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Belonging and participation as portrayed in the curriculum guidelines of five European countries

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to explore how the belonging and participation, as well as its related concepts, are framed in the national curriculum guidelines of the Netherlands, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. We employed a scoping study with concept-mapping methodology. The results reveal macro level principles related to human rights and values, multiliteracy and language, policy measures and ideologies. Meso level principles stressed that education is supposed to guarantee a child's overall development and skills acquisition, participation involvement in the activities related to a child's environment and cultural heritage. The micro level principles were indicative of the need for inclusive and accessible physical and social environments, along with teaching methods which foster positive attitudes about diversity and teachers' expertise levels to address diversity. We also found the importance of designing opportunities that encourage socializing, building relationships, and belongingness. Additionally, the results show how frequently the chosen key concepts are represented in the guidelines. Based on our study we can conclude that curriculum guidelines do not provide sufficent frameworks for promoting children's belonging and participation. Further exploration on those concepts is needed, along with increased scholarly attention within the spheres of ECEC and compulsory education practice to enable inclusion for all children.

KEYWORDS

Belonging; participation; ECEC; compulsory curriculum guidelines analysis; Europe

Introduction

The member states of the European Union have devoted a great amount of interest to their educational policy and recognized it as 'the foundations for improved competences of future EU citizens' (European Commision, 2014). The aim of this cross-cultural study is to explore how the belonging and participation, as well as its related concepts, are framed within the national policy documents—namely curriculum guidelines (also called curriculum frameworks)—of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and/or compulsory education in the context of five European countries: the Netherlands, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. Rather than a comparison between these curricula, we aim to scope how these concepts are presented in curriculum guidelines. Policy is a key term in this paper. As yet, there is no clear consensus on how to define policy. Definitions and conceptualizations of policy are drawn from different disciplines including education, anthropology, sociology, and political science. Policy is a summarized set of principles

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that has been authorized to establish broader parameters of action (Tahir, 2007). Policy can be seen as a static written text with a history of negotiation and compromise (Bell & Stevenson, 2006; Taylor et al., 1997). Conversely, other authors (e.g. Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) consider policy as a (dynamic) process, which involves both the production and implementation of the policy text. In this study we analyse and interpret curriculum guidelines as static written text following the definition of Ozga (2000, p. 33) saying that a policy text is a 'vehicle or medium for carrying and transmitting a policy message'. In this study we take a closer look into policy texts of five different countries with an understanding that globalization has an impact on national education policies. Some scholars of global education policy argued that globalization processes have set the stage for new types of power on national educational systems, creating new and more globalized education policy discourses and a more formalized global policy architecture (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). There is an increase of cross-national educational policy borrowing (Mundy et al., 2016). The neo-liberal approaches, for example, that emerged in Anglo-American states were rapidly picked up around the world and became the vernacular for the global policy including international comparison of the educational performance as widely accepted view of educational success (Mundy et al., 2016).

This study explores belonging and participation in ECEC and compulsory curriculum guidelines in order to gain new knowledge that will contribute to inclusive education. An international perspective should be approached with careful consideration as meanings could differ in cultures (Lingard & Gale, 2010). This study is part of a larger NordForsk funded research project under the thematic programme 'Education for Tomorrow. The title of the research project is 'Politics of belonging: Promoting children's inclusion in educational settings across borders (nr. 85,644)'. The project aims to advance knowledge on how children's belonging is constructed in the intersection between micro- and macro-level politics in different educational settings (across involved countries).

The role of curriculum, and a description of the education systems in the five countries

While there are many similarities across Europe in relation to the design and implementation of ECEC and/or compulsory education curricula, the cultural values and wider understanding of childhood differ between each country, region, and programme (DG Education and Culture, 2014). The increase of global cross-national cooperation in education has both encouraged and enabled educational theorists and practitioners to look 'over' the borders of their nations in order to exchange and transfer ideas for educational improvement (UNESCO, 2015). The literature (Autio, 2017; Tahirsylaj et al., 2016) shows two cross-national influential curriculum traditions: the German-based Bildung/Didaktik theory and the Anglo-American-based curriculum theory. The Anglo-American curriculum-thinking started from administrative needs; the goal was to have an effective, functioning system, which could solve practical problems with little interest to understand and see the intellectual, systematic and complicated nature of curricula (Autio, 2019). The Bildung/Didaktik theory is a teacher—rather than a system-centred—theory. In more recent literature, it has also been termed the German-Nordic Didaktik tradition (Autio, 2019; Bladh et al., 2018). It celebrates the individuality of teachers as active and reflective curriculum designers, as well as decision-makers, rather than as implementers of a workplace manual (or curriculum) of best practices (Westbury, 2000). This tradition can also be seen as resistance to, or refutation of, American industrialism, capitalism, and commercial values (Autio, 2017). The curriculum-tradition led to a standardized educational policy (Rizvi & Lingard, 2006), which has been shifting its focus to be more cognitivist- and constructivist-oriented. Within this tradition, the teacher's role is that of an invisible agent of the system (Westbury, 2000).

