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Jenny Rosén & Åsa Wedin

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Same but different. Negotiating diversity in Swedish pre-school teacher training

Jenny Rosén and Åsa Wedin
School of Education and Humanities, Dalarna University, Falun, Sweden

ABSTRACT
Due to migration, Swedish pre-schools are linguistically and culturally diverse settings where approximately one in five children is bi-/multilingual. Hence, pre-school teachers work in a diverse landscape in which they are expected to support the multilingual and multicultural development of the children. The aim of this article is to analyze the discourses of diversity in Swedish pre-school teacher training and, more specifically, how students are positioned and position themselves in relation to such discourses. The article takes its point of departure in an ethnographic four-year project that studied a group of students recruited to the pre-school teacher training by a municipality because of their migration background. The material analyzed consists of interviews and observations during the four years that the students participated in the program. Using the framework of nexus analysis, it reveals an ambivalence in attitudes in relation to diversity and in the positioning of certain students as other. Due to their historical bodies, the students are expected to add value to the pre-school teacher training program, but at the same time, they are expected to perform like everyone else in the program, reproducing a discourse of diversity as a positive asset.

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Introduction
The aim of this article is to analyze discourses of diversity in Swedish pre-school teacher training, and more specifically, how students are positioned and position themselves in relation to such discourses. In Sweden, pre-school teacher training is provided by higher education through a three-and-a-half year program. In the Swedish pre-school context where they are expected to work, at least one in five children is bi-/multilingual, and as part of increased migration to Sweden (with a peak in 20151), most pre-school teachers work with children and families from varied linguistic backgrounds. Pre-school is offered for children aged 18 months to 5 years old, organized by the municipality and paid by the parents. From the age of 4, children have the right to pre-school free of charge for approximately 15 hours/week. The activities in the pre-school are guided by a national curriculum and the Education Act (2010, 800), which stipulates that:

CONTACT
Jenny Rosén jro@du.se
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[...] education in the preschool aims at children acquiring and developing knowledge and values. It should promote all children’s development and learning, and a lifelong desire to learn. An important task of the preschool is to impart and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based. Each and every person working in the preschool should promote respect for the intrinsic value of each person as well as respect for our shared environment.

The main goals of the Pre-school teacher program are stated in The Higher Education Ordinance as to prepare students with knowledge and abilities needed to independently work as pre-school teachers. According to The Higher Education Ordinance (Swedish Council for Higher Education 1993, 100, Annex 2) that determines the main content of pre-school teacher training, the education program should be linked to future professional practice, and therefore comprise the following: ‘history of the school system, its organisation and conditions as well as the core values of early years education, including fundamental democratic values and human rights’. It is further stated in the learning outcomes in relation to core values that students shall:

- demonstrate the capacity to communicate and instill core educational values, including human rights and the fundamental democratic values
- demonstrate the capacity to prevent and restrain discrimination and other forms of harassment of children
- demonstrate the capacity to respect, communicate and instill a gender equal and equal rights perspective in educational processes

Moreover, Swedish education in general has a strong foundation of commonly shared ethical values and a perceived consent, formulated through principles of school value. However, forefronting perceived commonly shared values as stated in The Higher Education Ordinance as well as in the pre-school curriculum always means that others are excluded. As previous research has highlighted (Fridlund 2011; Lunneblad 2006; Torpsten 2006), there is a tension between stipulating core values while, at the same time, acknowledging that difference and diversity in itself is valued. Such a tension raises questions of representation and voice both with regard to common values and to diversity, and researchers have juxtaposed how certain students have been marked and made to represent diversity and the Other in policy as well as in the classroom (Gruber 2007; Jonsson 2007; Runfors 2003; Zilliacus et al. 2017).

This article takes its point of departure in the research project On the doorstep to pre-school. Pre-school teacher training students learning in a multilingual and diverse context (2013–2017). The aim of the project was to illuminate the learning trajectories of 10 students (named the S-group here) that had been recruited to the pre-school teacher training program by a Swedish municipality, on the basis that they had all migrated to Sweden and thus were expected to contribute with their assumed different linguistic and cultural experiences. In Sweden, students are normally recruited through an application system and do not pay for their higher studies, but due to limitations in the number of admitted students, companies and municipalities may pay for commissioned education. During the last years, the municipality in case had received a large number of migrants, many of them families with children, and therefore they experienced a need to educate pre-school teachers with diverse backgrounds in order to build bridges with these families. Hence, a decision was taken to educate pre-school teachers with a migrant background who
were expected to become an important contribution to local pre-schools, by commissioned education for 10 students the first one and a half semester of the pre-school program. The selected students were then expected to be admitted through the ordinary application process. The 10 recruited students had migrated to Sweden as youths or adults, and they used a number of different languages, such as Somali, Kurdish, Russian and Arabic, as well as Swedish and English which were required for their studies. Due to their varied knowledge of Swedish at the start of the program, those who needed it were offered Swedish language support during the first semester.

