

Managing the Symbolic Power of Halal Meat in Swedish Preschools: Food for Thought in Discussions on Diversity

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Abstract:

Recently there has been much debate as to which foods Swedish preschools should serve. This text explores preschool teachers' approaches to parents' dietary requests. The empirical material consists of 14 focus group interviews with 41 preschool teachers from two areas of Stockholm. Results suggest that cultural and religious differences pertaining to food and diet requests lead to dilemmas and conflicts which are handled with *instrumental multicultural* or *conscious multicultural* approaches, whereas *intercultural* or *transcultural* approaches are rare. Among the preschool teachers in this study, this leads to avoidance strategies or efforts to change the parents' views. Results show that the preschool curriculum provides little guidance and preschool teachers must develop their own strategies to deal with children's and parents' expectations and demands, often using the children as intermediaries.

Keywords: preschools, Sweden, dietary requests, preschool teachers' approaches to diversity, culture

1. Introduction

Today, Sweden is characterised by a higher degree of cultural, ethnic, religious, social and linguistic diversity than ever before in history. Despite there being significant variations in the degree of such heterogeneity, Swedish preschools are increasingly diverse and are obligated to work by the stipulations set in the Education Act (2010:800) and the National Curriculum for the Preschool (SNAE, 2011, 2018). This means ensuring compliance with universal human rights and the fundamental values of Swedish society, including democracy and equality, regardless of gender, culture, ethnicity, religion or any other background. The Education Act stipulates that municipal preschools should be non-confessional, whereas private preschools should be non-confessional in their teaching but may include confessional components beyond this. These rights and values should guide the climate of a preschool, as well as its activities and methods. At the same time, preschools should exhibit openness to, tolerance for and appreciation of cultural, ethnic, religious and social differences, and respect for the unique backgrounds of children.

Worth noticing is a change in the curriculum from SNAE 2011, which stated that "the preschool can help to ensure that... children with a foreign background receive support in developing a multicultural sense of identity" (p. 5), to the formulation in SNAE 2018 (p.6), which states that "preschool children should not be unilaterally influenced in favour of one or the other view. Therefore, teaching should be objective, versatile and non-confessional".² Considering these stipulations, it seems clear that the curriculum contains ambiguities and contradictory objectives – which, in the last instance, must be addressed by the preschool teachers.

Recently, there have been discussions about which food (particularly meat) preschools should serve. There are calls for vegetarian, vegan and sustainable food – and a heated debate

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about the presence of halal³ meat in the preschool. Food, diet and eating are associated with culture and religion, and are surrounded by rules of etiquette, beliefs and rituals. As such, they serve as symbolic distinctions between groups of people, at the same time as they exhibit control of individuals within a group and thereby ensure group cohesiveness. In our case, and to cite Rippin (2012: 28-29): “*Halal* is also employed in a sense which is opposite to that of haram in its meaning ‘sanctified.’” This being said, food, diet and eating are laden with cultural value, religious symbolism, strong feelings and ideological capital – which manifest themselves in the preschools and among our youngest.

Should preschools give consideration to dietary or eating requests motivated by culture, ethnicity or religion – more specifically, should they serve halal meat? Here, halal meat refers to meat from slaughter and preparation according to Islamic practices (whereas in Islam, halal has a broader meaning and refers to actions or behaviours that are permissible). By contrast, “haram” refers to impermissible or unlawful actions – and in light of food, this means that pork, blood and wild birds are haram.

Since the curriculum provides limited guidance on this matter and since this is a decision for each preschool to make, it is managed differently. Research by Stier and Sandström (2018) shows that food and dietary requests are frequent topics of debate among preschool teachers and a matter they must deal with in everyday work – in relation to children, parents and colleagues with diverging views on this matter.

