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Caring for the Whole Child in Preschool Education: Repositioning ‘Religion’ in Socially Sustainable Educational Professionalism

Ellinor Skaremyr, Magdalena Raivio & Arniika Kuusisto

Abstract

This chapter employs a holistic view of the child in its examination of socially sustainable preschool teacher professionalism, raising in particular the necessity of acknowledging the role of a child’s personal worldview as a part of it. Thereby, we aim to contribute to knowledge in the field and the discussions on social justice, Religious Education (RE), relational ethics and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC or preschool). Our argument stems from an understanding of preschool teacher professionalism that in the daily lives of children and their families can notably contribute towards sustainable justice in society. The chapter takes its starting point from our theoretical and analytical model for socially sustainable communities of care (Raivio, Skaremyr & Kuusisto, 2022), for a further elaboration on preschool as a caring community. The tool builds on previous theoretical, conceptual and empirical studies and focuses on five levels: International level, Societal level, Community (here preschool) level, as well as the levels of Situations, Events and Acts of Care. Our holistic view of the child builds further on postcolonial and feminist ethics of care, through which the model highlights the importance of the teacher’s sensitivity towards the child’s worldview with its religious or spiritual, ethical, and existential elements. Caring for the child’s worldview is seen as vital for the child’s resilience, contributing to learning, well-being, and sense of belonging, both in the daily events in preschool and in the longer perspective on their individual life trajectories. Thereby, receiving care also for this aspect of individual development is critically important for social sustainability in any society. The chapter concludes with reflections and implications for socially sustainable educational professionalism in preschool.

1. Introduction

This chapter takes a holistic view of the child in the examination of socially sustainable preschool teacher professionalism. We argue for the necessity of acknowledging the role of a child’s personal worldview as a part of the perceptions of the child. Thereby, we aim to contribute to the discussions on social justice,

Religious Education (RE), relational ethics and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC or preschool). Our argument stems from an understanding of preschool teacher professionalism that in the daily lives of children and their families can notably contribute towards sustainable justice in society. Thereby, the paper connects to the broader frame of discussions on preschool teacher professionalism concerning inclusive education and a preschool for all children (UNESCO, 1994), and thus has a didactic focus.

With the increased globalization, also ECEC settings around the world are getting increasingly diverse. In Sweden, which here functions as a case study context for our elaboration, the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity among the children attending preschools is often highlighted in a scientific context (Björk-Willén, 2022). However, the diversity of worldviews, be those of religious or secular or hybrid, among preschool children is often not mentioned in the research focusing on diversity (see Riitaoja et al., 2010; Poulter et al., 2016). Being not only one of the most multi-faith, yet also one of the most secularized societies in the world, Sweden's worldview diversity and in particular the questions related to religion are something that "just doesn't come up in discussions", as Vikdahl (2018) fittingly named her research about the topic. Still, every individual, both children, teachers, and other adults in preschool, holds a worldview, i.e., an individual view of the world, a perspective for meaning-making that founds life choices and actions in the everyday (Poulter et al., 2016).

Our positionings as academicians, early childhood researchers, and former early childhood teachers, provide us with knowledge and experiences about research and practice in preschools in Sweden. We recognize that there are preschools where sensitivity to children's worldviews and life-questions is part of the teacher's approach. However, previous research illustrates how preschools in Sweden preschool teachers find questions concerning religions and worldviews challenging and difficult, and that they recognize having a knowledge gap related to these (Puskas & Andersson, 2022; Stier & Sandström, 2018). It also shows how older children and youth with Christian faith may tend to hide their beliefs in fear of being bullied (Zackariasson, 2014; Kuusisto et al., 2017; Schihalejev et al., 2020). Even though Lutheran Christianity is in fact the 'majority religion' in the society, in reality the secularized 'Cultural Christian' hegemony in children's peer group may also marginalize the religious forms of the "mainstream" Lutheranism (Poulter et al., 2016; Riitaoja et al., 2010).