Taking a critical perspective in the analysis, culture including core values is not seen as fixed and static but as constructed and reconstructed by different actors, with issues of power being salient. In line with such critical perspective, culture is understood as ‘a historically evolved set of ways of thinking, concepts, symbols, representations (e.g. of the self and others), norms, rules, strategies, embodied in the actions and artifacts of a social community in power relations with those of other communities’ (Shi-xu 2016, 2). In the analysis, the theoretical framework of nexus analysis and position theory have been used, which enables us to look at the social action, in this case, pre-school teacher training, through discourses in place, historical bodies and interactional orders. We start out by presenting our theoretical and methodological framework. The empirical material is presented before continuing with the findings. Using nexus analysis as our framework (Scollon and Scollon 2004), the following research questions have guided the analysis process:

1. How do discourses in place enable social actions involving participants in the program, as mediational means in their actions?
2. What historical bodies may be understood through the material as enacted in the pre-school teacher training program?
3. What characterizes the interaction order that is mutually produced?

Finally, we discuss the main results and their implications for pre-school teacher training.

**Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework of the study is a poststructuralist and critical perspective, with diversity seen as a process that is constructed and reconstructed by different actors through the actions in their everyday life. Hence, we follow Butler (1997, 2005), in that discourse is produced and performed through everyday actions. Butler highlights the importance of repeated actions for the way norms and categories become ‘natural’ or ‘common sense’. Davies and Harré (1990) use the notion of positioning in order to highlight how discourses construct the frames of identity work. When an individual is positioned as a certain category of person, a subject, he or she needs to respond to that call in some way, by resistance or by performing that position.

In school discourse, positions such as student and teacher are central, but also other positions are possible such as bullies or second language users, positions to which individuals need to respond (Hjörne and Säljö 2009; Rosén 2017). Hence, positioning is a dual process of positioning oneself and being positioned. In other words, identity work takes place in discursive practices in our everyday life. Discourses are not static and, as Foucault (1993, 2008) notes, power enables us to act, and through interaction and actions, people
negotiate and transform discourse. Taking nexus analysis as a point of departure, our interest here is not in the implementation of policies concerned with diversity, but rather in how cycles of discourses are constituted and used in the pre-school teacher training program. Hence, nexus analysis (Scollon and Scollon 2004, 2007) is used in order to illuminate relations between different levels, challenging a hierarchical division between micro- and macro levels as units of analysis. Nexus analysis as a theoretical framework, as well as theories such as sociolinguistic scales (Blommaert 2013) and complex dynamic system theory (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008), has been used in order to generate a theoretical and methodological framework for multidimensional analysis.

Nexus analysis can be regarded as a form of discourse analysis, including a historical and an ethnographic dimension in the analysis (Hult 2010; Pietikäinen et al. 2011) and Scollon and Scollon (2004) emphasize how social action, as the unit of analysis, occurs in the intersection between the discourses in place, the participants’ historical bodies, and the interaction order produced. Nexus analysis entails not only a close, empirical examination of the moment under analysis but also a historical analysis of […] trajectories or discourse cycles that intersect [at a given] moment as well as an analysis of the anticipations that are opened up by the social actions taken in that moment. (Scollon and Scollon 2004, 8)

Therefore, nexus analysis takes as its nodal point the social action, while at the same time including the wider socio-historical discourses intersecting that specific unit of social action. A social action that is repeated is then understood as a social practice, and as such is in line with performativity theory with its emphasis on the repetition of actions. Social actions occur at the intersection between what in nexus analysis is framed as (i) the discourses in place which enable that action or are used by the participants as meditational means in their action, (ii) the historical bodies of the participants in action and the institutional settings focused on and (iii) the interaction order which they mutually produce (Scollon and Scollon 2004). Discourses in place highlight the need to empirically study which discourses are relevant and foregrounded in the social action that is being examined (Scollon and Scollon 2004). The concept of historical bodies comes from the work of Nishida (1998) and is understood as the collectively constituted experiences of individuals as well as institutions across time that become a ‘natural’ part of them. Thus, by using the concept of historical bodies, we perceive experiences as situated in the individual body since ‘a lifetime of personal habits come to feel so natural that one’s body carries out actions seemingly without being told’ (Scollon and Scollon 2004, 13). Historical bodies are not static, and combining the concept with position theory (Davies & Harré) and performativity (Butler 1997, 2005) provides us with important analytical tools. Interaction order, as developed by Goffman (1983), can be described as ways in which we behave as we form relationships with others in social interaction. In this project, we encompass the socio-historical discourses, the historical bodies of the students, and the interplay between the social practices in the pre-school teacher training program both during classroom activities and in-service training.