Against this background, this text explores how a group of 41 preschool teachers at 33 municipal preschools make sense of and approach the cultural, ethnic and religious diversity in the preschool, with focus on questions related to the serving or not serving of halal meat – in light of the curriculum stipulations. In the following, these preschool teachers’ reasoning when it comes to the dilemmas that arise from the curriculum (i.e., universal and particularistic claims) is focal, but so are the strategies they claim to use as a means to address the challenges pertaining to food and eating in relation to the curriculum.

It should be noted that the meaning of halal (and haram) is not the focus here, and nor is whether it is right or wrong to serve halal meat in preschools. Rather, the focus is these preschool teachers’ way of addressing this issue – regardless of their understanding or attitudes towards such food. In addition, there are differences in the theories on culture and religion, and whether behaviours are motivated by religion or culture. However, the discussion of such differences falls beyond this text, and religion is treated as a component of culture: i.e. religion is a system of beliefs, world views, symbols and prescribed behaviours within a larger cultural system.

The empirical material comprises focus group interviews with 41 preschool teachers in two highly ethnically and culturally diverse urban areas of metropolitan Stockholm. These preschool teachers make up a highly diverse group of people – the majority were not born in Sweden, are bi- or multilingual, and are engaged in intercultural communication with the children, parents and colleagues. Also, their Swedish language competence varies greatly.

We hope to contribute by expanding the understanding of the dilemmas that Swedish preschool teachers – and their colleagues in other countries – face as they try to manage dilemmas that result from the curriculum and that are associated with increasing cultural,

³ “With this pair of words [halal-haram] we step into the world of taboo thinking. Haram and halal belong to a very old layer of language. In fact, they go back to the old Semitic idea of ritual cleanness. Speaking more strictly, haram is the taboo, while halal denotes simply anything that is not held under the taboo, anything that ‘has been set free’ from it. Haram is applied to things, places, persons, and actions; and everything that is so designated is definitely separated from the world of the profane and is raised to a peculiar level of being, that of the ‘sacred’ in the twofold sense of holiness and pollution; it is, at any event, something unapproachable, untouchable” (Izutsu 2002: 237).

ethnic and religious diversity in the preschool. We also hope to shed light upon and inspire alternative approaches to intercultural work in the preschool.

2. Previous research

There is much research on ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious and social diversity in primary and secondary schools (Banks 1994, Souto-Manning 2007, Garcia 2018). However, such research that focuses on the preschool is more limited (Lunneblad 2006, Stier et al. 2012, Stier & Sandström 2018).

Also, much research is concerned with what preschools are *obligated to do* or *should do* (Freeman 1998, Geens & Vandenbroeck 2013, Han & Shelley Thomas 2010, Husband 2012, Keengwe 2010, Kemple 2017). Similarly, other research deals with the epistemologies of curriculum content or discourses on interculturality, intercultural education, differences or othering (Wardle 1998, Vandenbroeck 2007).

There are, however, exceptions. Oliveira-Formosinho and Barros Araújo (2011) single out the characteristics of a pedagogical approach for early age groups, i.e. to promote respect for diversity and emphasise the importance of adult-child interactions and family involvement. Stier et al. (2012) and Stier and Sandström (2018) found that preschool teachers have different approaches to multicultural preschool groups. Such differences emanate from different understandings of cultures, modes of reflection and modes of interaction. Joshi, Eberly and Konzal (2005) found that although teachers/preschool teachers define culture as being a set of deeply embedded beliefs and values, in their practice they mainly focus on overt aspects like food and celebrations. Similarly, San Poon, Abdullah and Abdullah (2013) found that preschool teachers claim that their teaching exhibits awareness of multiculturalism, although an in-depth analysis revealed that they were more concerned with outward cultural manifestations. Joshi et al. (2005) studied teachers' and preschool teachers' practices when working with families from cultures different from their own. The most effective strategies for parental involvement were found to be written communication, and parent-teacher conferences/meetings.