A curriculum is an important instrument for shared understanding and trust between children, staff, and parents. It is typically designed to facilitate learning and development so as to guide the work of ECEC and/or compulsory education at a national and local level (DG Education and Culture,

2014). For example, an explicit curriculum which provides clear purposes, goals, and approaches for the education and care of young children can significantly support the role of practitioners in creating effective learning environments (Oberhumer, 2005; Rayna & Laevers, 2011). A flexible curriculum, however, can also be desirable for educators in that it allows for greater autonomy in planning for children's learning (MacNaughton, 2003). It is important for educational institutes to adopt a 'framework approach' when designing and developing their curriculum on the institutional level based on national curriculum guidelines (UNESCO, 2017).

Four of the five countries studied are Nordic, and share similar educational systems; the so-called Nordic model of education grounded in the Didaktik tradition (Autio, 2013a, 2013b; Wermeke & Prøitz, 2019). This model used to refer to several educational similarities in the Nordic countries during the second half of the 20th century (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden). These shared principles include reforms aimed at furthering social justice, equality, and cohesion (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Lundahl et al., 2018). The education provided is of high and equal quality, regardless of the children's resources, origin, or location. However, the rise of neo-liberal politics—with its extensive marketization and privatization practices—in Nordic countries, and particularly within the Swedish education system, has raised serious doubts over the survival of the Nordic model (Lundahl, 2016). Educational development in other countries, such as the Netherlands, has followed the more Anglo-American-based curriculum theory or a mix of both. All of the participating countries (except the Netherlands) have a separate curriculum guideline for their ECEC, and the starting and ending ages vary by country. ECEC is voluntary in all five countries. The starting age for compulsory primary education varies between four and six.

Until the age of four, young children in the Netherlands can attend a variety of non-compulsory ECEC options (e.g. nursery schools, playgroups or childminding). While schooling is only compulsory in the Netherlands from the age of 5, over 99% children begin their education at the age of 4 (CBS, 2019; EACEA, 2012). Compulsory education is based on national curriculum guidelines. The overwhelming majority of primary schools are state-run, with only a handful of private schools existing in the Netherlands.

In Sweden, children between the ages of one to six can attend ECEC. Children must begin a compulsory preschool class the year they turn six. Comprehensive school is compulsory for all children from the autumn they turn 7 until the age of 16. Preschool classes, school, and recreation centres have a common curriculum. Sweden has several private ECEC centres and schools.

In Iceland, as in Sweden, children between the ages of one to six can attend ECEC and begin compulsory school the year they turn six. Compulsory school lasts for 10 years (i.e. children finish at the age of 16). 16% of Icelandic ECEC centres are private (Statistics Iceland, 2019). All schools must work according to the national curriculum guidelines, regardless of their public or private status.

In Norway, children are entitled to a place in ECEC centres when they turn one year of age. All licenced ECEC institutions are legally obliged to follow the 'Framework plan for kindergartens'. 53% of Norwegian ECEC centres are private. Compulsory school, (of which 4% are private), runs from between the ages of 6–16. The national curriculum includes the core curriculum for primary and lower secondary, upper secondary, and adult education.

In Finland, children between the age of one to six can attend ECEC programmes. Children attend compulsory preschool at the age of six. They start school at age 7 and end at 16. All three systems, (ECEC, preschool, and school) have their own curriculum. Finland has almost no private schools, but many private ECEC centres.

Theoretical perspectives on belonging and participation

Conceptually, 'belonging' concerns social locations, identifications, and emotional attachments, as well as feeling safe and 'at home' (Yuval-Davis, 2011). To be able to feel at home in an unfamiliar environment (place) is not just a personal matter, but also a social one. This means that one's personal, intimate feeling of belonging to a place should always be joined to discourses and

practices of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion; belonging cannot be an isolated and individual affair (Antonsich, 2010). This is where the 'politics of belonging' enters the scene. Politics of belonging focuses on how belonging operates in society, and how it is influenced by political and societal powers, ideologies, norms, values, restrictions, and regulations either in society as a whole and/ or in specific contexts (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Values and ideologies are changeable, meaning that the boundaries between groups and individuals are often created and maintained (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Thus, belonging is more than an individual feeling; it is also a political issue with collective consequences. There is a political struggle to promote a specific position in the construction of the collective, as well as boundaries between 'us' and 'them' within it. This means that boundaries operate at the intersection of politics of belonging and belonging (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). This study focuses on how national curriculum guidelines describe belonging, participation and its related concepts. It means to investigate which values and ideologies (politics of belonging) the political macro-level seeks to transfer to the institutional level and daily practice.

Education (both ECEC and/or the compulsory variety) is contextualized and has the social function to secure a child's development through their participation in the group to which they belong (Bitterberg, 2013). The human and the environment are thus inextricably linked and cannot be viewed separately (Taylor, 2013; Weldemariam et al., 2017). The possibility for children to experience belonging is therefore conditioned by simply being present in the context (attending), as well as having the personal abilities necessary to be involved in activities. Attendance and involvement can also be described as participation (Imms et al., 2016; Piškur et al., 2014; WHO, 2001). Children's participation and belonging are interdependent; involvement develops through relationships with others and provides feedback that influences future engagement (Hitch et al., 2014; Imms et al., 2016; Wilcock, 2007). To conclude, in our context, children's possibilities to participate in education activities and occupations (play, dressing, school tasks, sports, studying) depends on how the politics of belonging operates in the specific setting and in its extension. It is therefore a political question emanated from overall political agendas.