Diversity in education – previous research

Questions of internationalization, ethnic diversity and intercultural competencies have been central in higher education for some decades. Goals related to equality, equity
and equal opportunities are firmly grounded in a humanistic worldview, and are perceived as important for the creation of an equal and fair world (SJögren and Ramberg 2005). According to SJögren (2005), intercultural education may be perceived as three-dimensional, as an approach (attitude), as content (knowledge) and as ways of teaching (behavior and skills). Åberg (2008) highlights two problems with what he calls ‘the visualizing diversity strategy’; that the teacher who is presumed to visualize it is perceived as acting from a culturally neutral and objective position, and that unilaterally positive perceptions of the diversity strategy in itself are problematic. Tallberg Broman et al. (2002, 152) stress that when it comes to education ‘content and methods have emotional and social relations so that they are easily acquired by some while they are perceived as considerably more strange by others’, and that is not least the case in teacher education.

Eklund (2003) has studied how the official policy of diversity and interculturality has been expressed in national curricula for the compulsory school in Sweden. Her analysis shows gaps between political aims, the curriculum and the views of students. In another study, Runfors (2003) identified a paradox in the notion of ‘one school for all’, as equity in many cases meant that differences were obscured. In order to prepare children to succeed in Swedish society, teachers in primary school excluded the different experiences of the children in order for them to adapt to a Swedish ‘way of being’. Hence, diversity and cultural meetings in pre-school and school may be perceived as a challenge by educators, especially in regard to home–school cooperation and the so-called language gap between home and school (Avneri et al. 2015; Lunneblad 2013; Massing et al. 2013; Schecter and Sherri 2009).

Stier (2003) argues that, although goals for internationalization and ethnic diversity in higher education share some similarities, there are also differences. While internationalization is considered as a challenge, ethnic diversity rather tends to focus on problems, inequalities, legal matters and formalities in relation to ‘minority’ students. Stier stresses the importance of taking advantage of inherent human resources stemming from ethnic diversity, taking immigrant student’s needs and wishes into consideration, and the importance of sensitivity in relation to the complexity and potential of diversity in student groups. Taking advantage of the diversity also implies demanding tolerance and respect as well as self-reflexivity among teachers regarding teaching methods. Bate-laan (2005) stresses that talk about intercultural education should not end at ambitions, but changes in organizations are demanded, as well as in structures and pedagogy (see James 2005 for an example).

Materials and method

The empirical material analyzed here was collected in a four-year project with an ethnographic framework, to illuminate the learning trajectories of the selected students through the pre-school teacher training program, with a specific focus on diversity and multilingualism. During the project, the material was collected mainly through interviews, observations and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with the students in the S-group during different phases of the program, both individually and in groups. After the first part of the studies, the commission part, eight of the students managed to be admitted for the rest of the program. For different reasons, only four of these students graduated from the program within the stipulated time. Among the
reasons for dropping out or being delayed were severe disease, pregnancy and failing in assessment. No follow-up interviews were carried out with those that did not fulfil the program within the scheduled time. In total, 20 individual interviews and two group interviews with the students in the S-group were carried out. Due to varying reasons, the students were interviewed a different number of times. Interviews were also carried out with 12 of the teachers in the pre-school teacher training program and teachers allocated to give language support in Swedish as a second language. The interviews were semi-structured and were audio recorded and transcribed. The focus group interviews were less structured as the students were presented with a few questions by the researchers which they then discussed. Observations were documented through field notes, approximately 40 hours of observation, and included seminars, in-service training studies in some of the pre-schools where the students were placed and meetings in the initial recruiting process. Moreover, policy documents produced both nationally and at the university concerning the pre-school teacher training program have been analyzed, including national and local curricula for the pre-school teacher program.

Interviewing and observing the students through the three and a half years that they were enrolled in the program included several ethical considerations. The S-group studied together with other students who had been accepted to the program through the ordinary application process. Being recruited by the municipality and thus bypassing the application process was seen by some people as unfair. During the first year, some conflicts occurred, and on such occasions, we refrained from carrying out observations. In order not to mark the group further, no observations were made during the first two semesters. Another challenge was that observations in teacher education, during seminars and student presentations, included observations of colleagues. All students and teachers in the program who were observed were informed about the aim of the study and gave oral or written consent for their participation.