Research indicates that much parent-preschool teacher communication and preschool teacher-children communication revolves around the children's food and mealtimes. Harding, Wade and Harrison (2013) and Stier et al. (2012) identify mealtimes as important learning opportunities where socialisation and language development take place. Yet, there are no studies on religiously motivated dietary requests in the preschool. Twiner, Cook and Gillen (2009) conclude that issues of religious identity are overlooked in debates on school lunches, particularly the question of serving halal meat or not. Stier and Sandström (2018) describe preschool situations where cultural and religious differences lead to dilemmas and friction between children, preschool teachers and parents. Here, the curriculum provides little guidance, and the preschool teachers must develop their own strategies to handle children's and parents' expectations and demands, including strategies to avoid difficult situations concerning gender roles, celebration of traditions, music, song, and food and dietary requests. For this reason, this text explores how a group of preschool teachers make sense of and approach the question of serving or not serving halal meat – in light of the curriculum stipulations.

3. Methodology

In this study, data were collected by way of qualitative focus group interviews. This approach enables access to the attitudes, values and reflections of the participants (Krueger & Casey 2000; Kvale & Brinkmann 2009, Wibeck 2015). By allowing the preschool teachers to reflect upon and reason on a set of themes, there was proximity to the everyday life of the preschool.

The focus group interviews were held in Swedish, with one of the authors as the interview facilitator. Every preschool teacher participated in two interviews with about five

months between the first and second. In total, 14 focus group interviews were conducted with 41 preschool teachers from 33 preschools. To ensure consistency between the interviews, a manual was used. For the first interview session, the manual contained themes on the understanding of culture, mode of reflection and described mode of interaction as regards multiculturalism. These themes were broken down into sub-themes and discussed among the preschool teachers. The second interview round focused on challenges and inherent possibilities in the preschool's everyday life.

Before the focus group sessions started, the interview facilitator informed the preschool teachers about the study's aim, approach and methodology, and on the purpose and set-up of the interviews. They were also informed about their right to terminate their participation at any time, without giving a reason for such a decision, and the fact that published interview extracts would be confidential. Confidentiality was ensured by using pseudonyms, altering the names of places and events when this was necessary, omitting redundant and irrelevant information, and storing data in a safe location inaccessible to unauthorised individuals. The preschool teachers were invited to raise additional questions or to ask for clarifications. If the participants decided to participate, they completed a consent form. The interview facilitator made back-ups of the consent forms and stored them safely to ensure participant confidentiality.

The focus group interviews began with the facilitator introducing the themes. To come up with multiple ideas and angles on these themes from as many preschool teachers as possible, the facilitators encouraged spontaneous, respectful group interaction and introduced additional questions or asked for clarifications. The sessions were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English by the authors. After each focus group interview, the preschool teachers anonymously completed a written evaluation, where they assessed how much they had shared their views. They could also provide additional comments.

Drawing upon the interview manual themes, the data (i.e., utterances, themes and stories) were subject to an initial qualitative categorisation. Based on this categorisation, the data were analysed to identify commonalities and differences in how the preschool teachers manage dietary requests from parents in light of contradictory or conflicting curriculum goals. Results were then discussed, and conclusions drawn.

To ensure a high level of authenticity, extracts from the interviews are presented verbatim: i.e., in the actual words of the interviewees. Yet, they are not presented in their original form, since they have been translated into English. For reader clarity and issues of space, some editing has been necessary.

4. Theoretical approach

To analyse the focus group interviews, we have used a combination of concepts pertaining to the cultural construction and religious symbolism of food and eating and a framework for analysing approaches to multicultural classrooms used in previous studies (Stier et al. 2012, Stier 2016, Stier & Sandström 2018). This framework assumes that the preschool teachers participating in the focus group interviews adhere to different, yet overlapping, approaches to manage the challenges of ethnocultural diversity as they work to meet the stipulations of the preschool curriculum. These approaches are labelled “instrumental multicultural”, “conscious multicultural”, “intercultural” and “transcultural”.