Although the experiences and educational settings of comprehensive school age children are relatively well researched, the scarce research on worldviews in preschool age group leaves much more to be investigated and communicated. In this chapter we suggest an understanding of the concept 'the whole child' where the socioemotional dimension of a child's life is understood as also including spiritual, religious, ethical, or existential aspects. Based on this, we elaborate on how a socially sustainable ECEC, that acknowledges 'the whole child', can be understood and planned for. Questions that guide our analysis are: What can preschool teacher professionalism mean regarding caring for the whole child and inclusive education, and what does it entail? How can an intersectional feminist and postcolonial tool

(Raivio et al., 2022) help us understand different aspects of a socially sustainable preschool education and reposition 'religion' in Socially Sustainable Educational Professionalism?

2. Socially sustainable educational professionalism

The diversity and plurality in ECEC contexts enhance the necessity for professional competences related to diversity, in order to safeguard social sustainability and sustainable justice in ECEC community and the society at large. Thus, it is critically important that ECEC professionals are equipped with intercultural and interreligious competencies as a part of their professionalism (Rissanen et al., 2016, 2020; Kuusisto, 2017). The importance of an ethical and relational leadership, what Cronqvist (2017) refer to as didethics, to achieve an equal transition from preschool to school for migrant children, who are at risk of being marginalized, have also been shown by Cronqvist and Skaremyr (2022). Lamminmäki-Vartia et al., (2021) argue that developing professionalism in ECEC worldview diversity requires teacher students' professional learning through their individual value-learning processes, also as related to the worldview super-diversity of the ECEC context. According to them (*ibid.*, p. 298), this entails "professional sensitivity to, competences in, and values and attitudes related to worldviews, implemented in educational practices and interaction in real-life encounters, and the ways in which world views are talked about." They add that since ECEC is often the first societal arena for children to enter, it is also a critically important secondary socialization context for value learning, where ECEC teachers are the adult role models for encountering diversity. Furthermore, Lamminmäki-Vartia et al. state that professionalism in worldview diversity connects directly to values, social justice, and human rights for equal treatment, entailing a continuous value-learning process as part of wider professional development (Lamminmäki-Vartia et al., 2021). Black feminist and philosopher bell hooks (1995) uses the concept of 'engaged pedagogy', to highlight the importance for teachers to maintain both critical awareness and engagement in the classroom. We argue that this could apply also for a social sustainable ECEC teacher professionalism. Like hooks (1995) we put the pedagogical focus on both practice and contemplation, and the importance of a holistic approach to learning that emphasises a union of body, mind and spirit.

3. Educating and Caring for the whole child

Within a Nordic perspective, there has traditionally been a strong connection between caring and educating the children in ECEC. Instead of understanding education and care as dichotomous, they are seen as integrated, but also with play (Broström et al., 2018; Furu, 2019). This so called EduCare can be described as child-centred and as focusing on a child's well-being in a holistic sense but also on the child's democratically rights. In line with this, the Swedish curriculum for the preschool (Swedish National Agency for Education, [SNAE], 2018) also entails a holistic perspective in terms of that care, learning and development should form a whole in preschool education. Nonetheless, the curriculum does not express

faith, religion or spirituality to be important aspects when caring for the whole child. Compared to the concept of play, that the curriculum explicitly express should have a central place in the education and that it is vital for children's development, learning and well-being, children's spiritual or religious thoughts are not addressed. Besides, according to the curriculum children should be able to discuss life questions in preschool, but this is rather to be understood as a right than as a necessity for children's well-being.

In 2005, Nell Noddings raised similar questions about how to educate the whole child, after observing increasing challenges in society, such as that a sense of community had declined in schools. Noddings argued that the way in which education is divided into separate subjects makes it too fragmentary, and that a more child-centred approach would enable a more inclusive and holistic education. If, for example a math teacher can include thoughts of Descartes or arts during lessons, this would also make the students aware of the teacher's holistic stance, according to Noddings. In similar lines it could be argued that to educate the whole child within ECEC, education should include acknowledging the spiritual or religious worldview and its existential and ethical aspects, for coming into terms with the challenges and demands in the society. This would make education and the teachers' pedagogical professionalism, socially, emotionally but also educationally sustainable.