One of the important features of ECEC and/or compulsory education curricula is a strong focus on communication, interaction, language, and dialogue as key factors that sustain children's learning through meaning-making and belonging (European Commision, 2014; Peers, 2020). Previous work of our Nordic research group has stressed the importance of the value system in education. For example, Einarsdottir et al. (2015) showed that policies guide actors within ECEC to provide young children with a democratic environment that facilitates both learning and caring. However, the value fields of democracy, caring, and competence comprise multiple dimensions and meanings, such as a) 'democracy' as being and/or becoming; b) 'care' as the fulfilment of basic needs and ethical relationships; and c) 'competence values' as learning for sociality and academic skills. Researching values education in Sweden, Emilson and Johansson (2009) reported that preschool children typically encounter caring, democratic, and disciplinary values. Furthermore, the literature (Bakken et al., 2017) indicates that participation attendance seems to be influenced by the opportunities offered in the classroom environment, where children could experience a sense of belonging and trust, and develop social interaction skills. Further research (Tillet & Wong, 2018) has demonstrated that educators have a strong sense of social, emotional, spatial, and temporal dimensions of belonging, but lower levels of understanding regarding cultural or political dimensions. Moreover, as noted in an Australian study, belonging is not easy to implement, observe or empirically demonstrate (Selby et al., 2018) in ECEC. One way to conceptualize and study it, would be to look at participation. All the curricula emphasized sociocultural, human development approaches. A study focusing on qualified ECEC educators (Tillet & Wong, 2018) described them as having strong senses of several dimensions of belonging but showed that educators had a less comprehensive understanding on cultural or political dimensions. Belonging was considered a key concept in the development of the Australian ECEC national curriculum that ties belonging to language as a means of redefining ECEC approaches (Peers, 2020).

There is widespread agreement on the significant contribution that senses of belonging and participation have towards the learning and development of young children. However, little is known regarding how national curriculum guidelines inform and facilitate educators to create rich learning environments that welcome diversity, develop a sense of belong, help build social relationships, and offer opportunities for children's participation in educational activities and play.

Material and methods

We used a scoping study methodology (Arksey & O´Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010) to 'map' relevant key concepts in the curriculum guidelines for ECEC and compulsory education from the participating countries in relation to politics of belonging, and belonging with its related concepts, from these curricula. While many types of scoping studies exist in the literature (Anderson et al., 2008; Colquhoun et al., 2014; Pham et al., 2014), we opted for 'concept mapping' in this study. Concept maps were introduced by Novak and Cañas (2006) to activate or elaborate (prior) knowledge in education, though has been used also widely in research (often in scoping studies). There is a variety of concept map characteristics. In this scoping study a semantic sophistication was used as a guiding characteristic for exploring concepts used in curriculum guidelines as described by De Ries et al. (2021). To identify and select appropriate curriculum guidelines in the present study, we followed a five-stage framework process proposed by Arksey and O´Malley (2005). We describe the five steps below:

Step 1, identify the research question: The overall research question was: How do national policy documents (curriculum guidelines) of ECEC and compulsory education frame belonging and participation, and the related concepts of belonging, in the participating countries?

Sub-questions:

- How often are concepts and morphological variants related to belonging mentioned in different national curriculum guidelines?
- How do national curriculum guidelines describe belonging and participation, as well as its related concepts?

Step 2, identify relevant documents: Researchers from all five countries conducted an orientation search to identify potential curriculum guidelines that fulfil the following inclusion criteria: a) targets ECEC and/or compulsory education for children up to the age of eight; b) serves for curriculum design; and c) is published in the English language.

Step 3, select documents: We compiled and discussed an overview of the identified documents in a debriefing session; first on the national level (each co-author with a national team) and then in the international expert-research team of six co-authors. The inclusion criteria for the final selection was that the documents must have been considered to have embraced relevant concepts (belonging with its related concepts). Table 1 lists all of the included curriculum guidelines from the participating countries.

Curriculum guidelines of ECEC and compulsory education included in the analysis

Step 4, chart the data from documents and development of analytical framework: Before starting the charting process, the expert-research team identified the core concepts around belonging. The starting point was Yuval-Davis's theory of belonging and the politics thereof. However, the first orientation screening showed that belonging as a concept is mentioned sparingly in curriculum guidelines across the countries (see also the results section). The expert-research team organized four online debriefing sessions and identified eighteen concepts with their morphological variants. These were: belonging, community, culture, disability, diversity, environment, equality, ethics, family, inclusion, participation, peer, relationship, right, safety, support, value, and well-being.

Table 1. Curriculum guidelines of ECEC and compulsory education included in the analysis.