In turn, these approaches have three components: the *underlying conception of culture*, *reflection mode* and *interaction mode*. The underlying conception of culture refers to tacit views on the meaning of culture – views salient in thought and concrete ways in daily preschool practice. Culture includes, but is not limited to, language, world views, values, norms, traditions, habits, rituals, symbols – and food and dietary requests (Douglas 1966).

Conceptions of and traditions related to food and dietary requests and restrictions are symbolically loaded components of any culture or religion. Neither Jews nor Muslims eat pork, Hindus do not eat beef, while Swedes do eat crayfish. Festivities centre around food, and meals are surrounded by rituals and norms, and what is eaten or not is prescribed by taboos and values. Thus, food is not merely about matter – i.e. things we eat for nourishment, survival or health reasons (Barthes 1997; Lévi-Strauss 1969; Douglas 1966, 1984). Drawing upon Douglas (1966), food and eating are symbols that enable classifications which, in turn, ensure social order within a group and maintains boundaries with other groups – between “us” and “them”. To put it differently, food is “a code expressing cultural identity and, at the same time, otherness” (Stano 2017: 87). Foods that fall outside these classifications (in our case haram) are seen as dirty, uneatable or taboos, and are potential threats to the social order. Therefore, for reasons of ritual cleanliness, desirable food (e.g., halal) is prescribed, whereas violations to dietary rules are objects of condemnation or sanction. According to Rippin (2012), the word halal can be viewed as “ceasing ritual avoidance behavior” (2012: 28-29). In turn, such questions become ideological and political. It is against this background that the focal place of food, eating and dietary preferences in the preschool should be seen. Meal times and discussions of food are also learning opportunities, and not merely occasions for nourishment (Stier et al. 2012; Harding, Wade & Harrison 2013). In the results section, focus is on how the interviewed preschool teachers manage food, diet and eating based on the demands and wishes of parents, and in relation to the curriculum and law.

Reflection mode pertains to self-knowledge, openness and views on the limits of tolerance and adaptiveness based on cultural, ethnic, religious or social background. Finally, interaction mode is about how the understanding of culture and ways of reflection manifest themselves in the preschool teacher’s interaction with children, parents and colleagues. Taken together, these three components impact how the preschool teachers approach their professional practice, that is, how they understand and act with regard to the perceived ethnocultural diversity in the preschool group they work with.

The *instrumental multicultural approach* is anchored in a shallow understanding of cultural, ethnic and religious heterogeneity (Stier et al. 2012). Cultures are viewed as different, static and internally homogenous entities. The preschool teachers are unwitting bearers of conceptions and stereotypes. Working in a multicultural preschool becomes a question of coping with differences, often with a distant attitude. An example is how they (unknowingly) refer to and exoticise other cultures or focus on cultural totems: e.g., they encourage the children to see, touch or taste things from other cultures without relating these activities to a larger context. In addition, there is a reluctance or inability to set boundaries for what is consistent with the curriculum, the law or norms of the dominant society.

By contrast, the *conscious multicultural approach* means that preschool teachers are more aware of their role as the bearers of conceptions and stereotypes, and yet are quite unreceptive to alternative views in interaction with children, parents or colleagues (Stier et al. 2012). They are also reluctantly distant when they cope with differences and are anxious when it comes to their boundary-setting when parents pose demands on the preschool. Cultures are viewed as partly dynamic and internally heterogeneous entities.

An *intercultural approach* is based on a view of cultures as highly dynamic, internally varying and (re)constructed in social interaction. This is paralleled by a genuine openness to explore and, to some extent, to work with and make use of alternative cultural repertoires, including language and world views (Stier et al. 2012). This is done by making use of the children’s inherent curiosity and capacities, and by stimulating their willingness to transgress cultural and ethnic boundaries and explore other cultures. It means taking the children’s queries seriously, coping with cultural variation, challenging one’s personal cultural

conceptions, exploring intercultural interaction and being unambiguous when it comes to boundary-setting.

