



# Research Perspectives on the Politics of Belonging in Early Years Education

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## Introduction

This special issue of the *International Journal of Early Childhood* addresses young children's belonging in educational settings. In democratic societies, it is a crucial value that every child has a right to experience belonging, to be valued equally and with respect, regardless of their background and individual needs. This value is most evident in policies that highlight inclusion as a principle in education (Armstrong et al., 2011; Slee, 2019). Because a growing number of children now attend institutional education in their early years, these educational settings play a crucial role in shaping children's opportunities for experiencing belonging. At their best, these educational settings provide all children with an inclusive and welcoming environment where everyone can experience ownership and be a part of the group and the community. Studies show that the experiences of belonging are important for children's agency, development, evolving identities, and their overall well-being (Guo & Dalli, 2016; Kustatscher, 2017; Over, 2016).

However, there is increasing concern about children's exclusion and marginalization in different parts of the world, as studies show that even the youngest children may confront rejection, discrimination, subjection, and bullying in educational settings and in society (e.g., Goryl et al., 2013; Jenkins et al., 2017; Juutinen, 2018; Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012). In an era of globalization and mobility, diversity is present in societies and questions about who belongs, and who does not, have become more important than ever in the history of humankind. Stuart Hall (1993) argued that people's capacity to live with difference is a key question for the twenty-first century.

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In the past few years, researchers have shown increasing interest in exploring belonging across diverse research areas, including psychology, education, human geography, social sciences, migration studies, and political sciences (Halse, 2018; Kustatcher, 2017; Over, 2016; Selby et al., 2018). In early childhood education, research on children's belonging increased in societies where belonging had become a key principle in curricula (Macartney, 2012; Peers & Fler, 2014; Selby et al., 2018; Sumsion & Wong, 2011). Guo and Dalli (2016) stated that nowadays belonging is a worldwide curricular goal in early childhood education.

Belonging, as a curricular goal, means that educators are required to commit to promote all children's belonging in a professional way. Yet, it seems that children's belonging tends to become adapted and taken-for-granted in the pressures of daily lives in educational settings (Halse, 2018). Research literature portrays various challenges in enacting the principles of belonging and inclusion, including educators' lack of appropriate knowledge and skills and challenges with resourcing, curricula, and policies (Adebayo & Ngewenya, 2015; Piskur et al., 2017). More research is needed to deepen understanding of children's belonging as a phenomenon to generate empirical knowledge about how children's belonging is shaped in different educational contexts. This special issue aims to promote discussion on children's belonging as a research area that has important implications for a wide range of individuals in the field of education: individual children and families, professional educators, as well as leaders and policy-makers at local, national, and global levels.

## The Multifaceted Concept of Belonging

As researchers across various research areas have explored belonging, they have framed the meanings of the concept in various ways based on their disciplinary interests. Some scholars note that belonging is a vaguely defined and under-theorized concept and there is a need to clarify the basis on which the concept is understood (Antonsich, 2010; Halse, 2018; Lähdesmäki et al., 2016; Peers & Fler, 2014; Wastell & Degotardi, 2017). It seems that belonging is a multidimensional concept that has been used when referring to a variety of issues at multiple levels (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016; Sumsion & Wong, 2011). Yuval-Davis (2011) articulates this multiplicity in the following way:

People can 'belong' in many different ways and to many different objects of attachment. These can vary from a particular person to the whole of humanity, in a concrete or abstract way, by self or other identification, in a stable, contested or transient way. (p. 12).

Lähdesmäki et al. (2016) point out that the diverse definitions and approaches to belonging "can be perceived as an interrelated network or rhizome in which various theoretical points of view, concepts, and discussions intertwine" (p. 236). When attempting to make sense of the conceptual multiplicity in the meaning of belonging, at least four different features though intertwining framings of belonging can be identified in the previous research literature.

First, psychology-oriented researchers especially have approached belonging as a *fundamental human need* that is universally present in human's life from the early years on (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Over, 2016). From this viewpoint, the need to belong is crucial for understanding children's development and social behavior in their early years.