Country & Code	Document title	Type of education
Finland (FI-1)	National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (2017)	ECEC 0–6 years
Finland (FI-2)	National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014 (2016)	Compulsory 7–16 years
Iceland (IC-1)	The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools (2011)	ECEC 1–6 years
Iceland (IC-2)	The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools (2014)	Compulsory 6–16 years
The Netherlands (NL-1)	Inclusive education in the Netherlands (2008)	Compulsory 4–12 years
The Netherlands (NL-2)	The Education System in the Netherlands (2005)	Compulsory 4–12 years
Norway (NO-1)	Framework Plan for Kindergartens—content and tasks (2017)	ECEC 1–5 years
Norway (NO-2)	Core Curriculum for Primary, Secondary and Adult Education in Norway (1993)	Compulsory 6–16 years
Sweden (SW-1)	Curriculum for the Preschool Lpfö –98 (revised 2010) (1998)	ECEC 1–5 years
Sweden (SW-2)	Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and the recreation centre (2011)	Compulsory 6–16 years

We used a sequential explanatory mixed method approach to develop the analysis protocol (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011); with first quantitative analysis followed by qualitative analysis. In the literature on mixed methods research, a sequence refers to a temporal relationship between qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and/or analysis (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016). In this scoping review study, the sequence of the analysis consisted of two phases; the results of phase one (the quantitative analysis) informed and navigate the synthesis of a subsequent phase two (qualitative analysis). In different stages of this scoping study, we applied a back-and-forth strategy between early results and new insights. The quantitative word analysis was conducted using KNIME Text Processing Extension (Tursi & Silipo, 2019). Based on the results (see below), the expert-research team compressed (by exploring the results of the quantitative analysis) the eighteen concepts to nine during three further debriefing sessions, thereby excluding those not so tightly connected to the theory of belonging and/or participation, namely culture, disability, environment, ethics, family, peer, right, safety, and well-being. Our qualitative analysis used a theory-based direct content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Schreier, 2012). Based on the literature, we first outlined a definition of each concept (belonging, community, diversity, equality, inclusion, participation, relationship, support, and value).

Step 5, collate, summarize and report the results: This phase represents a second analysis round, using both a quantitative and qualitative approach. The quantitative analysis contained word frequency analysis (identification of morphological variants for the key concepts and calculation of the relative frequencies for key concepts in all documents), as well as a comparison between the relative frequencies of content words in all documents (see Table 2). The qualitative analysis used a three-step content analysis abductive discovery approach: mnemonics (familiarization and immersion in the data), defamiliarization (creating a productive distance between the researcher and the data), and revisiting observations (combining theoretical and data-based coding) (Padgett, 2016; Reichhertz, 2010; Schreier, 2012; Želinský, 2019). The defamiliarization stage provided us with important content insights in all nine concepts. Based on this stage, we deemed it worth further analysing the two concepts (i.e. belonging and participation)—which had the most related purpose and meaning for this study—in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how these concepts are described in the curriculum, as well as their connection to the politics of belonging.

Table 2. Frequencies of nine concepts and morphological variants, including amount of content words.

Concept and morphological variants	FI-1	FI-2	IC-1	IC-2	NL-1	NL-2	NO-1	NO-2	SW-1	SW-2
$N_{content\ words}$	12,129	12,8748	7,819	14,708	10,318	37,707	5,129	6,279	2,269	50,491
Belonging (belong, belongs, belongingness)	(3)	(10)	(3)	(13)	(0)	(4)	(6)	(0)	(1)	(2)
	0,2	0,1	0,4	0,9	0	0,1	1,2	0	0,4	0,0
*Community (*communities)	(52)	(437)	(6)	(5)	(14)	(0)	(27)	(24)	(1)	(16)
	4,3	3,4	2,2	2,0	1,5	0,2	5,3	3,7	0,4	0,3
Diversity	(15)	(252)	(6)	(5)	(14)	(0)	(19)	(5)	(2)	(7)
	1,2	2,0	0,8	0,3	1,4	0	3,7	0,8	0,9	0,1
Equality (equal, equals)	(12)	(65)	(27)	(29)	(2)	(5)	(10)	(8)	(2)	(25)
	1,0	0,5	3,5	2,0	0,2	0,1	1,9	1,2	0,9	0,5
Inclusion (inclusive)	(3)	(2)	(1)	(9)	(44)	(0)	(4)	(0)	(0)	(0)
	0,2	0	0,1	0,6	4,3	0	0,8	0	0	0
Participation (participating, participate, participated, participatory)	(51)	(305)	(18)	(37)	(55)	(61)	(50)	(12)	(15)	(41)
	4,2	2,4	2,3	2,5	5,3	1,6	9,7	1,9	6,6	0,8
Relationship (relationships)	(19)	(135)	(2)	(2)	(3)	(8)	(12)	(6)	(2)	(244)
	1,6	1,0	0,3	0,1	0,3	0,2	2,3	0,9	0,9	4,8
Support (supports, supported, supporting, supportive)	(180)	(1438)	(18)	(37)	(58)	(80)	(31)	(2)	(17)	(23)
	14,8	11,2	2,3	2,5	5,6	2,1	6,0	0,3	7,5	0,5
Value (values)	(30)	(174)	(27)	(23)	(1)	(5)	(39)	(22)	(21)	(98)
	2,5	1,4	3,5	1,6	0,1	0,1	7,6	3,4	9,3	1,9

Absolute frequencies are placed within the parentheses and relative frequencies (*1,000) below same.

