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Supporting Children's Psychosocial Well-Being in Sámi ECECs

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Abstract

Our aim is to investigate how Sámi early childhood education and care institutions (ECECs) contextualise their work to support psychosocial well-being among children aged 4–6. We have conducted seven qualitative interviews among ECEC educators. Using Stepwise Deductive Induction (SDI) analysis we found that Sámi ECECs contextualise their work to support psychosocial well-being among children by constantly balancing between dealing with the possible consequences of Norwegianisation and the assimilation process from the past and highlighting Sámi culture in a positive way. In practice the staff try to support the children's positive sense of self, recognition and feeling a sense of belonging to the Sámi culture. They also strive to contextualise Sámi practices in terms of today's society and adjust to the present group of staff, children, and parents to ensure the children's well-being.

Keywords: *well-being, Sámi, ECEC, Norwegianisation, racism*

Introduction

This study aims to investigate how Sámi early childhood education and care institutions (ECECs) facilitate a health-promoting psychosocial environment for Southern-, Lule-, and Northern-Sámi children aged 4–6 in line with the guidelines in the Framework Plan for

Kindergartens in Norway. Studies show that Norwegian children in general (both Sámi and Norwegian) have different challenges, where the occurrence of mental problems among children in the 0–6 age group is about 10–20 per cent in Norway (Stensen & Drugli, 2019), and where about 7 per cent have a mental disorder (Wichstrøm et al., 2012). There is also a higher prevalence of psychological distress, and a higher risk of being exposed to physical, psychological, and sexual violence among the Sámi than among the non-Sámi (Dagsvold et al., 2020; Eriksen et al., 2018, p. 2; Hansen & Skaar, 2021, p. 13).

Health and well-being for all is one of the United Nations Sustainable Develop Goals (SDG) (World Health Organization, 1978). Health is a “human right” and “the attainment of the highest possible level of health is a most important world-wide social goal whose realisation requires the action of many other social and economic sectors in addition to the health sector.” Psychosocial well-being is a superordinate construct that includes emotional or psychological well-being, as well as social and collective well-being (Eiroa-Orosa, 2020). Health promotion should preferably be universal and present in the arenas where children live their day-to-day lives (Skogen et al., 2018, p. 15), such as in the ECECs. 93 per cent of children aged 1–5 attend ECEC in Norway, and hence almost all children in Norway will encounter health promotion efforts in the ECECs:

Kindergartens shall promote good health, play a preventative role, and help even out social inequalities. They shall promote physical and mental health in the children. They shall contribute to children’s well-being, happiness, attainment and feeling of self-worth, and they shall combat harassment and bullying. (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 11)

Due to Sámi influence on the curriculum, Sámi culture and rights are more visible in the latest Framework Plan for Kindergarten in Norway (2017). This is part of a Norwegian state policy to acknowledge the Sámi culture, perspectives, and history (Olsen & Andreassen, 2017). According to Gandolfi and Rushton (2022), the ECEC curriculum, practice, and discipline need to be critically analysed and contextualised to challenge colonial practices, a term we use to refer to Sámi colonisation and the history of Norwegianisation.

From the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, the Sámi people were colonised through a policy of “Norwegianisation” under which many Sámi lost their identity and their language (Olsen & Andreassen, 2017). According to Bjørnholt et al. (2021) Norwegianisation, assimilation, and historical collective traumas still affect Sámi people on individual, relational, and societal levels today. Historically, the Sámi people’s collective traumas are connected to assimilation policy, boarding schools and attempts to eradicate their languages, loss of culture, lack of recognition of language and identity, ostracization and stereotypical attitudes, and continuing discrimination on the individual, relational, and societal levels. Collective traumas affect collective and individual identity, relationships, and practices over generations. The consequences have been psychological stress, identity crises, self-hatred, violence, and abuse. Intersectional elements, such as age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, culture, religion, social class, and living conditions are all part

of shaping the Sámi peoples' living conditions. Norwegianisation, assimilation, and collective historical traumas are hence not sufficient for explaining psychosocial difficulties among Indigenous people. Not all Sámi experience historical and/or collective traumas. It is important to focus on resilience in the Sámi population, as well as any risk factors (Bjørnholt et al., 2021).