Second, studies draw attention to belonging in terms of *individuals' sense of being connected* with other people and places. The social dimension of belonging—experiencing emotional attachment to other people and in membership of groups, collectivities, and communities—has been conceptualized as togetherness (Hännikäinen, 2007) and the sense of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Although this social dimension is at the very core of the studies of belonging, there is another branch of research that highlights individuals' connectedness with places, referred to as 'place-belonging' (Antonsich, 2010; Healy & Richardson, 2017; see also Kirova, 2016). Researchers in human geography and migration studies, especially, have framed the concept of belonging as an intimate feeling of 'being at home'. In these conceptualizations, home is a metaphor referring to spaces of familiarity, comfort, and security that generate an individual's sense of belonging (Antonsich, 2010; Lähdesmäki et al., 2016; May, 2013).

Third, belonging is approached as a *process* through which individuals are identified as belonging to particular social groups and differentiated from other social groups (May, 2013). These processes of identification and differentiation are closely connected with the concepts of identity, categorization, and bordering. Christensen (2009) argued that belonging is a strong marker of individual and collective identities which shows how distinctions are drawn between people, that is, how people are categorized, positioned, included, and excluded according to some feature, such as ethnicity, gender, age, or (dis)ability. The processes of belonging have also been described as bordering or boundary-maintenance, that is, drawing boundaries between who is inside and outside the groups or communities (see Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2011).

Finally, the processes of belonging take us to the fourth framing of this concept, namely, belonging as a *political* matter, which is also the position of the studies presented in this special issue. Many scholars remarked that belonging has a collective element. In order to belong, one has to be accepted by others in the community and in the society (Antonsich, 2010; May, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Yuval-Davis (2011) maintained that the politics of belonging "involves not only constructions of boundaries but also inclusion or exclusion of particular people, categories and groupings within these boundaries by those who have the power to do this" (p. 18).

The politics of belonging refer both to the politics at the macro-level of societies and how belonging operates at the micro-levels of individuals' lives. The politics of belonging bring to the fore questions concerning power, tensions, and negotiations that have inspired many authors contributing to this special issue.

## Research Project on the Politics of Belonging

The theme of this special issue is on the processes and structures for belonging in early years settings, drawing on research across different countries: Finland, Iceland, Norway and the USA. The aim is to advance knowledge about the politics of

belonging in different educational settings in the early years. The majority of the papers are part of an international research project supported by NordForsk: *Politics of belonging: Promoting children's inclusion in educational settings across borders* (2018–2021; no. 85644) that involved participants from Iceland, Finland, The Netherlands, Norway and Sweden.

The main research question of that project was: *How do the politics of belonging emerge in the intersection between the macro-level politics and the daily lives of educators, other professionals, children, and parents in different educational settings?*

Of importance for the studies presented in this special issue are the theoretical ideas related to the politics of belonging. Politics of belonging concern borders and the political work to identify who is inside or outside a community, who has the right to decide, and on what grounds someone is included or excluded (Yuval-Davies, 2011; see also Stratigos et al., 2014). Situated intersectionality is a central idea in such theory that identifies how varying ways of seeing the world is constructed in, and between, social structures and categories, individual emotions, and individual and collective value preferences. These aspects are intersectional, because they constitute and are constituted by each other and that one facet also cannot exist without the other.

Children participating in research studies across this project are between 3 and 8 years old, they represented gender groups, different ethnic backgrounds, and children with, and without, special needs and disabilities. The project collaborated closely with educators, other professionals, children, and parents in early education settings and primary schools. The objectives of the project were set at multiple levels: theoretical, conceptual, and empirical as well as on the levels of policies and educational practices. Within the framework of this NordForsk project, we approached belonging as a relational, multidimensional, contested, and power-loaded phenomenon constructed in the intersection between macro-level politics and humans' daily lives at the micro-level. We regard early years educational settings as communities where belonging is constructed and contested by educators, children, and parents. The construction of children's belonging takes place within particular political structures.