Results

This study provides results drawn from the quantitative (section 1) and qualitative analyses (section 2).

The descriptive results of identified concepts and morphological variants—section 1

We analysed nine concepts (belonging and eight related concepts) and morphological variants—the absolute and relative frequency distributions of which can be seen in Table 2. The top row of Table 2 shows the total amount of words in each curriculum guideline, while the left column displays the nine key concepts (and their morphological variants). The absolute frequency of each concept is shown in parentheses, under which the relative frequency is displayed. The size of the curriculum guidelines differs among the participating countries, from 2,269 to 128,748 words. Consequently, we can consider the relative frequencies to be important.

Frequencies of nine concepts and morphological variants, including amount of content words

The quantitative analysis shows that use of the nine concepts differs between the five curriculum guidelines. The concept 'belonging' is an uncommon word in most of the documents, with a relative frequency of between 0 (NL-1, NO-2) and 1,2 (NO-1). 'Participation' had a higher relative frequency—9,7 (NO-1), 6,6 (SW-1) and 5,3 (NL-1). Interestingly, 'participation' and 'support' are two concepts that occurred throughout all the analysed curriculum guidelines with a high relative frequency. We can also see that 'inclusion' is seldom used in the curricula except in the Netherlands (NL-1); likewise with 'equality' or 'diversity'. When viewing the relative frequencies of each country separately, both Finnish curriculum guidelines (FI-1 and FI-2) mention 'support' and 'community' more often than the other concepts. Iceland's IC-1 mentions 'equality' and 'value' the most frequently, while these concepts are 'participation' and 'support' in IC-2. In the Dutch curriculum guidelines, 'support' and 'participation' had the highest relative frequency (NL-2), followed by 'inclusion' (NL-1). The most frequent concepts in Norwegian curriculum guidelines were 'participation' (NO-1) and 'community' (NO-2). In the Swedish curriculum guidelines the concept 'value' (SW-1) and 'relationship' (SW-2) were the most mentioned. Further exploration using word clouds showed that 'participation' and

'belonging' are very frequently found in the same text fragment with one of the other seven concepts. It was worth noting that, as a concept, 'participation' has been translated in all five languages. However, the concept of 'belonging' seems to be difficult to translate into Icelandic or Finnish because there is not one word that accurately encapsulates its meaning. In Dutch, 'belonging' is translated as *'erbij horen'*, which could also be considered an imperfect translation. 'Support' is typically unrelated to belonging as Yuval-Davis (2006, 2011) describes it, but is used instead as a word that assists other meanings (e.g. schools can support new teachers). In order to gain a deeper understanding, we delved into curriculum guidelines texts and conducted a content analysis of the description of 'participation' and 'belonging'.

The thematic results of belonging and participation in the curricula—section 2

The results of the qualitative content analysis (see the summary in Table 3) revealed three main categories representing the different societal levels described in all curricula: a) guiding principles; b) educational programme principles; and c) teaching practice principles.

Summary of the qualitative analysis results

The first main category, 'guiding principles' indicates how early childhood education and care and/or compulsory education assure 'participation' (attendance and involvement) or 'belonging' from a macro-level perspective.

Guiding principles that guarantee 'participation' (in terms of attendance and/or involvement) are the inclusion of values and rights within the curriculum guidelines of all countries. Equality, democracy, cooperation, solidarity, responsibility, forgiveness, respect, and education for all are the values and rights seen as a necessary foundation for children to become independent, autonomous, active, and responsible participants in a democratic society (FI-1 p.60; FI2, p.13, p.24; IC-1-p.5/1; IC-1 p. 41/III; NO-1, p. 9, p.27, p.47, p.56; NL-1 p. 28). Additionally, the Christian heritage of Icelandic culture is addressed (IC-1, p.30/III) as one of the necessary human values in education. A child's language skills are an important prerequisite for participation and inclusion in society (NO-1, p. 9; FI-2, p.15; NL-1, p. 46), as is multiliteracy, including Sign language (FI-1 p.55; FI-1 p.46; FI-2 p.13; FI-1 p. 27). The guidelines refer to important educational bodies, structures (e.g. educational councils and student associations), policy measures and laws (e.g. 'Participation and democratic action', the 'UN Convention on the Rights of the Child—Articles 12 and 104'),which regulate educational systems,

Table 3. Summary of the qualitative analysis results.