Accordingly, caring for the whole child and its development, means supporting not only the academic skills but also social-emotional skills in education (Wikman et al., 2022). It also means an in-depth understanding of each child as an individual (eg. Lewallen et al., 2015; Liesch et al., 2022; Rudoe, 2020) and that children's physical and socio-emotional development is important to promote to ensure their total academic progress (e.g. Liesch et al., 2022; Rudoe, 2020). Diamond (2010, p. 780) explains:

If we want the best academic outcomes, the most efficient and cost-effective route to achieve that is, counterintuitively, not to narrowly focus on academics, but to also address children's social, emotional, and physical development. Similarly, the best and most efficient route to physical health is through also addressing emotional, social, and cognitive wellness. Emotional wellness, similarly, depends critically on social, cognitive, and physical wellness.

The quote expresses how children's emotional development and well-being is vital for school success. Wikman et al. (2020) conclude that well-being, in addition to children's self-concepts and prosocial behaviours, is an important element when understanding children's academic achievement and henceforth, to prevent school failure. Nonetheless, in the studies above, words like religion, spirituality or worldview are not mentioned. We argue that to educate and care for the whole child implies a child-centred approach which entails the enrichment of both academic and socio-emotional skills—as something that also includes spiritual, religious, ethical or existential aspects of life.

4. Inclusive education and children's sense of belonging

It is well known that the concept of inclusive education was established in the Salamanca declaration (Unesco) in 1994 and it expressed that education in schools should be adapted to meet the differences and needs of all children. However, the concept of inclusion is complex and can be understood in multiple ways (Magnusson, 2019). There are thus some agreements. The concept is considered to be relevant for children who, for various reasons, based on such as learning difficulties, language, ethnicity, or gender, end up outside the school community (Nilholm, 2021; Persson & Persson, 2020; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Asp-Onsjö (2006) defines inclusion from three aspects: spatial –to what extent the student are together with peers in the classroom, social – to what extent the student is taking part in social activities together with peers and teachers, and didactic – to what extend didactical conditions are adapted to enhance the students learning. A student can be included from all three of these aspects but it is also possible for a student to be included from only one or two of the three aspects (Asp-Onsjö, 2006). Hence, inclusion focus on the context that surrounds the child and actions are made for the purpose of including all children, which is a usual understanding of inclusive education as such. The point of departure in this chapter is children's own sense of belonging and feelings of inclusion.

Our conceptual elaboration is inspired by Yuval-Davis's (2006; 2011, p. 12) understanding of belonging which, to her, is about emotional attachment and feelings of being safe, feeling 'at home'. According to Yuval-Davis, how belonging is created, can be understood through three analytical facets, namely: Social positionings: Individual's identification and emotional attachments to different communities and groups, and: Ethical and political value systems, with which people assess their own and others belonging. These three facets are interrelated, and it is a dynamic process when belonging is created (Yuval-Davis, 2011). The first facet highlights the situated aspect of belonging, understood as situated intersectionality, the stable categories to which people belong, like gender, ethnicity or religion. The second facet point toward the individual's subjective identification and sense of belonging to a specific group, and at the same time identify and position others to be inside or outside this group. The third facet highlight the social norms, such as ethical and political values, with which individuals identify and assess him-/herself to be part of a group and at the same time identify others to be outside the group. Understanding the processes of belonging as political systems like this, are quite new (cf. Johansson, 2022). To ensure social sustainability, children's well-being and sense of belonging is key in providing an inclusive ECEC environment (Johansson & Rosell, 2021). By using the politics of belonging, combining it with the feminist and postcolonial tool explained in the next section (Raivio et al., 2022), in similarity to Noddings (2005), we argue for using a holistic approach of caring for the whole child that also includes caring for the religious, spiritual, and existential dimensions.