Findings and analysis

The analysis and findings of the study will be presented in accordance with the theoretical framework and the research questions, starting with discourses in place, followed by historical bodies, and then interaction order. Nexus analysis enables us to see how discourses circulate between policy documents (national and local) and different actors in the program such as policy-makers, teachers and students, and also how they are reproduced, negotiated and challenged in the social practices. First, the material has been analyzed using a thematic approach by identifying dominating discourses in regard to diversity. In a second step, the analysis has been carried out through the framework of nexus analysis (Scollon and Scollon 2004, 2007), using the dimensions of discourses in place, historical bodies and interaction order. Central to the analysis is the interplay among the three dimensions of the social action studied. This means that for each step, the material as a whole has been analyzed. Concerning discourses in place, the main focus was on policy material and teacher interviews, and concerning historical bodies and interaction order, the focus was on student interviews and observations.
Discourses in place – diversity as a common good in Swedish education

In order to analyze how dominant discourses concerning diversity are produced and negotiated in the pre-school teacher training program, we draw on official policy documents and informal interviews with officials from the municipality.\textsuperscript{2} We also draw on previous research about diversity and pre-school teacher training in Sweden.

Since the mid-twentieth century, equality and diversity have been explicit goals in Swedish education in terms of core values to be taught, while education has also been perceived as serving to increase equality in Swedish society (Lunneblad 2006; Tallberg Broman et al. 2002). In the early 1970s, the Royal Commission on Immigration presented a political agenda based on the principles of equality, freedom of choice and partnership (Ministry of the Interior 1971; Ministry of Labour 1974). The goal of freedom of choice implied that ‘public initiatives are to be taken to assure members of linguistic minorities domiciled in Sweden of a genuine choice between retaining and developing their original cultural identity and assuming a Swedish cultural identity’ (Ministry of Labour, 1974, 25). That equality and diversity were stated as explicit goals of education can be understood in relation to a growing interest by international organizations such as UNESCO and the European Council in intercultural learning and dialogue as part of educating for peace. The concept of intercultural learning was also included in Swedish discourse in the mid-1980s, through a decision that schools should adopt intercultural learning methods (SOU 1983: 57). This is in line with the notion of ‘one school for all’ based upon values of equality, community and integration. In the post WW2 period up until recently, diversity and interculturality have been perceived as positive in most political contexts, including Sweden (Åberg 2008; de los Reyes 2001). A shift in discourse can also be found from a previous focus on multicultural education in terms of specific activities for children with migration background toward an intercultural education including all students, even though the concept of intercultural education was introduced in policy already in 1983 (Language and Culture Inquiry 1983). Despite the rise of xenophobia in the form of nationalist movements and political parties, diversity can be understood as a dominating political discourse at least in the Swedish political context. In educational settings, diversity is expected to ‘do something’ and different actors are expected to ‘do something with it’ (Åberg 2008). Hence, there is a belief that diversity in itself will create a common good in education, and transform and change individuals’ perceptions of others.

The Swedish pre-school is guided by a national curriculum, which stipulates that cultural heritage is expected to be transferred to children in pre-school, although without addressing the multiple heritages that children may confront. Furthermore, the curriculum states that ‘the increased mobility across national borders creates a cultural diversity in pre-schools, which give children possibilities to form basic respect and regard for all humans despite their background’ (Swedish National Agency for Education 2016, 4). A central task for the pre-school is to transfer a cultural heritage to children in terms of values, traditions, history and knowledge from one generation to the next. Hence, questions of who is to define such cultural heritage and to transfer it become relevant especially with regard to the fact that, according to curricula, children with a foreign background should be supported in developing a multicultural belonging. The curriculum further states that the pre-school is a social and cultural meeting place that can strengthen...
children’s ability to live with and understand the value of cultural diversity in an increasingly international society (Swedish National Agency for Education 2016, 6).

The local municipality that recruited the S-group has a long tradition of labor migration, with 22% of the population having a foreign background, and during the last years, the municipality has faced an increase in refugee migration (Wedin 2017). Following the decision to recruit students who had migrated to Sweden as adults or as adolescents, these students were selected in cooperation with the official employment agency based upon previous experiences and earlier education. Since several of the students lacked sufficient skills in Swedish and English (the main languages in higher education in Sweden), they were offered a short introductory course to higher education and courses in Swedish to complete the grades needed to register to the pre-school teacher program. This meant that they were recruited before they actually qualified for the program and that they had to fulfil requirements during the commissioned part of the program. In this case, the municipality paid for the first one and a half semester of their studies. Formally they were admitted in a similar way to the other students from the second part of semester two. They were, however, from the beginning integrated in the same groups and courses as other students, recruited through the ordinary application system.