In a recent study, Sámi youths stated that while they were proud of their Sámi culture and wanted to pass on their Sámi cultural heritage, it could be demanding to master both the Indigenous and majority cultures. Most young Sámi had experienced discrimination at the hands of fellow pupils, strangers, or people from another ethnic group, most often at school and online (Hansen & Skaar, 2021). Children in different cultural contexts have different life experiences. Non-Sámi and Sámi children in Norway live geographically close to each other in all parts of the country and have both similarities and differences in culture and background. The Sámi are an Indigenous people, and a minority in Norway. Dagsvold et al. (2020) find little research on mental health services that are culturally adapted to the Sámi population.

Culture is individual and social, and resilience processes might rely on cultural background for strength, but background can also pose risks (Sørly et al., 2020, pp. 1, 12–13). An overrepresentation of several risk factors among the Sámi population makes it important to study how Sámi ECECs aim to promote psychosocial well-being. It is important to study protective and risk factors when analysing children's well-being (Trijp & Lekhal, 2018), and bearing this in mind, we have conducted a qualitative interview study in seven Sámi ECECs in Norway to answer the research question: How do Sámi ECECs contextualise their work to support psychosocial well-being among children?

Contextualisation of Sámi education

As mentioned above, *decolonisation* and, we want to add, *Indigenisation*, are important concepts in Sámi education. Decolonisation is a critical and deconstructive approach, exploring how continuous colonial impact on Indigenous communities still influences Sámi education. Decolonisation of ECECs means resisting “psychological developmental paradigms of children and childhoods, individualism over collectively and ongoing oppressive structures that serve to segregate Black, Indigenous and racialised children, families and communities, rather than fostering dialogue, solidarity and allyship” (Abawi, 2022, p. 123). Indigenisation focuses on making and remaking Indigenous spaces, methods, and voices (Olsen & Sollid, 2022, p. 19).

The education of Sámi children has been assimilative, and many Sámi are unable to speak their language (Keskitalo, 2022, p. 38). Colonisation entails exclusion, discrimination, and prejudices based on ethnicity, culture, and beliefs (Ministry of Education and Research, 2018, pp. 49–50). Four factors affect Sámi education. It is: (1) tainted by colonisation; (2) practised in a liminal position or in interfaces; (3) practised in the field of multiculturalism, and (4) practised with limited self-determination (Keskitalo et al., 2012). There is a fine line between decolonisation and inner driven development (Balto, 2005).

Sámi education needs to be Indigenised through an approach highlighting diversity, and, according to Olsen and Sollid (2022, p. 19), needs a local approach.

According to Osler and Lindquist (2018, p. 6), there is almost a total lack of concepts relating to race and racism among teachers, which undermines their ability to deal with cultural racism and structural diversity. “Race, identity and Indigeneity are often downplayed and unacknowledged” in ECECs “due to the hegemony of psychological-developmental norms that depict young children as too young or too innocent to notice race or racial injustices” (Abawi, 2022, p. 121). Young children “are aware of cultural and racial differences, and children have both negative and positive attitudes towards their own and other’s racial communities” (Abawi, 2022, p. 115). MacNevin and Berman (2016, p. 827) criticise “the shortcomings of the focus on physical materials as the primary strategy for addressing ‘race’ and other forms of difference in early childhood education,” claiming that children’s play episodes emphasise how play reproduces systems of power and oppression in a broader social context. All these factors (racism, colonisation, losing Indigenous language, losing Sámi identity and culture) will influence children’s well-being because they are possible risk factors in children’s lives.

According to Angel et al. (2022), it is challenging to offer all Sámi children education in the Sámi language and culture, and in the Sámi language that they are entitled to under the Kindergarten Act and the Education Act. The Office of the Auditor General (2019) has found that the lack “of Sámi teaching aids weakens the provision of education,” and that a shortage of Sámi teachers is a persistent problem.

Sámi upbringing

While Sámi upbringing is often said to be influenced by collectivistic values, it is also affected by such individualistic values as autonomy. Balto (2005) found that Sámi parents seem to prefer less restrictions and routines than their Norwegian counterparts. Non-confrontational approaches where children themselves are supposed to solve challenges resonates with Sámi traditions. Sámi upbringing includes indirect communication and approaches to channelling or guiding children through the social system, often through storytelling and practices implicit in the language. Traditionally, kinship has had a great controlling function in Sámi society.

The risk of presenting a “Sámi upbringing” is that there is more than one Sámi identity, upbringing, mother tongue, culture, and way of life. The Sámi people experience their Sámi identity differently (Hansen & Skaar, 2021, p. 9). A dynamic approach to Sámi culture acknowledges that it is changing, varies from context to context, and interacts with the surrounding environment: “Essentialized descriptions and a static view on culture ignore individual innovation and the dynamics of culture. A dynamic approach to culture promotes individual choices and holds that cultural norms and values are not static” (Dagsvold et al., 2020, p. 368).