5. Socially sustainable educational professionalism

As shown above, when it comes to social justice, religion, and relational ethics and in relation to ECEC, a preschool teacher professionalism that strives for sustainable justice in society is central. How preschool

teachers perceive their mission to include all children and the whole child, affect how a socially sustainable preschool takes form. So do laws and conventions, but also norms and values that circle in the society. To deconstruct and understand aspects of socially sustainable preschool education and at the same time reposition religion as being part of the socio-emotional dimension in a child's life, we will use a model developed by Raivio et al., (2022), see figure 1 below. The model is based on an intersectional feminist and postcolonial ethics of care perspective and is intended to serve as a foundation for "making the preschool functioning as a sustainable community of care" (Ibid, p. 9). This model places the preschool teachers' intercultural and interreligious competencies (Rissanen et al., 2016; 2020; Kuusisto, 2017) at the centre of the social sustainable professionalism, and present some suggestions of important dimensions of how to create an including environment where all children is given the possibility to feel a sense of belonging (Yuval-Davies, 2011). The original figure visualises a model for understanding, researching, and planning socially sustainable communities of care and encompass six levels or dimensions of care: international, societal, community, situations, events, and acts of care (see further in Raivio et al., 2022, pp. 10-12). Whereas the first two dimensions, international and societal/national level, can be regarded as part of the policies and structural conditions for how to organise and plan for a caring community and for the everyday situations in preschool. The first two dimensions also encompass norms about what is seen as vital for the child's wellbeing and development, which together with policies and structural conditions have impact on preschool practice. The third community dimension encompass structural conditions and norms within the actual preschool, and the latter three dimensions; situations, events, and acts of care, deals with how adult initiated or child-initiated event takes place in the moment – the place where policies, conditions and norms are put into practice. Although the model is illustrated with a visual figure, see figure 1 below, "[T]he different analytical dimensions: international, societal, community, situation, event and act, should be understood as flexible, overlapping, entangled and in constant change" (Raivio et al., 2022, pp. 9-10). In this case, we will use this model with its different dimensions, to elaborate on how to understand how to provide care for the whole child in ECEC in a way that includes the sensitivity for and competencies to educate about religion and worldviews. To scaffold a continuum in preschool teachers or students value learning processes and autonomy in their execution of a socially sustainable educational professionalism, we also offer a battery of questions for consideration in appendix A.



Figure 1. A model for understanding, researching, and planning socially sustainable communities of care (Raivio et al., 2022).

5.1. The international dimension of caring for the whole child

A socially sustainable preschool education that acknowledges and safeguards every child’s well-being and sense of belonging have besides the Salamanca declaration (1994), its starting point in writings in other international steering documents, such as Agenda 2030 (UN, 2015) and the Convention on the rights of the child ([CRC], UN, 1989). These policy documents have implications for preschool education because they effect values of sustainability (Raivio et al., 2022). One example is Agenda 2030’s goal 10 on Reducing inequality within and among countries, which state “[B]y 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status”. Another example is CRC (UN, 1998, article 3), which depicts that the best interest of the child shall, at all times, be a primary concern for institutions, such as preschools, when planning and performing practice. Institutions, such as the preschool, shall also make sure that the child is protected against all kinds of discrimination on the behalf of his/her beliefs (article 2). Furthermore, the CRC (article 14:1) expresses that “[S]tate Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion”.

Consequently, these international agreements expressed in Salamanca declaration (1994), Agenda 2030 (2015), and the Convention on the rights of the child (UN, 1989) affect national regulatory documents but also norms in the society. In turn, national regulatory documents and norms expressed in the society regulate and influence the education and activities that’s going on in the specific preschool. Henceforth, this also effects the participating children in the preschool. This first dimension encompass what Yuval-Davies (2011) describes as the third facet for analysing how belonging is created; the international social

norms, uttered in policies and via social media, with which individuals identify and assess themselves to, in the process of making themselves part of a group, at the same time identifying others to be outside the group. In relation to ECEC professionalism this can be related to introducing the children to international or globally agreed norms and values supporting them to become caring and democratic citizens.