## Research Studies

In this special issue on: *Politics of belonging: Processes of participation, inclusion and social justice in early years educational settings*, the research studies focus on various topics—yet they are all connected to ‘belonging’ from various viewpoints: from the perspectives of children, educators and parents in early years settings but also from the viewpoints of educational policies. The studies are assembled around an interest in exploring conditions and tensions for belonging at the grass-root levels of children's, parents, and educators' daily lives. The theoretical frameworks adopted by the researchers are varied but also connected, as they apply to the conception of the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011), and the sense of belonging as an individual's emotional attachment to people and places (Antonsich, 2010).

A variety of methods was used to generate research material: analyses of policy documents, (video) observations, interviews, group discussions, narratives, photo-telling and photographs taken by children (Graham et al., 2006; Johansson & Røthle, 2018; Pálmadóttir et al., 2018; Puroila & Johansson, 2018a, 2018b). The research aims and methodology of the papers are briefly described below.

*Young children's belonging in Finnish educational settings: An intersectional analysis* is the title of a study by Anna-Maija Puroila, Jaana Juutinen, Elina Viljamaa, Riikka Sirkko, Taina Kyrönlampi and Marjatta Takala (University of Oulu). This study focuses on children's belonging in Finnish educational settings while exploring how children's belonging is shaped in the intersections between macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of young children's education. The study employs an intersectional approach (Carastathis, 2014; Hancock, 2007) to integrate and interpret various research material gathered in Finland: policy documents, group interviews with educators, parents' interviews, observations and video recordings, photographs taken by children, and discussions with children.

*Parental experiences of belonging within the preschool community* is a research article authored by Björn Rúnar Egilsson and Jóhanna Einarsdóttir, (University of Iceland) and Sue Dockett (Charles Sturt University). Through the lens of *Cartography of Belonging* (Sumsion & Wong, 2011), the authors explore parents' lived experiences of belonging and non-belonging in the context of their children's preschool in Iceland. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve parents of children from diverse backgrounds. The interviews focused on parents' experiences of their child's time at the preschool, relationships with peers, educators and other families and the forthcoming transition to primary school.

Sara M. Ólafsdóttir and Jóhanna Einarsdóttir (University of Iceland) investigate how children with diverse backgrounds experience of belonging in an Icelandic preschool. The article is called *Peer culture in an Icelandic preschool and the engagement of children with diverse cultural backgrounds*. Data were constructed with each child while they engaged in a walking tour of the preschool in which children took photographs of features of interest as a basis for subsequent conversations. Participant observations in preschool classrooms were also undertaken to understand in more detail the nature of children's relationships with each other.

How do children construct belonging in relation to a preprimary school setting? This is a question raised by Taina Kyrönlampi, Minna Uitto and Anna-Maija Puroila (University of Oulu). The title of their paper is *Peers, play and place: Children's belonging in a preprimary school setting*. The research material consists of photographs taken by children about their everyday lives in a Finnish pre-primary school. Subsequently, the children discussed their photographs in small groups with a researcher.

The research study implemented by Gunnar-Magnus Eidsvåg and Yngve Rosell, (University of Stavanger) is titled, *The power of belonging: Interactions and values in children's group play in early childhood programs*. The article uses a lifeworld hermeneutical approach to study children's belonging as a complex and sometimes ambiguous phenomenon. The authors explored belonging as social interaction and power and values were expressed in social interactions. Children were viewed as active agents with power to include or exclude; create space for each other; or set

boundaries. The data consisted of video observations, as well as interviews with children and teachers, in three early childhood education settings in Norway.

In the research study, *Troubling belonging: The racialized exclusion of young immigrants and migrants of Color*, Mariana Souto-Manning, Karina Malik, Jessica Martell and Patricia Pión (Columbia University) problematize the neutrality of the concept of belonging. These authors explore the politics of belonging through collectively revisiting their memories and experiences as immigrant children of Color in the USA. They employ ‘pláticas’ as method to prompt the sharing of memories, experiences, and stories imparting personal knowledge, familial practices, and cultural histories.

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