Recent studies on Sámi upbringing by Hansen and Skaar (2022, pp. 93–95) found that Sámi youth were satisfied and resilient despite external stress. The young people related to

the influence of two or more cultures and had to balance these influences effectively. Many of the young people had experienced ethnic discrimination, bullying, and hate speech during their life span. The Sámi youth wanted to have social and cultural communities and meeting places, a feeling of belonging and connection, and recognition for their Indigenous identity. They mourned the loss of language, cultural heritage, and knowledge under the Norwegianisation process. Many young people reported having a close relationship with nature, which contributed positively to their mental and physical health. The Sámi youth wanted bonds, security, and attachment to their own identity, mother tongue, and culture. They struggled with a lack of recognition of their Sámi identity and culture in society, especially if they grew up outside Sámi majority areas, where there was less support for Sámi language, identity, and culture.

Theoretical approach – the concept of well-being

Well-being can be understood in different ways. Genetics, personality, domestic life, ECECs, environment, and the country's welfare policy and welfare system interplay to affect children's well-being. Two main classifications for well-being are: (1) the hedonic and (2) the eudaimonic dimensions. A hedonic perspective of well-being is "the search for pleasure and happiness, being related to the experience of satisfaction, that is, what makes life pleasurable, the presence of positive affections and the absence of negative affects" (Giuntoli & Vidotto, 2020; Silva et al., 2023). Eudaimonic well-being is based on a long-term emotional process, positive personal relationships, life purpose, autonomy, environmental domain, self-acceptance, and personal growth and self-realisation (Giuntoli & Vidotto, 2020; Silva et al., 2023; Karunamuni & Weerasekera, 2019). These views are closely related and influence each other.

Dodge et al. (2012) have synthesised the complex concept of well-being in the following definition: "Stable well-being is when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular physiological, social and/or physical challenge."

Despite the lack of a uniform theory for children's well-being, there is general consensus that it is a multi-dimensional, holistic concept encompassing many aspects of children's lives (Lewis, 2019). Fattore et al. (2009) present three overarching and interconnected dimensions that are particularly important for children's well-being: (1) positive sense of self: experiences of positive recognition and feeling a sense of belonging. (2) Agency – control in everyday life: being able to exert influence on everyday occurrences. (3) Security and safety: emotional security and having warm, satisfying and trusting relationships with adults and peers that enable children to fully engage in life. People develop in complex environments where the determinants of psychosocial well-being are multivariate (Eiroa-Orosa, 2020). These relationships are affected by power imbalances due to gender, economic, ethnic, and ability inequalities. Therefore, it is important to learn more about what is considered to support children's well-being in Sámi contexts.

Good relationships are important for children's well-being and development in general, regardless of cultural background. Ness and Munkejord (2021, p. 1) have shown that Sámi informants connected well-being to: "a) well-being through connection to nature; b) well-being through connection to reindeer; c) well-being through connection to family." They argued that research on the well-being of people with a Sámi background should consider the individual's life story and what constitutes well-being for them. Some Sámi studies indicate that family, relatives, and godparents are seen as particularly important in the socialisation of Sámi children. It seems that these family relations are sometimes practised and given meaning in a slightly different way than in other Norwegian cultures (Nergaard, 2011; Nystad et al., 2016). At the same time, this cannot be understood as essentializing, i.e., as truths about all Sámi children. All children have varied relationships to family, relatives, and other close associates. Good relationships are important among children who, due to Indigenous status, may be at risk of experiencing discrimination and prejudice – or lack of coherence between the home's upbringing and the language and pedagogy of educational institutions (cf. Bjerklund & Åmot, 2020; Hansen, 2011; Hansen & Skaar, 2021; NIM, 2018; Midtbøen & Lidén, 2015).

Method

The data material in this study comes from individual and group interviews with Sámi ECEC staff from the project *Sámi ECECs as health promoting arenas*. We contacted Sámi kindergartens in the 18 municipalities that received support from the Sami Parliament in Norway and received a positive response from eight. Due to circumstances related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number was reduced to seven Southern-, Lule-, and Northern-Sámi ECECs in different regions in Norway. We included both local Sámi communities in the north, and ECECs in urban contexts; three urban (> 20,000 inhabitants) and three rural (< 5,000 inhabitants). We had 16 informants, three of whom were men. All were Sámi speaking; some had learned Sámi as adults, and not all had a Sámi background. All ECEC directors that agreed to participate in our sample received an invitation letter approved by the local authority. The letter was then distributed to the staff. The ECEC participants were anonymous until they had consented to participate.