Overall approach	Underlying conception of culture	Reflection mode	Interaction mode (teacher-child-parent)
Instrumental multicultural	cultures are different, static and internally homogenous	unconscious	• cope with differences • distant • exoticising • unclear boundary-setting
Conscious multicultural	cultures are partly dynamic and internally heterogenous	conscious	• reluctantly distant • cope with differences • distant • anxious boundary-setting
Intercultural	cultures vary, are highly dynamic and are (re)constructed in social interaction	critical and self-reflexive	• cope with and make use of cultural variation and intercultural interaction • clear boundary-setting
Transcultural	cultures are more similar than dissimilar; intercultural interaction constantly creates new cultures	meta-reflexive	• lay bare and make use of human similarities • reconstruction and facilitation of hybrid identities • boundary transgression

Note: Modified from (Stier et al. 2012: 293, Stier 2017: 301).

Preschool teachers who adopt a *transcultural* approach encourage children to transgress cultural boundaries, beyond the intercultural approach (Stier et al. 2012). The transcultural approach encourages or even urges children to transgress such boundaries. The underlying assumption is that cultures are more similar than dissimilar and that they are constantly constructed and reconstructed in social interaction. Using meta-reflection, the ambition is to lay bare and make use of human similarities and to encourage intercultural exchange and cross-fertilisation.

Using this framework, we can analyse how the interviewed preschool teachers understand culturally, ethnically and religiously prescribed dietary requests, how they reflect upon this matter and how this shows in their interaction with children, parents and colleagues.

5. Results

In the focus group interviews, questions, dilemmas and considerations pertaining to food and diet requests were a common part of everyday life at the preschool. Moreover, these are highly entangled with cultural values, with conceptions of ‘proper’ and ‘non-proper food’, as well as with the ideological underpinnings and legal requirements of Swedish preschools. In concrete terms, these questions, dilemmas and considerations were mainly about balancing what was considered to be best for the children with the wishes of the parents. In particular, the interviews concerned problems with halal meat.

5.1 Avoidance strategies

In terms of the interviewed preschool teachers, the instrumental multicultural approach is common. They describe other cultures primarily as different from the Swedish majority culture and view them as static and homogenous. Hence, dietary requests posed by parents are unconsciously viewed as wishes from internally homogenous ‘others’ and one is often unaware both of one’s own cultural food preferences and of the reasons and dilemmas connected to the parents’ wishes. Questions about what food to serve or not are dealt with when they occur, rather than in a systematic and prescriptive fashion (compared to questions of gender, which are dealt with more consistently). Not only are questions regarding food dealt with in an ad hoc fashion, decisions related to such requests are made reluctantly and ambiguously, with little consideration for the curriculum or wider implications.

On the other hand, there are examples of what has been referred to as a conscious multicultural approach – i.e. the fact that the preschool teachers seem aware of the strong religious symbolism of food preferences, and of the interlinkages (justifiable or not) with ideas related to freedom of religion. There is also recognition of the dynamic nature of values and of the diversity of opinions among parents.

Regardless of this, to avoid problematic situations, they are reluctant to set clear boundaries vis-à-vis the parents and therefore come up with strategies to rationalise their actions and to avoid problematic situations. These avoidance strategies become instrumental, i.e. they become concerned with avoiding problems rather than elaborately reflecting on and accommodating their practice implications. In quote 1, the strategy in a problematic situation is to *circumvent* it, with the pretext (rationalisation) that from a sustainability perspective, vegetables are better than meat:

- (1) We cannot continue to eat as much meat as we do, it is not sustainable, so we have discussed... when we serve food... who shall have this and who shall have that and then you don’t know who shall have halal.

Thus, being highly aware of the religious symbolism of eatable and non-eatable food, and thereby of potential conflicts, reasons are sought in a less-heated sustainability discourse rather than in the curriculum or in a discourse of religious freedom and privilege. The sustainability discourse connotes scientific objectivity – a-matter-of-factness – something that is underpinned by the curriculum stipulations that the preschool should facilitate sustainability.