Main category	Chosen Framework	Sub-categories
Guiding principles	*Participation as attendance and as involvement is guaranteed by:*	Human rights and values (equality, democracy, cooperation, solidarity, responsibility, forgiveness, respect, and education for all). Language and multiliteracy. Policy measures and laws. Educational bodies and structures.
	Belonging is supported by:	Relational ideologies, respect for diversity, social awareness, and civil consciousness.
Educational programme principles	*Participation as attendance and as involvement is strengthened by:*	Assuring a child's overall development & skills acquisition (ADL, language, technology skills, and indoor and outdoor play). Understanding cultural heritage. Offering multidisciplinary guidance. Enabling joint decision-making between schools, parents, and children.
	Belonging is enabled by:	Shared rules, and fair and respectful attitudes towards peers and adults. Interactive dialogue to explore diverse social and cultural circumstances.
Teaching practice principles	*Participation as attendance and as involvement is fostered by:*	Inclusive and accessible physical and social environments. Teaching methods that foster positive attitudes about diversity, equity, and equality, and utilize teachers expertise to tackle the needs of culturally diverse classrooms.
	Belonging is made possible by:	Designing opportunities that encourage socializing, building relationships, and belongingness.

enhance inclusive education, and lay a foundation for children to become active and participating citizens in a modern society (FI-1 p.28/ FI-2 p.13; NL-1 p.5; NO-1, P27; IC-1 p.27/I). The guidelines (FI-2, p.69; ICE-2, p.41; NO-1, p. 40; SW-2, p.12–17) stressed the education system's responsibility to promote participation by offering special support for children when needed. Measures and criteria (e.g. children with visual impairment) that require special education programmes have also been described (NL-1, p. 25).

As mentioned above, mentions of 'belonging' are rare in ECEC and compulsory curriculum guidelines. The guiding principles which do promote 'belonging' refer to relational ideologies, such as encouraging democratic relations in everyday activities (e.g. play), and the notion that each child should have the opportunity to form their own opinions and make their own choices in light of their personal circumstances (SW-1 p.4, p.12; NO-1, p.7–8, p.23, p. 48). The Norwegian guideline (NO-1, p.7, p.23, p. 48) described every child's need for belongingness. Icelandic guidelines (IC-1 p. 41/III, p.68/III, p.35/II, p.42/III) specify the need for an inclusive school spirit, respect for diversity, social awareness, and civil consciousness as important relationship bases from which to eliminate forms of discrimination and disintegration.

The second main category, 'educational programme principles', explains how ECEC and/or compulsory education assure 'participation' (in terms of attendance and involvement) or 'belonging' from a meso level perspective.

These principles consider a child's overall development (IC-1 p.46–47/II, p.23/I, p.5/I) and skills acquisition (e.g. in ADL (FI-2 p. 77)) in information and communication technology (FI-1 p. 13), in mastering a child's own sense of responsibility (e.g. through planning group work at school (FI-2 p. 35)) and involvement in indoor and outdoor play (IC-1 p.46–47/II). A multidisciplinary education approach that links different fields of knowledge is seen as an optimal method for allowing children to successfully participate within education. Furthermore, the ECEC community and compulsory schools must foster an acquaintance with, and appreciation for, cultural heritage through artistic activities and other forms of expression, which also in turn benefits future employment and further studies (IC-1 p.32/III, p.17/I, p.35/II; FI-1 p.27; NO-1, p. 55). ECEC should be a democratic learning community where teachers, parents/guardians, and children are all active participants in decision-making processes and in the guaranteeing of educational quality (NL-1 p.28; IC-1 p.33/II; p.27/I, p.49/II SW-1 p. 15). All stakeholders ought to actively participate in regularly planning and assessing ECEC activities (IC-1 p.31/III, p.68/III; NO-1, p.21, p. 27, p. 37). The heads of ECEC should be tasked with ensuring that parents/guardians receive opportunities to participate and influence how goals can be most effectively achieved in pedagogical planning (SW-1 p. 13). Interestingly, a Finnish compulsory guideline (FI-2, p. 28) states that student association activities offer an important channel for the participation of children in decision-making.

Educational programme principals in curriculum guidelines define 'belonging' in education as a set of inter-linking attitudes. Finnish guidelines for compulsory education (FI-2 p. 35) state that children need to develop compliance with the shared rules, and behave in a fair and respectful manner towards both peers and adults. Furthermore, ensuring the equal participation of all members of the school community is one of the basic principles for developing open and interactive dialogue (FI-2 p.26; FI-1 p.53; NO-1 p.8–9, p. 24–25). In so doing, are more effectively able to interact, build relationships, and create meaning, as well as to develop their identity and awareness of their own history (e.g. Sami children shall be able to contribute and participate in their own language). Educational programmes need to provide the youth with the opportunities to explore diverse social and cultural circumstances, and exercise being critical and creative (IC-1 p.5/I).

Third main theme is 'teaching practice principles', which explains how ECEC and/or compulsory education guarantee participation, attendance, and/or involvement in activities (or, 'belonging') in a micro level context.

Teaching practice principles underline how teaching methods, in combination with physical and social environments, reinforce children's participation. Social environments that stimulate a democratic and collaborative atmosphere enable children's active involvement in both education

and society at large (IC-1 p.46/III, p.5/I). These principles recommend that physical environments should be designed in such a way that toys and equipment are accessible for all children (NO-3, p.19; NO-1, p. 19), meaning that all can experience the joy of playing, and are able to observe, analyse, and support each other while doing so (NO-1, p. 20). Physical environments must be physically accessible, as well as suitable for using information and communication technology (FI-2, p. 29). Practice principles strongly advise a sense of shared responsibility in creating learning environments so as to support the active participation of both teachers and children (FI-2 p. 16). ECEC and/or compulsory education must respect diversity that allows all children to use different forms of expression, and enable their participation in ways suited to their age, level of experience, individual circumstances, and needs (NO-1, p. 27, p. 40). ECEC and/or compulsory teachers are responsible for applying democratic teaching and working methods, which should include elements of ethics, social competence (IC-1, p.46/III; SW-1 p. 8), and religious and cultural respect (NO-1, p. 55). It is therefore vital that teaching staff reflect their own attitudes in order to most effectively convey and promote equity and equality (NO-1, p. 10). Furthermore, any experience or knowledge gaps regarding how to strengthen positive intercultural relationships between pupils should be acknowledged and ameliorated in a timely fashion (NL-1, p.56; SW-1, p. 15).