Due to COVID-19, five of the interviews were conducted digitally. We had five individual interviews and two group interviews using a semi-structured interview guide with emphasis on health promotion and the psychosocial environment. The audio recordings from the interviews lasted from 60–90 minutes. The study has been approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), and the project complies with all ethical guidelines established by the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH) (2018). We asked all Sámi ECECs to participate and included all that welcomed our research (availability selection).

The analysis has used a *stepwise-deductive induction (SDI)* approach (Tjora, 2018). We developed three categories that contextualised the ECECs' attempts to support

psychosocial well-being among children by using text-near quotes from our informants: (1) counterbalancing consequences of Norwegianisation and historical assimilation; (2) addressing the risk of discrimination and racism; and (3) highlighting Sámi culture in a positive way.

Table 1. Example text-near quotes and categories

Categories	Counterbalancing consequences of Norwegianisation and historical assimilation	Addressing the risk of discrimination and racism	Highlighting Sámi culture in a positive way
Text-near quote leading to category (example)	“And we have families involved in revitalisation processes”	“Thus, our identity and the value of the Sámi aspect are ranked lower”	“It’s also about preserving elements from your own childhood and Sámi upbringing”
Text-near quote	“We must look ahead in terms of the Sámi aspects. We must keep up with research on education.”	“It’s about pride. Something about identity development, and that’s great.”	“Children’s codetermination has been very important in Sámi culture.”

We did not ask our informants any questions about Norwegianisation, racism, and discrimination because our focus was on resilience and well-being. All informants raised this subject, however, and hence it was an important finding and category. Later studies (Bjørnholt et al., 2021; Hansen & Skaar, 2021) have underlined the relevance of this subject when working on well-being, and our study from 2019 thus agrees with later studies.

In qualitative studies it is important to obtain sufficient material to shed light on the research questions in a balanced manner. The most common is to have 15 interviews, plus/minus ten (Kvale 1999, pp. 58–59). According to Thagaard (2011, pp. 59–60), the size of the sample should be assessed in relation to a “saturation point.” When the study of several units does not provide an extended understanding of the phenomena being studied, then the sample is large enough. Because the analysis provides comprehensive data on the topic of the article, we believe that we reached a saturation point with the scope of informants and data we have available (Malterud et al., 2016). This study can tell us something about how ECEC staff think about facilitating well-being for Sámi children.

Ethical considerations

We have taken a culturally sensitive approach in dialogue with a Sámi advisory board during the process. This advisory board had members from Sámi ECECs and national preschool authorities. We discussed our work with this group, as this study aims to carefully take into consideration historical and personal backgrounds that influence research linked to the subject of Sámi rights and culture. Only one of the two researchers in charge of this study is Sámi.

It has been crucial to bear in mind the historical fact that research and the school system have been part of the colonisation of the Sámi people. Together with most other Indigenous peoples, Norwegian Sámi share a history of forced cultural assimilation and a

recent history of political mobilisation and revival. The colonisation and assimilation of the Sámi people culminated in the nation-building policies primarily based on monocultural norms, called Norwegianisation. Due to the assimilation policy and colonisation processes, the Sámi population has not been able to promote their own understandings of the institutions created in a Norwegian context. This includes those related to Sámi education, such as the ECECs, the focus of this study.

Because the Sámi population is small, and our selection is limited, we do not specify whether the informants are Northern-, Southern-, or Lule-Sámi, the exact location of the interviews and so on, to ensure the informants' anonymity.

Findings and discussion

The seven Sámi ECECs in our study contextualise their work to support psychosocial well-being among children by (1) counterbalancing consequences of Norwegianisation and historical assimilation, (2) addressing the risk of discrimination and racism, and (3) highlighting Sámi culture in a positive way. As the ECECs are spread all over the country and are situated in varied circumstances, the staff describe a variety of contexts and challenges.

Counterbalancing consequences of Norwegianisation and assimilation

The assimilation and Norwegianisation process influences the Sámi language and culture in different ways, where one is the everyday and pedagogical use of the Sámi language (Johansen & Markusson, 2022). We found traces of this in our material. In the interviews the informants talked about the importance of the Sámi language for Sámi culture and identity, for establishing relations, expressing feelings, and building relationships. One informant stated that language was the most important factor for children's identity construction: "It's about the entire identity of these children. You have your complete identity, and how you feel further into your life. We know that many are depressed because they never learnt the language."