5.2. The societal dimension of caring for the whole child

As mentioned earlier, socially sustainable preschool education in Sweden has also its starting point in the Nordic Educare-perspective on childhood and education and care (Broström m fl. 2018, Furu, 2019) which is characterized for not discriminating between education and care and to take point of departure in the perspectives of the children, by outdoor education and play as a central feature for children's learning. Societal values that are communicated through national policy documents, like the Swedish curriculum for the preschool, Lpfö 18 (SNAE, 2018), governs education in preschool. In the Lpfö 18 (SNAE, 2018, p. 5) it is expressed that "[E]ducation should also convey and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based." The concept of religion is only mentioned once in the Swedish educational act (SFS 2010:800) and the Swedish curriculum for the preschool (SNAE, 2018). It is mentioned in contexts dealing with violations, that children shall not being exposed to violations because of their faith. In both of these steering documents it is also expressed that the education shall be non-denominational. A policy study that explores the concept of culture in the curriculum, shows how culture, when it is mentioned in the curriculum, can be interpreted to entail religion (Raivio & Skaremyr, 2022). Research (Puskás & Andersson, 2017, 2022; Reimers, 2022) has shown that preschool teachers express uncertainty regarding how to manage issues related to religion in multicultural ECEC settings, and a risk that children will be unilaterally influenced by Christian values. The preschools also have a mission to transmit and to further develop a cultural heritage (SNAE, 2018). Depending on where the preschool is located in Sweden and conditions within the preschool, such as the children's group and the representation of languages, cultures, religions and worldviews, the preschools practice of traditions varies and are changeable (Puskás & Andersson, 2017, 2022; Reimers & Puskás, 2022,). This makes the demands on preschools to transmit a cultural heritage challenging.

The preschool education is also being influenced by norms and values expressed in society. Sweden can be described as a Western, postmodern, and neoliberal society, which is both secular and culturally and historically influenced by Lutheran Christianity (Berglund, 2014; Reimers, 2022). Sweden is thus largely influenced by its Lutheran cultural heritage but has also been described as the most secular and multi-faith country in the world (Gearon et al., 2021). Reimers (2019;2022) describes this particular secular norm, as Western Lutheran Secularism. Implications of a study by Kittelmann Flensner (2015) is that 'Swedishness' is the same thing as being non-religious and to not practice religious traditions or consider oneself to have

a spiritual or religious worldview. To be considered as a 'believer', regardless of religious identity, can, as it means deviating from the norm, in similarly to factors like origin and ethnicity most likely become the grounds for 'othering' in most Swedish social context. It could also increase the risk of being contested or discriminated against. A socially sustainable preschool education must thus also identify norms and traditions expressed by the minority that are being disregarded, and thereby identify what is the specific "spectrum of value" (Gearon & Kuusisto, 2017) and act upon anomalies to enable equity and inclusion.

This dimension could also be related to Yuval-Davies (2011) third facet for analysing how belonging is created, since it encompasses the national social norms, uttered both in the policies mentioned, and the discourses in society at large. As shown, there are majority norms connected to Western Lutheran Secularism (Reimers, 2019, 2022) with which individuals may or may not identify and assess themselves to, and that will be negotiated even in the ECEC. When it comes to the ECEC, there is a need for research based elaborated national strategies of how to implement the democratic and intercultural norms expressed in the policies, as well as how to create a preschool environment where religion is taught and discussed in a way that make it possible for all children to feel a sense of belonging, and last but not least, to provide against discrimination related to the othering of children and or families considered 'believers', regardless of religious identity.

5.3. The community dimension of caring for the whole child – an inclusive education

Similarly, as societal values are expressed on the societal dimension, norms and values for a socially sustainable preschool education are expressed on the community dimension of care. These norms and values are expressed in practice, i. e. in the organizing of the daily life at a preschool. The politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006; 2011) entail the situated aspect of belonging (first facet), situated intersectionality, the stable categories to which people belong, like gender, ethnicity or religion, expressed in society. Thereby, also the children who come to preschool may already identify themselves with one or several of these identity markers (Johansson, 2022). Related to the norms and values of society, these categories also help children assess who belongs to different groups and who doesn't. Similarly, norms expressed in the preschool make children identify themselves as inside or outside the stable categories that are being expressed, and thereby valued, in the specific preschool (second facet). Also children can sense and identify themselves to belong or not to belong to the specific child group and at the same time position others to be inside or outside this child group (Johansson & Rosell, 2021). The social norms in the specific preschool and child group that children will identify and assess him-/herself to be part of the group can be norms that highlight diversity or similarity. It can be norms of multiplicity and open-mindedness, or it can be norms of singularity/uniformity and close-mindedness, whatever the case will be the individual child will assess his-/her belonging accordingly. This means, the way preschool teachers talk about, plan for, and execute their education, express norms about what is valued and what is not. The implication is that children will enter preschool and depending on what they perceive as the norm in the

preschool will make them assess if they are part of the norm or not, and if they are included or excluded. If the norm in the preschool is to acknowledge children's spirituality, worldviews and life questions, children (also those with a religious worldview) will feel included, they will sense that they belong.