There was a strong belief that these students, positioned as having a ‘different’ background, would contribute as pre-school teachers in some way. Positioning them as different also meant that they were expected to add a certain value of diversity and specific understandings to the pre-schools as well as the pre-school teacher training.

Similar expectations were addressed by several officials from the municipality as well as teachers responsible for the pre-school teacher program. Some of the main teachers in the program were involved in the early stage of recruiting the students. One of them expressed a strong will for integrating the 10 students so that they would become like all other students in the program while at the same time contributing to the group because of their different experiences.

Carin and I had a strong desire that it would go well (laughs) when they were going to come and that they were going to be well received and integrated with the rest so that there should not be anything special for these students (…) First there were some rumors in the beginning I may say and there was a lot that I perceive as not well prepared from the part of the municipality (…) it had emerged as an interesting and positive project and there I’m the first one to sign that but (…) that they would be well received then and get into this job in a good way.

In conjunction with the start of the teacher training program, there were some incidents with letters to the editors published in the local newspapers expressing opinions against what was perceived as the extra help that these students had got to enable their admission to the program, a type of help that was denied others, followed by a debate in the local press and on social media containing racial statements. This was something that the teachers in the program were upset about, although they also used it in their teaching as an example of the xenophobic discourse that people with immigrant backgrounds could encounter in society. They argued that initiating such discussions during classes could give students positioned as Swedish insights that were important when later on meeting families with different kinds of backgrounds in their jobs as preschool teachers. The analysis of discourses in place reveals a strong emphasis on diversity and multilingualism as positive values and a potential resource, and in relation to such
discourses, the students were positioned as the ‘other’ by both officials in the municipality and employment offices who expected them to contribute positively in terms of diversity. The xenophobic discourse expressed in the local media was hence used by the teachers in order to strengthen the importance of diversity as a positive core value in the program. The teachers in the program positioned themselves against such a discourse not by ignoring it but rather by using such statements as examples of racism and inequality in Swedish society. Hence, it was important for the teachers that students positioned as Swedish should understand their privileged position and learn from the ‘other’. Although the students were selected based on the presumption of constituting a potential resource because of their immigrant background, through the recruitment, they were positioned as deviant from the ‘normal’ participants, lacking in language skills and needing support to become included.

**Historical bodies – positioning, performing and representing**

From a focus on discourses in place, we now turn to historical bodies. The notion of historical bodies, similar to that of habitus (Bourdieu 1991), illuminates how the lifetime experiences and habits of an individual become naturalized and embodied. Still, the historical body is not static but contextual and changing over time. The notion of historical bodies will be analyzed here and combined with theories concerning positions and performativity. In the analysis of historical bodies, materials from observations in seminars, along with teacher and student interviews, have been used.

As noted above, the historical bodies of the students in the S-group were marked as important before even entering the program, as just by their presence, they were expected to bring new perspectives both to other students (not marked as different) and to the children and staff working in the pre-schools. Their historical bodies as immigrants, multilingual and women were addressed, especially in the recruitment process and initial meetings, but the meaning of such categorizations was negotiated and shifted over time. One teacher argued that the students in the S-group, through their outsider perspective, could get a better understanding of the Swedish pre-school. As part of the curriculum, she had asked the students in a seminar to discuss the Swedish pre-school from an international perspective, and during the following seminars, the students from the S-group had shared their experiences of growing up under sometimes harsh conditions. Although the narratives told by the students were seen as important by the teachers, especially to give an opportunity for the students positioned as Swedish to learn about other perspectives, norms of childhood and pre-school perceived and presented as Swedish still prevailed in the program through perspectives on children and childhood expressed through the content represented through literature, lectures, seminars and examinations. With regard to Swedish norms, the students in the S-group came to talk about their own childhoods and previous experiences during seminars as problematic. During an interview, one student said:

[...] for me childhood, before I started this program, when they play, it is just that they play and I didn’t think that they should explore something or learn through play and such. And also, it is for when I remembered my own childhood, I had lego and different things to play with and we also had role playing where I pretended to be mum and such but now I understand that, it is supposed to do such things but we didn’t have any adult that would
observe us and explore and to help us with what we need and to develop our interests and such.

The students in the S-group positioned themselves as having previous experiences with childcare that were not good when compared with what they learned in the program, what was positioned as the norm, what was good and desirable, through the curriculum and by students and teachers. In this way, their own experiences became devalued.