The ECECs also worked to vitalize Sámi culture. One informant explained that the staff and parents cooperated on defining what was characteristic of the Sámi culture in their area. She said this was done with tremendous respect for the city she worked in.

What's the Sámi identity here in the kindergarten. [...] It develops over time, I would say, depending on the needs. And we have families involved in revitalisation processes – parents wanting their children to grow up with a Sámi identity. [...] So, we support them a lot in their revitalisation. Particularly those who are Southern-Sámi where we see them taking back the language, culture and identity, all important things for them. (Marja, urban ECEC)

Due to the Norwegianisation process and possibly also to decolonisation, the Sámi pedagogy has had less room and time to develop than the Norwegian pedagogy (Johansen & Markusson, 2022). As minorities, many of our informants experienced having less prepared

pedagogical resources and theories/methods adapted to their Indigenous culture. The Sámi pedagogy was hence updated and modernised by the ECECs, where they used research in their practice:

And then I feel that we really need to think things through. That the activities we do – we must look ahead in terms of the Sámi aspects. We must keep up with educational research. We can't be ten years behind. How can we coordinate this educational research? How can we merge it like hand in glove with ancient Sámi traditional knowledge? (Ravna, urban ECEC)

An ECEC teacher had discovered that the local authority was not providing the services Sámi children were legally entitled to, and that parents had not applied for language aids. She said that no other Norwegian ECECs in the city, and not even herself in her formal practice, had safeguarded Sámi rights well enough before she started working in the Sámi ECEC, adding: "So it's clear the work [of the Sámi ECEC] was so important then for an Indigenous population that has simply been Norwegianised for many years, it gave me enormous motivation" (Marja, urban ECEC).

The ECECs in our sample lacked books in the Sámi languages and staff with sufficient knowledge of the Sámi language and culture. It was quite common that our informants made teaching material themselves, another informant translated books about scary adventures and made an emotion poster. Because inhabitants of Sámi culture were perceived as not expressing their feelings openly, some informants tried to counterbalance this.

Even though some Sámi informants did not think it was normal to talk about feelings in the Sámi culture, one informant thought it was common to express care, comfort, and affection in more practical ways:

I think that we're very good when it comes to comforting and caring. We have a Sámi word which means "positively spoiled." On a walk today one of the girls was tired, so one of the staff carried her on her shoulders. It may be embedded in our culture [...] that we are a bit like spoiled in a positive way. And now we're working on independence. So, we try to make sure we don't have too much of this "being spoiled." (Elen, rural, ECEC)

The ECECs in our study said they wanted to make the experience of belongingness to Sámi culture positive for the children. They treated them both as culture bearers and as individuals with their own personality and identity at the same time:

Remember that the children aren't only Sámi, they're also completely unique people. This is very important to think about when working with cultural understanding, when working with diversity, when working to strengthen the children in their cultural belonging. Identity and belonging. (Ravna, urban ECEC)

We asked the informants what the implications were when the children were in a minority position. One informant said: “I believe that our duty in kindergarten is to strengthen that sense of identity, to believe in yourself and acquire good attitudes and values” (Mathis, rural ECEC). This points out the different ways the ECECs highlighted Sámi culture in a positive way to support children’s well-being. One ECEC tried to support the coexistence of children’s multiple cultural identities by highlighting that the children were both Indigenous and a part of the majority population:

You’re still Norwegian – or some see you as Sámi – but you’re still Norwegian, but you have a Sámi identity too. The identity methodology we use is very much a marble-cake identity. You’re a mix of identities. Because many of the children also have a Norwegian identity. And these identities must be able to coexist. [...] We’re not only Sámi or only Norwegian, we’re also a mix. (Juhán, urban ECEC)

One ECEC used research on Sámi identity and health to plan their didactic work and adapt their pedagogy to Sámi culture (decolonising the education): “We also know from studies that using nature is an important part of what Sámi youths have said has strengthened their identity and their mental health. That’s also one of the reasons why we use nature as much as we can” (Elen, rural ECEC).

