 'ghetto' has been used in official policy papers to characterise these areas until recently and is still used in public debate. Correspondingly, during the last almost 20 years, Denmark has seen several so-called 'ghetto initiatives'² (Seeman 2021) focusing on social housing areas as a problem area requiring special attention. Social problems associated with these areas are a large proportion of inhabitants with convictions for crime, lack of formal education, lack of employment, and inhabitants with descent in non-Western countries, thus they are non-white. Areas that are on the 'ghetto list' are subjected to different initiatives and differentiated legislation (e. g. discrimination among applicants for housing to ensure a 'more balanced' population, tearing down housing in order to 'remove the problem' etc.), increased legal punishments for certain crimes - and the abovementioned obligation to attend ECE.

Despite the differences in the kind of emphasis on place, linked to ECE participation, unemployment, crime or so on, representations of place are both geographical (vulnerable residential

areas) and social (socioeconomically vulnerable groups). Living in these places is represented as a problem in itself: children in these places are represented as having limited access to the majority society - which is implicitly represented as the 'real nation' - and the norms and values that characterise that. Through the terms 'parallel society' or 'vulnerable city districts', the problematic population is represented as being outside the 'real nation', belonging to places that are associated with a long list of deviances, deficiencies, and risk markers, thus they are legitimately shut out from both collective and individual democracy. Collective democratic principles and values, such as solidarity (a cornerstone of Nordic democracy), shared responsibility and the appreciation of diversity and respect of the other are suspended, and *individual* democratic rights to have a choice, influence and participation in decisions are cancelled. ECE is utilised in both a processual and static sense of democracy. On the one hand, obligatory participation in ECE seeks to make these children more equal and with that legitimises racialised identification and support, and on the other hand, ECE enables equality and participation in society only if these children assimilate to the expectations and values of the Danish society.

Virulent nationalism in policies of Nordic welfare *nation* states

The policies analysed in this article speak in the familiar Nordic language of democracy referring to inclusive ideals, principles of equality and participation. Read from a global perspective they clearly sound like familiar inclusive discourses. However, we wished to show how by paying attention to the nuances in discourse and the carefully constructed problems and solutions in these policies that bring together seemingly common-sense ideas and supportive intentions, the policies manage to cloak existing segregation in an inclusive language and allow explicit racism to be part of and passed today into Nordic ECE policies. The analysed policies in our view legitimise differentiated access to welfare provisions despite the Nordic principle of universality (Nordensvard & Ketola, 2015, Seeman 2021, Hervik, 2019) and trump the ideal of democratic rights and participation of identified segments of the population. While Nordic welfare state ideals of universalism, equality and inclusion are deployed as linguistic expressions, these ideals are narrowed and twisted to apply 'exclusively to the native populations' and to label and legitimise racism towards those who are identified as others based on their backgrounds, language competencies and geographical locations in the Nordic welfare *nation* states (Bergmann, 2017, p. 202).

The problem that is presented by these policies, although in a coded form, is about the presence of racialised minorities within a national space that is constructed as homogeneous, posing a threat to national ideals and principles, and the realities of the nation. There is a host of denominators used to code groups in these policies and elsewhere that are identified as problems (cf. Makoni & Pennycook, 2007), and denominators also gain legitimacy from research evidence used. On the surface, these denominators sound like Nordic welfare values, such as equality, universal provisions, inclusion, democracy, and citizenship. We have shown, however, that these policies serve to cloak separation, divisions, stigmatisation and discrimination that underlie these policy problem constructions and solutions. These denominators operate implicitly yet everyone knows what they mean. Hervik (2019, p. 542) terms this process 'foreignization', through which everyone understands who is referred to and racialised as the Other.

We argue, therefore, that these policies represent an intensified or '*virulent*' form of nationalism, that seeks to regain the status quo aided by these policies and with the coercive inclusion of children from a foreign background into ECE. Measurements of this virulent form of nationalism are not only identified but also legitimised within these policies, such as socio-economic segregation, racism, and the suspension of democratic rights of these communities (Bieber, 2018). Thus, virulent nationalism is a part of policy-making in Sweden and Denmark operating on axes of descent, narratives of nativeness, deservedness or set of national and welfare values (Bieber 2018).

Although the analysed policies have not been fully implemented, our analysis demonstrates that there is a change in policy in both Nordic welfare states. With these changes, the concept of processual democracy changes to emphasise consensus on exclusion. The right to participation, decision and equal access are replaced by a colonial concept of democracy (Biesta, 2007), where democracy is seen as an already existing, non-negotiable entity that is closely connected to the nation based on ethnic citizenship and the notion of welfare *nation* state (Bergmann, 2017). In this way, values of equality, universalism and inclusion are twisted, changing from a focus on welfare and social security of and solidarity for all to only national citizens, and the demand on the assimilation of others who are deemed as a threat.

In consequence, these policy discourses in our view, and closely paraphrasing Banting and Kymlicka's arguments (2017), have the power to break democratic solidarity enshrined in the operation of Nordic welfare states that is characterised by support for basic human rights and equalities, support for the rule of law and for democratic norms and processes. They also threaten equal participation of citizens from all backgrounds, and risk basic rights and equalities as part of social democracies. Our concern is that these policies affect children, parents, and the delivery of ECE with real consequences, and that necessitates more research to understand.

Notes

1. <https://www.norden.org/en/statistics/participation-education>.
2. Ghetto initiatives is the official term. Seeman 2021 mentions initiatives from 2004, 2010, 2013, 2018. A new initiative was added in 2021, this purposely used the term 'parallel societies' rather than ghetto areas but underscored that it was otherwise a continuation of the ghetto policy and the basic problem understandings, with a main focus on housing policies.

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