During the seminars that were observed as well as during interviews, all the students in the S-group positioned themselves as good and hard-working students taking the initiative and showing that they were well prepared in different ways. One example was during a math seminar, when symmetry was discussed based on exercises that the students had had access to in digital form before. When the teacher asked the students to explain symmetry, one of the students in the S-group held her mobile up to show her display, where she had made one of the pictures from the exercises her profile picture. By showing that she had used the exercise material, she positioned herself as an engaged student, not only doing the exercises but also including it in her private life through her mobile display. In interviews, they often talked about what they had learned during courses, re-voicing the main conclusions from the lessons and literature. They spoke about how much they had learned and how that had improved their skills as pre-school teachers-to-be. One of the students said in an interview during the second year of the program:

[...] we have developed a lot, we have activities in pre-school, we have planned them ourselves and made them with the child and it worked well, and we just, it is always so, I say after each course that we start we learn something new that we didn’t know before and when we complete the course we know how to use it as educators. This role as educators, how we relate to the child and that is for the whole program, how we as educators will do for the child to learn and feel safe.

Most of the teachers in the program positioned themselves as Swedes or Scandinavian, although they had experiences of living in other countries. One of the teachers, Shari, had migrated from Iran and sometimes positioned herself and was positioned by other teachers as ‘one of them’ but at the same time with experience as a teacher in the Swedish school system, marking her importance for the students by explaining issues related to language as well as the education system. The other teachers in the program also acknowledged this, arguing that Shari’s historical body enabled her to ‘say things that would sound inappropriate if I said it’. A given example was that she could address assumed problems with husbands allowing their wives to study and families demanding that they prioritize household work. In other words, through her historical body, she could give voice to support but also criticize the students in ways that were not perceived as possible for teachers positioned as Swedish.

During the second year, the S-group was dissolved both formally and informally. The students were formally transferred to the regular program and did not receive any special support. Moreover, during interviews, when teachers talked about the S-group, they tended not to include those of the original students in the S-group who were high-performing students and who were often taking the role as leaders during group work or seminars and initiated discussions. At the same time, they tended to include other students instead, such as students who they positioned as non-Swedish and who
they perceived as lacking in Swedish language skills, and students who were perceived as ‘weak’ with poor results regardless of origin. One example is the following:

[...] now it is, now I, we, got women that is from yeh one is from Thailand, yeh and from Russia and then we got from Somalia and Iran and Iraq and yeh it is not a homogenous group, they are different in their own ways and that is what distinguish, that is that they are all struggling with the language that is an obstacle for them.

Here, the category of female students with an immigrant background is constructed around perceptions of lacking Swedish language skills. Although some of the students mentioned in the quotation were not actually among the recruited students in the S-group, they became positioned and grouped together here, even though teachers pointed out that they were not homogeneous.

The negotiation of who belongs to a certain student group and the categorization of certain students revealed the ambivalence among the teachers in relation to discourses of diversity as positive assets, while they avoided essentialist understandings of culture. Hence, categorizing students with regard to their Swedish language skills can be understood as a safe strategy to avoid talking about culture and national belonging. Problems with categorizing who is Swedish and not, and who belongs to certain groups became explicit in interviews, where teachers sometimes had a hard time naming students, hesitating and accusing themselves of being prejudiced as illustrated in the quotation below, where one of the teachers talks about seminar groups.

[we had] mixed groups and some totally Swedish if I can say like that, so totally Swedish groups.

The teachers showed strong concern during the interviews not to express anything that could be perceived as xenophobic and, hence, not in line with a dominant discourse of diversity as positive, while they still tried to express what they perceived as ‘otherness’, such as positioning students with immigrant backgrounds as students that it takes more time to understand compared to the ‘Swedish girls’.

During the last courses in the program, only four students remained, all of whom wore the hijab, with three of them wearing a typical Somali type of clothing with long skirts and sleeves. In interviews and seminars, they positioned themselves as different historical bodies, however not de-valuing themselves but as active women who used their voices in interaction. Clothing became one of the symbols used by teachers to relate to the diversity represented by these students in relation to the others. One of the teachers claimed in an interview that she had become more aware of diversity by having these students in the group and exemplified from a seminar when they were discussing images from advertisements aimed at parents and how she had realized that the children in the pictures all were, as she put it, ‘blonde Western children’:

This (x) happy family playing with lego or something then there is two a boy and a girl and then there is a mother and a father too thought thought there are very few adopted children visible and sort of like this and then we have probably discussed and I asked some of them (.) the shawl ladies sort of but there are no ones with shawl for example how does it feel to never see that, I asked them directly in the group and such things became more concrete then.