Teaching practice principles in curriculum guidelines portray 'belonging' in education by designing opportunities that encourage socializing and relationship building. Every child must have the same opportunities to be seen, heard, and encouraged to participate in all shared activities, as well as to converse and feel a sense of togetherness (NO-1, p.40; FI-2, p.20, p. 30; NO-1, p. 50–51). As communities often contain minority languages (FI-2, p. 91), bilingual ECEC and/or compulsory education activities can stimulate sense of belonging and inclusion (e.g. giving instructions in more than one language) (FI-2, p. 33). It is for ECEC to ensure that each child develops the ability to understand and feel confident with the world around them (NO-1, p. 21), and to act in accordance with democratic principles (SW-1 p. 12).

Discussion

This cross-cultural study has explored how the belonging and participation, as well as its related concepts, are framed in curriculum guidelines in the context of five European countries. Additionally, this study identified nine key concepts (and morphological variants) that relate to belonging.

Our results reveal several important principles (macro, meso, and micro principles) relevant for ECEC and compulsory education. **Macro level** curriculum guidelines chiefly relate to different human rights and values, policy measures, ideologies, and conditions that enable participation. Guiding principles particularly show that relational ideologies, respect for diversity, social awareness, and civil consciousness all support belonging. **Meso level** principles stress that education is supposed to guarantee a child's overall development, skills acquisition, involvement in environmental and cultural heritage activities (both indoor and outdoor), offer multidisciplinary guidance for participation attendance and involvement, and provide measures for meaningful collaboration and joint decision-making with all education stakeholders. Culture for open, interactive dialogue, shared rules, respectful attitudes towards peers and adults, and opportunities to explore diverse social and cultural circumstances seem to be key educational principles that ensure belonging. **Micro level** principles indicate the need for inclusive and accessible physical and social environments, teaching methods that foster positive attitudes about diversity, and capitalize on teachers' expertise to successfully manage everyone's needs to participate. Designing opportunities that encourage socializing, relationship building, and belongingness are vital principles which ought to be considered and applied when proposing teaching activities for belonging. Furthermore, acknowledging the diversity of languages, and reflecting on positive attitudes towards equity and equality, also appear as enabling principles of teaching practices for belonging. Additionally, the results reveal how frequently the chosen key concepts are represented in the curricula.

Belonging can be seen as a core value and a universal human need. From infancy, humans tend to create relationships and a sense of belonging with other people, groups, cultures, places, and material objects (May, 2013; Stratigos et al., 2014). Our results show that the word 'belonging' is used somewhat infrequently in curriculum guidelines—indeed, the concept does not exist in some countries or it is difficult to translate in other languages. One could question whether this concept is understood and interpreted in the same manner—as described by Yuval-Davis (2011)—across the five participating countries. On the other hand, our results show that the three levels of politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011) could be grasped in the curriculum guidelines of these same five countries. The curriculum guidelines detail different groups—whose identity is constructed in co-operative situations in ECEC and compulsory education—and minority languages users (e.g. Sami children or Sign language users). Moreover, they stress the importance of engaging play in various relations which, as Yuval-Davis (2011) describes, aids with identification, categorization, and the level of emotional attachment. The results also included the ethical and political value of respecting children, in appreciating cultural heritage, and in raising young people to be active members of a democratic society. The Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2008) is convinced that intercultural dialogue may help with appreciating diversity while sustaining social cohesion. Furthermore, the council stressed that intercultural dialogue cannot be prescribed by law, but instead must retain its character as an open invitation to the ongoing debate in society (Council of Europe, 2008).

Within the nine concepts related to belonging, the most chosen and frequently mentioned was 'participation'. Participation is a necessary precondition for experiencing belonging. If a child cannot attend educational activities due to language or disability barriers, or because of any other exclusion-causing aspect, they would be unable to experience involvement and build relationships. Attendance and involvement relate to the objective (being present) and the more subjective (in-the-moment) experience of participation (Imms, et al., 2016). Participation is considered a central task of teaching (Dunphy, 2012). According to Morningstar et al. (2015), the teacher must manage both the learning and participation of pupils. Participation has many dimensions and meanings (Piškur et al., 2014). For instance, it can also be seen as a means with which to understand the power relations between the educational system and the everyday lives of children. Our results stress the importance of shared decision-making, and the involvement of children and parents in a democratic dialogue.