While we use the concept of caring communities, hooks (1994, 1995) use the concept of 'beloved communities' when addressing the political aspects of belonging from a black feminist point of view. A 'beloved community' is according to hooks (1995, p. 264) a community where "loving ties of care and knowing bind us together in our differences." Following hooks line of thought, a beloved community should be built on a vision where everyone in the community appreciates their own and others different cultural legacies and identities, which also include differences in religions and worldviews. On a community level are staff discussions, about how they perceive, understand, and think about key concepts like *inclusive education*, *belonging*, and *worldviews* concerning children's development of identities, of vital importance (See also Appendix A). There is a need for what hooks (2015) calls 'engaged pedagogy', i. e. for preschool teachers to maintain both critical awareness and engagement, and to continuously make room for critical discussions that will entail power perspectives and power relations of 'who is in' and 'who is out'. Therefore, the staff needs to develop cultural knowledge about the norms expressed in their practice, about themselves and others. A local policy regarding values, norms and attitudes toward religion and worldviews can be an important tool when planning for and performing a socially sustainable professionalism and maintaining consensus among the educators.

5.4. Situations of care - Preschool teacher professionalism in practice

Within the communities of care, situations of care are being planned for (Raivio, Skaremyr and Kuusisto, 2022). On this level norms discussed and developed between staff members comes to action in the planned education in which children take part. The focus is on the teacher's conscious planning for and implementation of situations that should enable children's openness to express their own and also listen to other people's worldview and life questions. This is in line with what Noddings (2013) describe as a moral education based on a relational approach. Noddings (2013, s. 184) put forth the school as a place to start in caring for each other and more so, to "teach our children to live in the world as one-caring and cared for". In the same way as preschool educators need to plan for activities and materials that will develop children's knowledge in language, mathematics, science and other subjects, they also need to plan for developing children's openness for different worldviews: religious, spiritual, ethical or existential. Just as multilingual practices in preschool does not happen by itself but requires preschool educators conscious planning (Skaremyr, 2019), a socially sustainable education that safeguard children's different worldviews, such as religious, must be planned for. A caring and sustainable education (Noddings, 2013) is based on dialogue – listening and talking – and includes a close relation and collaboration with parents (caregivers).

Thus, the preschool has the power to plan for and offer an inclusive education for the attending children. By conscious planning for inclusive working methods and approaches, attitudes such as that 'Swedishness' is the same as being non-religious (Kittelman Flensner, 2015), can be counteracted. This can be applied to Yuval-Davis (2011) first facet which highlights the stable categories to which people belong, like religion, and second facet which points toward individual's subjective identification and sense of belonging to a specific group. When preschools acknowledge and make visible, by inclusive working methods and approaches, varieties, and different ways of being, thinking and understanding the world, children's possibilities to sense that they belong are likely to increase.

5.5. Events and acts of care

Events and acts of care are separate in text in the original model (Raivio et al., 2022), but they are often entwined in practice, see Figure 1. The event and act dimensions highlight the importance of teacher's sensitivity towards the child's personal worldview with its religious, spiritual, ethical, or existential elements. We picture how an adult initiated or child-initiated event takes place. It can be a talk about what happens after death, a religious tradition, or children's thoughts about life. The preschool teacher's sensitivity and receptivity towards children's initiative to express ethical or existential, spiritual, or religious worldviews is of high importance. It also entails the educator's conscious action to initiate events that enable children to approach, think, and talk about these subjects. To care for the whole child means to actively seek children's perspective, not only to act upon spontaneous questions or expressions from the child. On this level, it is also about reciprocity, children's and educators' mutual advantages when worldviews are discussed or expressed.