The quotation illustrates how certain students were positioned to represent diversity during seminars and how the difference is embodied by their hair color and use of the
hijab. Referring to them as a specific group of students, ‘the shawl ladies’, constructs boundaries between those wearing a hijab and those not, where the former are asked to represent a different view. Thus, the incident at the seminar, on the one hand, shows the effort made by the teacher to highlight and to discuss norms of whiteness and heteronormativity in the advertisements and experiences of exclusion while, on the other hand, also marking certain students as different due to their hijab. The quotation also illustrates how the physical presence of the students in seminars actually did add new perspectives to the content discussed.

Interaction order/social practices – negotiation of otherness

Interaction order and social practices as repeated social actions are central in the negotiation of otherness. To analyze interaction order, observations from seminars and presentations during examinations have been used together with teacher and student interviews, mainly from the later part of the program when only four students remained from the original S-group.

The courses in the pre-school teacher program were organized in different ways, but all included seminars in groups of 5–15 students. Seminars were led by a teacher, and students were often asked to prepare before seminars by reading literature and working in smaller groups. They were also given tasks that were to be presented during seminars as part of their examination. The seminars can be understood as a main space for the negotiation of difference and intercultural learning. While teachers in the program had already positioned the S-group as different and as a group, teachers also expressed a will to integrate them by splitting up the group when arranging the study groups for the first semester. However, some students positioned by the teachers as Swedish in interviews voiced discomfort with the arrangement, since they thought that the lack of Swedish language skills among the students in the S-group would have a bad impact on the rest of the group and the grading of their own work. One of the teachers argued that she tried to listen to all students and to explain to them that they were all graded individually. While the complaining students tried to explain problems in group work due to cultural and linguistic differences, the teacher rejected this. Hence, this teacher rejected explanations of differences in behavior or performance with diversity, something that could be understood as simultaneously reinforcing a paradox of making the diversity invisible, positioning the students in the S-group as similar to the others.

Another example of negotiating otherness previously mentioned was from an interview where a teacher mentioned one seminar where the students were supposed to work with different physical activities and games, creating an ‘adventure landscape’ for children to practice physical movements and balance. The teacher had told the students to come to class with clothes in which they could move and with sport shoes, but said in an interview that she had expected that ‘these girls’ would come dressed as usual, with long dresses and hijabs. However, the quotation below highlights how the teacher’s prejudices were challenged in this practice, and how she reflected on the removing of the hijab as an action of empowerment and freedom.

[...] but when I met them at the entry to (the hall) then there they were in their sportswear and I hadn’t expected that I thought that they would dress in their dress their long dresses and one of the girls the had also released the cloth and made a turban and she did really look good in
that turban and then I couldn’t help saying how beautiful you are in that because then her chin appeared and then we went down to the gymnasium and (.) right at that time the only boy in the group (.) was ill so we were only a bunch of ladies women and then they looked at me and then they said ‘will any male come here?’ no I don’t think so unless a janitor will pop in I said and suddenly the shawls went off and I got to see their long beautiful hair and then we sat down in a ring and I thought sort of that why you may be very strange very strange feelings sort of coming to a gymnasium and maybe I thought that they were going to have more yes negative feelings towards a gymnasium than a ordinary people so everybody got to talk (.) about their feelings, how do you feel about being here and there were only positive everybody was so expectant and thought that this would be fun moving themselves and being there and that was a positive experience that had not actually expected then and they were all at full speed they tried and they climbed and they span around and laughed a lot yes absolutely no difference at all.

The final words in the quotation, ‘absolutely no difference at all’, make teachers’ negotiation of difference and sameness visible. This further highlights an ambivalence in the perception of diversity, as something positive while at the same time as something threatening the idea of equivalence, transforming it into similarity. Here, the removing of the hijab was expressed positively, first when the cloth ‘was released’ in a way that made the student ‘really look good’, revealing her beauty with the appearance of her chin. When then ‘the shawls went off’, the ‘long beautiful hair’ appeared. In the teacher’s narrative, the following positive outcome with joyful moving at full speed, climbing, spinning and laughing, appears as a result of the loosening of the clothes, particularly the hijabs. In another setting, this could have been a description of adult women starting to enjoy playing in a way usually expected of children, as could be expected in a pre-school teacher training setting, but in this case, it was presented as a result of the removing of clothes, with the hijabs highlighted.

Thus, the analysis of social practices made the negotiation of ‘otherness’ more visible. While these students were expected to bring something to the program, and later to the profession, that students positioned as Swedish were not expected to bring, their dressing with the hijab and ‘everything covered’ was something that was explicitly addressed by teachers, both in seminars and in interviews, as symbols of their otherness, in contrast with the students positioned as Swedish.