The city council was interested in the use of nature in the identity work in the ECEC. The ECEC staff had used a book about Sámi markers in their discussions:

When we brought this before the city council, they challenged us by asking what Sámi educational methods are exactly and what they should look like. Then we answered by using a lot of what Gro Jernsletten said in her book on Sámi culture identity markers, and one of these things is precisely that, being close to nature and the land, and you know, things like that. (Juhán, urban ECEC)

This indicates that Sámi educators may have a need to counterbalance the consequences of historical assimilation and Norwegianisation by developing and adapting Sámi pedagogy to Sámi culture(s) and decolonising Sámi education. Counterbalancing might involve such things as speaking of feelings in the Sámi language and according to Sámi culture, having access to books and pedagogical material to support communication on feelings, and perhaps developing and modernising the way the Sámi talk about feelings.

Closeness to nature and positive personal relationships are part of eudaimonic well-being (Giuntoli & Vidotto, 2020; Karunamuni & Weerasekera, 2019; Silva et al., 2023). Our informants also mentioned the importance of addressing children’s mixed identities as Sami and Norwegian. In a study by Hansen and Skaar (2021), young people found it demanding to be an Indigenous person who was supposed to master both the minority and the majority cultures.

The lack of Sámi-speaking staff, teaching materials, and pedagogical theory and methods, as our informants mentioned, could be consequences of the Norwegianisation and

colonisation of Sámi education (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2023). This might directly and indirectly influence children's well-being. Not having staff speaking your native language might influence the children's opportunity to express feelings in their native language and having them understood. The Sámi informants in our study talked openly about feelings to the children. The lack of Sámi teaching aids to help when talking to children about feelings could be language-related, considering the "small" languages, Lule-Sámi, and Southern-Sámi, or related to a lack of Sámi teaching aids for ECECs in general. The assumption that the Sámi do not talk about feelings might be based on cultural essentialism (Dagsvold et al., 2020), and this is then challenged by what these staff members say.

Addressing the risk of discrimination and threats of racism

The informants talked about addressing the risk of experiencing discrimination and racism as an Indigenous child. One informant said it was lonely and less valued being Sámi in her environment:

We're only a few Sámi in this city, and it can often be lonely to be a Sámi here. We might not have the Sámi networks. Thus, our identity and the value of what is Sámi are ranked lower – or experienced that way, at least. "Why do we need this?" In the eyes of curious children, we see these questions, "Why should I be Sámi and learn Sámi? Nobody else is a Sámi or speaks Sámi." (Ávla, urban ECEC)

One informant said learning about the Sámi culture in all Norwegian and Sámi ECECs was important to counteract stereotypes in the future, and hence to protect the mental health of Sámi children: "This is important, so they don't have to deal with questions like: 'Do you have a two-storey lavvo?' or 'How many reindeer do you have?' Without you having anything to do with reindeer, or reindeer herding" (Laara, urban ECEC).

Creating pride in children was used as a strategy to counterbalance racism:

We're facing a formidable job in trying to create pride in the children because they are what they are. Some choices are made by parents, but then we have the Sámi ECECs, and we want them to be proud Sámi. Because eventually you run into a wall when you face racism, you'll encounter prejudices, regardless. (Ávla, urban ECEC)

One informant experienced a dilemma in preparing children for ethnic harassment, as it could make them think less of themselves:

We try to maintain focus on this because we know that bullying can start in kindergarten. But starting to have a focus on how you may be bullied because you're Sámi, that's a real minefield. That's too abstract for the children. Our duty is rather to strengthen their identity, so they become strong and confident. (Ásta, rural ECEC)

Hence pride was seen as a possible counterbalance to the risk of Sámi children being both individualised and victimised by structural discrimination and/or racism. One ECEC informant talked about being safe in one's own identity: "I just applaud that the children [...] do not leave here with prejudice and racism [...] we are so safe, as adults and as children, in who we are and where we come from" (Juhán, urban ECEC).

Ethnic pride was also considered important for highlighting Sámi culture in a positive way:

It's about pride. It's something about identity development, and that's great. [...] One thing is that you see it so clearly in the children, but you also see it among the parents. It feels special to be allowed to join such a process. [...] They're also close to the Sámi culture and understand that the way we do things here in this city is not defined because we're in a development phase. We have focused on the fact that being Sámi is something we have in common. (Marja, urban ECEC)

The informant found that it was inevitable that the children would face racism. Living with such a pessimistic view on the children's future is a possible psychosocial health risk for both them and the staff. The Sámi ECECs tried to counteract racism and discrimination by supporting Sámi children's identity and by actively using elements in Sámi culture to support children's psychosocial development. In choosing these positive elements, some ECECs use research on such issues as the meaning of nature for psychosocial well-being among the Sámi (Ness & Munkejord, 2021).