Although inclusion is often viewed as one of the key guiding educational principles (Hausstätter, 2014; Nilholm & Göransson, 2017; Onderwijsraad, 2020; Takala et al., 2012), the word itself was seldom used in the studied curriculum guidelines—it was mostly found in the Dutch guidelines. The compulsory Finnish curriculum guidelines most often used the word 'support' which, in the literature, usually refers to early intervention (Pulkkinen & Jahnukainen, 2016).

While our research was not designed as a comparative study, we noticed some context specific novel aspects in our findings. For example, in Finland the education guiding principles are designed with reference to the future, focusing on raising children to become active citizens of a democratic society. Other countries (e.g. Norway), however focused more on the present, as in how to promote the well-being of the child within everyday education. Another interesting finding was that certain curriculum guidelines (e.g. Finnish and Norwegian) stressed multilingualism as an important aspect for enabling belonging and participation. This might be an influence of the Nordic model of education (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006). The regular use of different languages, and exposure to multicultural settings, encourages the development of a personal identity as a multilingual and multicultural individual, while concurrently emphasizing the positive attributes of otherness and difference in social interaction (Čeginskas, 2015). While for example, in the Netherlands a child's Dutch language skills are an important prerequisite for participation and inclusion. Also interesting is that Dutch curriculum guidelines are slightly more emphatic of cognitive-oriented curriculum elements, which perhaps more closely resembles the Anglo-American-based curriculum tradition

(Autio, 2017; Tahirsylaj et al., 2016). However, this could also be indicative of these requirements being considered more important in Dutch as both guidelines were for compulsory education. A more in-depth exploration is needed in order to compare all curriculum guidelines.

A curriculum reflects the values and goals which are considered essential in society, and accordingly acts as a mirror of what is important and desirable for its future (Vitikka et al., 2012). Generations of children go to ECEC and compulsory education organized according to current curriculum guidelines. This demonstrates a curriculum's importance, as well as its significant impact on the information, values, and communication methods that will be transmitted forward. One must be aware that education can change a society (Apple, 2018). Neoliberalism sees competition as the main characteristic of human relationships; rather than foster inclusion, it structures the ways in which social groups come together, and create mechanisms of integration and segregation (Fischer, 2020). Some hints of neoliberalism can be found in the studied curriculum guidelines (e.g. Sweden): the focus on the future, on being a competent member of society, or the absence of disability discussion. Socioeconomic and ethnic segregation in bigger cities (e.g. Helsinki) has been documented, and a negative response of schools in relatively disadvantaged neighbourhoods has been noticed (Bernelius, 2013; Pesando et al., 2020). The consequences of school choice (state versus private) are unaligned with inclusive education and has consequences for groups of children (e.g. children with special needs) (Magnússon, 2020). This study could provide questions for further investigation, such as 'do curricula offer principles which are in conflict with parents' interests, such as free choice of schools?'

This study is not without limitations. The studied countries were all European and seemed to have similar value-based educational systems and procedures. This is not always the case when analysing curricula in different countries, as was shown by Mottaghi and Talkhabi (2019). Furthermore, a limited number of documents were included in the study due to the inclusion criteria stated (e.g. published in the English language). Still, analysing the guidelines proved challenging as they were translations, which therefore could have resulted in certain misunderstandings as meaning is often lost in translation (Van Nes et al., 2010). For example, the Icelandic curriculum guideline (IC-2) used the concept of belonging more than any other, despite the fact that the concept of belonging is rather uncommon in daily life—it could well be that, in translation, this concept has a slightly different meaning. Moreover, the guidelines' word count differed and could have influenced the explanation and meaning of searched concepts. Furthermore, some curriculum guidelines might be outdated—indeed, during the project period curriculum guidelines in several countries were under construction and not yet available.

The ECEC and compulsory education curriculum guidelines studied emphasize the importance of children's (and pupils') human rights, diversity, equality and inclusion, democratic values, and relationships with all group members. These aspects are considered important and form the basis of participation and belonging (Bernelius, 2013; Magnússon, 2020; Pesando et al., 2020). This is, to our knowledge, the first study that focused on whether and how curriculum guidelines address and describe the concepts of participation and belonging. The study shows that the attention to these concepts is rather thin, and that concepts are interpreted in different ways.

Curriculum guidelines' principles serve as an inspiration for policy makers, schools boards, curriculum designers and teachers (and anyone responsible for education) to put these principles into practice—particularly in today's society. Based on our study we can conclude that curriculum guidelines do not provide sufficent frameworks for promoting children's belonging and participation. This study may inspire national educational bodies to take a close look on how the concepts of belonging and participation are used in the curriculum guidelines and understood in order to elaborate what is needed to put it in practice by all mentioned stakeholders.

It is recommended that all stakeholders should be involved in discussions and reflections on the nature of learning, teaching, curriculum design and teachers' education with regard to belonging and participation. Moreover, it is important to look how the curriculum functions in practice, as well as weigh up what truly enables inclusion of all children in education. A critical constructivism approach with dialectical understanding of the relationship between ideas (such as belonging and

participation), social change, and strategically selective contexts and social structures (Bentley et al., 2007) may support thorough understanding how daily educational practice can be designed to truly support belonging and participation.

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