The ambivalence in attitudes in relation to diversity becomes more accentuated in the feeling of unease that the students in the S-group expressed at the beginning of the program as not being ‘regular’ students, as well as in teachers’ rejection of using perceptions of difference with reference to culture, thus positioning students in the S-group as similar to the others, making diversity both valued and invisible. Through the higher value that was given to (lacking) literacy skills than to oral performance in seminars and examinations, the students were referred to as lacking competence in Swedish.

Cycles of discourses

The analysis of discourses in place, historical bodies and interaction order/social practices reveals an ambivalence in attitudes in relation to diversity and in the positioning of the students as ‘other’. Due to their historical bodies, the students are expected to add value to the program, but at the same time, they are expected to perform like everyone else in the program, reproducing a discourse of diversity as a positive asset. In the
everyday practices in the program, the S-group are sometimes positioned as different but as our analysis shows, such positions are shifting over time and space. An ambivalence between, on the one hand, emphasizing difference and, on the other hand, sameness can be seen in relation to the visualization strategy (Åberg 2008). Although diversity in itself is perceived by the teachers as a positive value, the different experiences and skills of the students may not. Hence, the historical bodies of the students in the S-group are often given value only to illustrate differences in relation to a Swedish norm as the correct and desirable. So, while diversity is perceived as a potential resource, students are simultaneously positioned as deviant, lacking in language skills and with less valued experiences. This further highlights the ambivalence in the perception of diversity as something positive but also threatening the equivalence. In the social practices of the program where all students were expected to participate in similar ways, their physical appearance became a symbol for deviance, something to take off, while also being used to raise questions of discrimination and xenophobia. Still, being recruited as immigrants representing diversity and multilingualism with expectations to bring something to other students and to pre-school with ‘their outside perspective’, students in the S-group were simultaneously also expected to serve as pre-school teachers from a culturally neutral and objective position, transferring a (Swedish) cultural heritage including values, traditions and history from one (Swedish) generation to the next. As in Sjögren’s study (2005), students in the S-group here were expected to adapt to the Swedish ‘way of being’, and thus their lack in Swedish language skills as well as the experience of Swedish traditions positioned them as deviant. The analysis of historical bodies also revealed the association of the S-group with low performance, an immigrant background and low proficiency in Swedish, even though this also included other students and not all of the students in the S-group. As Stier noted (2003), ethnic diversity appears here as a focus on problems and inequalities despite a dominant discourse of diversity as positive.

To conclude, the study highlights that the positive values related to diversity were reproduced in the discourses in place, and that such diversity was embodied by the students in the S-group. However, the study also shows how other discourses in place such as being a good and hard-working student and a professional pre-school teacher deemphasized the diversity that the students in the S-group were expected to bring. While the students were presumed to contribute by embodying diversity, this was not followed by self-reflexivity on the part of the teachers as to what Swedish traditions means, which thus made it difficult to take advantage of the diversity that they brought. The program prepared them for working as pre-school teachers, a profession in which they were foremost expected to perform according to Swedish norms of childcare, something that was never challenged. Hence, their historical bodies became devalued through a reproduction of a discourse of Swedish childhood, childcare and pre-school as more advanced and its core values as a common good, something that was endorsed and reproduced by the students in the S-group themselves, particularly during the first year of the program.

Notes
1. According to the Education Act Chapter 7 §2, Chapter 8 §3–7 and Chapter 29 §2, children have the right to attend school and pre-school during the asylum process.
2. For ethical concerns, we have chosen not to include references to the municipality documents, in order not to reveal the identities of the students.
3. All translations are our own.
4. According to the municipality’s official webpage.
5. All interviews were carried out in Swedish and are here translated by the authors.
6. In regard to ethical considerations, in line with the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council, we have not included references to articles in the local media since this would reveal the identities of students and teachers.

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Notes on contributors

**Jenny Rosén** works as an assistant professor in Swedish as second language in the Department of Language Education, Stockholm University and at Dalarna University, Sweden. She has a PhD in Education from Örebro University, Sweden from 2013 and her dissertation was titled *Svenska för invandrarskap? Språk, kategorisering och identitet inom utbildningsformen Svenska för invandrare.* [Swedish for Immigrantness. Language, Categorization and Identity in the program Swedish for Immigrants]. Rosén has worked with teacher education in relation to multilingualism and diversity since 2006 and has been involved in and coordinated projects in cooperation with the Swedish National Agency for Education. Her current research focuses on translanguaging, identity and learning in different educational contexts. Her research interest is multilingualism, language and education policy, identity and diversity often working within a postcolonial and intersectional framework.

**Åsa Wedin** holds a PhD in bilingualism and is a Professor in Educational Work at Dalarna University, Sweden. Her main research interests lie in multilingual education and literacy. She has worked in teacher education for many years and her publications include books for teacher education as well as research articles in the field.
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