The ECEC staff in our study negotiate the risk of racism in children's lives with the aim of supporting their resilience in facing racism. Even though the framework plan for Norwegian kindergartens also addresses the prevention of bullying, discrimination, and exclusion, the Sámi context is different. The Sámi ECEC staff can have good reason to expect that the children will be exposed to racism and discrimination. Research shows that the prevalence of bullying, racism, and discrimination is a far more widespread phenomenon in the everyday life of Indigenous people than in the majority population (Eriksen et al., 2018; Hansen & Skaar, 2021; The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2023). Hence such phenomena as racism have a different meaning in a Sámi Indigenous context and will have different and possibly stronger implications for children's well-being. If ECEC staff find it hard to talk about racism, the children will be unprepared when they in fact are faced with it. If they do talk about it, the children might not understand it or may feel marginalised. Research shows that in general, some Norwegian teachers find it hard to discuss racism (Osler & Lindquist, 2018, p. 26). These findings are from a majority context, without having to deal with the additional minority and Indigenous history. Nonetheless, several of the ECECs in our study talked about racism.

In a majority context, feeling shame over one's own ethnic identity might never be a relevant subject to reflect on. Pride in being Norwegian is rarely a concept in research nor in everyday speech. But ethnic pride is a well-known subject that is discussed in everyday speech and in minority research. The ECEC staff implicitly interpret that they must address

the possibility of ethnic shame in their pedagogical approach. What is for the majority population a taken-for-granted privilege, is something a Sámi pedagogy must work on in everyday life in ECECs.

Highlighting Sámi culture in a positive way

The informants transformed old knowledge on upbringing into modern pedagogical practices when highlighting Sámi culture, doing this in a positive way to improve children's psychosocial well-being. They also tried to connect their own upbringing, ancestors, and further generations:

Mental health. It's also about preserving elements from your own childhood and Sámi upbringing. That you acknowledge your own upbringing. But also, your grandparents'. There's something we call acting like an adult. That we learn from the values our ancestors have given us. That's also good mental health.

(Ravna, urban ECEC)

Another way of supporting children's psychosocial well-being was to support their participation in overarching activities the informant thought were used by adults in other Norwegian ECECs:

And you're aware that this idea about children's codetermination has been very important in Sámi culture. It's not some recent trend, like it is in Norwegian kindergartens. I know that when I was growing up, I took part in everything from when I was a toddler, within the scope of the law. But we were allowed to explore and challenge ourselves. To be curious. And to be treated in a good way. That the children are allowed to participate. (Ravna, urban ECEC)

Participation in ordinary, everyday activities was seen as a crucial way of highlighting Sámi culture. Moreover, the existential pain and sorrow of life was perceived as something not to be hidden from the children because exposing them to life as it is supported their resiliency, according to one informant:

We really want the children to be allowed to encounter life just as it is, here and now. That they should become accustomed to and prepared for the various challenges life throws at you. That they in a way successively encounter resistance, that sad and stupid things happen in our everyday lives.

That you learn to deal with them based on your own capabilities.

(Ravna, urban ECEC)

Using various experiences and everyday Sámi markers in free play to support both cultural background and language development was underlined as important: "For example, we use *kofte* and coffee bags. It's like consumer products for us then, they get to play with them and have a close relationship to them" (Marja, urban ECEC).

These Sámi markers were used in addition to exposing the children to Sámi culture in practice and in communication (storytelling) in the everyday life of the ECECs. Our informants valued Sámi early-development traditions, but they also said that it was important to be aware of new knowledge, to internalise the best from one's own traditions, and to use relevant trends in childhood perspectives and policies. The ECECs supported Sámi identity construction by giving the children Sámi markers for use in play, and at the same time giving them experiences from Sámi cultural practices and thinking that could inspire their play with the cultural markers. This is a way of providing children with objects used in a culture so that they can identify with them, spin fantasies around them, and/or project their own cultural experiences on to them. Letting children participate in creating a Sámi culture through their own expressions here and now was important. At the same time, "simply providing children with racially and culturally diverse material [...] is not sufficient to nurture positive racial identity development or to challenge biased and stereotyped beliefs and prepare children to confront racism and other forms of oppression when they encounter it" (MacNevin & Berman, 2016, p. 827). The authors thus recommend self-reflection among the ECEC staff, observing children's play, getting inside of it, fostering positive identification with race, and talking openly about racism and ethnicity, in addition to using objects all the children can identify with.