In caring events, the teacher's mission as the one-caring (Noddings, 2013) is about seeking openness and awareness for the spiritual, secular, or religious aspects of the child. According to Noddings, the teacher is not seeking answers, she is seeking the involvement of the child who is being the cared-for. The Swedish Educational act (SFS 2010:800) depict that all education shall be non-denominational, and therefore are children's experiences of religion in preschool limited to entail knowledge about different religions gained through different activities and talks. When children are engaged in talks and activities about religion there are all-around benefits for all children (Noddings, 2013). Through such experience children will be devoted to each other and become the caring-ones.

Events and acts of care are characterized by the teacher's responsiveness and respect for diversity and the visibility of diversity, in a positive light, in the hall, on walls and among the books, toys, stories, music, and festivities offered in preschool. It is not only a matter of how much, but also about how, in what way, diversity is presented: the tone of the teacher's voice when mentioning that Muslims now have Eid or that some people believe that Jesus was born on Christmas, for example. It is about presenting all minorities, languages, and cultures, in a respectful way.

6. Open Conclusion

In this chapter, we have elaborated on how caring for the whole child entails a repositioning of religion and religious, spiritual, ethical, and existential aspects in the daily education in preschool. This means that we are arguing for an expansion for the understanding of teacher professionalism to include not only intercultural and interreligious competences (See Rissanen et al., 2016; 2020; Kuusisto, 2017) but also care for the spiritual, religious, ethical, and existential aspects of children's worldviews. This expansion is in line with what Lamminmäki-Vartia et al (2021) express is connecting professionalism in worldview diversity to values, social justice, and human rights for equal treatment, which as part of wider professional development would entail a continuous value learning process.

Based on the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2006; 2011), children's sense of belonging to a certain and/or different group/-s, influence children's possibilities for a sustainable education and development of self. By repositioning religion and education about religious, spiritual, ethical, and existential aspects in preschool education and address the whole child, children's sense of belonging would increase or be enabled. In literacy studies it has been shown how addressing the whole child, by paying attention to the minority literacy, has an all-around benefit on the child's learning, as expressed by Kenner and Gregory (2020, p. 376): "When schools address the child as a whole person and give status to the minority literacy as a valued part of mainstream education, these links are strengthened with all-round benefits for self-esteem and learning". In the same way will, we argue, the preschool teacher's care for children's individual worldviews and life questions in preschool education have positive implications for children's self-esteem and learning and thus act as socially sustainable.

Children's life questions, be it religious, ethical, spiritual, or existential, are "specific and concrete and anchored in daily life" (Ristiniemi, Skeie & Sporre, 2018, p. 13). Sporre (2022) has shown how life questions "livsfrågor" in Scandinavian school curricula's have been handled in varying ways within the subject of religious education, and that didactical questions regarding whose (children's or someone else's) questions are to be handled and how is lacking. In line with Ristiniemi, Skeie and Sporre (2018) we suggest that teacher autonomy is a necessary course of action when implementing preschool curriculum, to meet and act upon the individual child's life questions.

We want to conclude with some thoughts on repositioning 'religion' in socially sustainable educational professionalism and its importance for all children. If children don't get the chance to meet a diversity of worldviews, religions, and different ways of thinking about and understanding the world and life itself, they will most certainly develop an ethnocentric way of thinking. It means that children will, based on their own narrowed experience, understand and assess other people, and their way of life, including worldviews and traditions, as deviant and wrong. By repositioning 'religion' in ECEC and use a holistic approach of caring for the whole child, *all* children will benefit and sense that they themselves but also others belong to an inclusive society built on equality and democratic values.

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Appendix A

Community level – What norms regarding religion and worldviews are in play? What is valued or what is not, what is given attention and what is not, who is included/excluded? What worldviews is represented in books, songs, and other materials? Is every child in your group represented or who is and who is not? Do we need a local policy at the preschool? How do we perceive, understand and think about the concepts *inclusive education, belonging, and worldviews* concerning children's development of identities?

Situational level – How can we safeguard the diversity of worldviews and religions? What actions can we plan for to safeguard every child's sense of belonging? How can we collaborate with parents? What routines do we need for addressing each child? Again, do we need a local policy at the preschool?

Events and acts – How can preschool teachers show an openness and attentiveness for children's life questions, spiritual, ethical, or religious expressions, or thoughts? How can the preschool teacher seek and request children's thoughts och experiences of spirituality, religion, or worldview?