The Sámi ECECs in our sample focused on participation, claiming there is a Sámi tradition for being especially good at involving children. Where Western culture often focuses on individual participation, our Sámi informants often focused on collectivistic participation and relating it to cultural socialisation and learning their culture more than in mainstream Norwegian ECECs.

Conclusion

The Sámi ECECs in our study focus on the child's interaction with a cultural environment that presents opportunities and challenges to promote well-being. The challenges mentioned are racism, harassment, and being part of an Indigenous minority and the mainstream society at one and the same time. Concurring with Hansen and Skaar (2021), the informants in our study also pointed out how diversified Sámi society was, and thus the ideas and practices for supporting children's well-being will vary from one Sámi area to the next.

For Indigenous children in ECECs to experience well-being, the staff need to take into consideration a multi-dimensional, holistic concept encompassing many aspects of children's lives (Lewis, 2019). Our project points out that racism, discrimination, and resilience factors are part of everyday life. The ECEC staff tried to support the children's positive sense of self, recognition, and feeling a sense of belonging. They also let them participate in a way that supported their agency and control in everyday life by letting them have influence on everyday occurrences, and where they could fully engage in the Indigenous life, which is an important part of well-being according to Fattore et al. (2009) and Eiroa-Orosa (2020). This type of participation is in line with Sami culture.

The informants used research to learn about what supports children's well-being in Sámi contexts, aiming to build new ways of constructing everyday life in ECEC as a part of a decolonisation process (Abawi, 2022). They also considered what effect it would have on children's safety to either talk or not talk about discrimination and racism against Indigenous people. According to Eiroa-Orosa (2020), security and safety are important parts of well-being. This study points out that ECEC staff supported emotional security by talking about feelings and finding words in the Indigenous language to name them, also posited as an important part of well-being by Eiroa-Orosa (2020). Our informants support positive affections, positive personal relations, autonomy, environmental understanding, and self-acceptance among children – hence supporting both the hedonic and the eudaimonic dimensions of well-being (Giuntoli & Vidotto, 2020; Karunamuni & Weerasekera 2019; Silva et al., 2023).

The informants wanted to form warm, satisfying, trusting relationships with the children, which Eiroa-Orosa (2020) claims is part of supporting well-being. At the same time, they recognise that children's relationships in the society outside the ECEC will include power imbalances between the majority population and the Indigenous child, and they want to prepare the children for this. The staff need to work on different areas parallel to supporting the children's holistic well-being. People develop in complex environments, where the determinants of psychosocial well-being are multivariate (Eiroa-Orosa, 2020). Attitudes and general communication in the day-to-day interaction in the ECECs (Jåvo, 2010) are important factors for promoting well-being, as are awareness of history, learning from ancestors, using Sámi language, talking about feelings, children's participation, ethnic pride, closeness to Sámi culture, Sámi markers used in play, belongingness, and cultural understanding. Hence future research on well-being in Sámi ECECs needs to address the risks as well as resilience.

Sámi ECEC staff contextualise their work to support psychosocial well-being among children by constantly balancing between dealing with the possible consequences of Norwegianisation and the assimilation process from the past and highlighting Sámi culture in a positive way.

For the informants it was an ongoing and never-ending process to contextualise Sami practices according to today's society and adjust to the present group of ECEC staff, parents, and children. Sámi culture thus means different things in different areas and in different Sámi groups. There is no outlined Sámi pedagogy to rely on, and the staff must create ways to support children's identity development as Sámi citizens. This concurs with Dagsvold et al. (2020), who state that Sámi culture is in a constant state of development.

Our findings point to what we interpret to be a significant additional workload for Sámi ECEC staff. They must facilitate psychosocial well-being for the children in line with the requirements of the Kindergarten Act (2005) and must also address the possible risks and effects that Norwegianisation, the historical assimilation policy, racism, and discrimination might have on Sámi children today. They have to have an additional way of thinking, understanding, and planning pedagogy in the Sámi ECECs, which Norwegian majority

ECECs do not need to consider. Moreover, there is also the possibility that the ECEC staff's own collective traumas and experiences of racism might be activated. Thinking about collective traumas and at the same time protecting the children from being affected by them is hard emotional work. This adds a major additional workload to the ECEC staff's daily work. As other studies have pointed out, several serious psychosocial risk factors are involved in being a Norwegian child in general (Skogen et al., 2018), and a Sámi childhood often has more risk factors (Hansen & Skaar, 2021). This makes the strategy of highlighting Sámi culture in a positive way important.

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