Another strategy employed to avoid the problem is to *serve halal meat to all children*. One reason for this is economical. Since Swedish municipalities have a financing system whereby preschools are paid based on the number of children, children who move to another

preschool (where halal meat is served) represent a financial loss. As such, accommodating dietary requests may serve to make the families stay at the preschool:

- (2) It generates children if the preschool serves halal meat... and many have gone to private preschools... I think what is most interesting is that suddenly halal becomes the meat we serve all children... if you are Christian or if you are not religious at all, then you probably don't want the blessing of this meat.

Therefore, although the preschool teachers can see the disadvantages of serving halal meat to everyone, they are reluctant, unwilling or, perhaps, unable to truly address the problem. Instead, the matter-of-factness of the economic realities is used to justify the unwillingness to address the question of halal meat. Economics, rather than the curriculum or values, define the strategy, the result being that the requirements of the parents are met.

At the same time, the preschool teachers are aware of the issues of serving halal meat and may even complain about their own willingness to set boundaries when it comes to the preschool adapting to parental wishes. In a semi-reflexive fashion, and without touching on the question of cultural values and conceptions of food, they claim that serving halal meat is inconsistent with the guiding documents:

- (3) If you read the guiding documents for the preschool, you will find that they state that the school and the preschool shall be non-confessional... but halal meat is a religious element that we allow in preschool.

The preschool teacher is aware of the inconsistency between parents' dietary requests and the Education Act's stipulation that the preschool be non-confessional. As a consequence, the question of preferences for "Swedish" food is not addressed – a question which is loaded with religious symbolism and which is the object of heated discussions in public discourse. Instead, the strategy is one of passiveness and unwillingness to "get involved". Inconsistent with an intercultural approach, they do not set any boundaries, nor involve themselves in discussions with the parents on these matters. Instead, they give way to external pressure, money or the vagueness of the curriculum or religiously motivated claims that are inconsistent with the curriculum. At the same time, they let the latter take precedence over the legal principle of a non-confessional preschool.

In their interaction with parents, another avoidance strategy among the preschool teachers is to use *noa* words instead of the word "halal".⁴ In quote 4, the term "halal meat" is replaced by the term "the red bowl":

- (4) We negotiate with parents about, for example, this thing with halal; then they are given their halal meat and the others are given regular meat... we have criticised that. We don't say halal anymore, we say... "the red bowl".

Once again, this means that the core question and symbolic power of food preferences are not addressed; rather, the issue is diverted by using rhetorical tactics. In quote 5, the preschool teachers are both highly aware of the sensitivity of these issues and engaged in meta-reflection:

- (5) About this thing with halal, we have actually made a decision not to call it halal meat, because the word haram is a rather strong negative word and we don't, if I understand it correctly, have a word for it in Swedish.

⁴ The Polynesian word "noa" pertains to the opposite of a taboo: i.e., something that can be used without risk.

Thus, they are not in the habit of talking about halal openly; instead some of them refer to halal as “AF” (alternative food):

- (6) Everything that is not halal becomes haram and haram is “not okay” and then in the end it becomes wrong, we think, that these children are given approved food and the others in some way food that is not approved... therefore we have made a decision to call it alternative food, so we say AF – so we have sort of switched.

Thus, one reason for not using the word “halal” but the safe phrase “alternative food” is because halal is associated with its opposite: “haram”. Another reason is the connotative objectiveness of “alternative food”, which serves to “desacralize” the food. This line of argument indicates a certain meta-reflexivity (consistent with the transcultural approach) and a relative insight into the meaning of halal and haram. Yet it exhibits little awareness of how one’s own vocabulary and expressions divert attention away from the core issue: i.e., the extent to which dietary preferences should be met in the preschool – meaning that they fall short of the intercultural or transcultural approaches.

Such a renaming strategy is not without problem. Quote 7 exemplifies how enmeshed and complicated the reasoning becomes when the preschool teachers name the different “sorts of meat” for the children. Here the *noa* word for halal is “general food” or “variation meat”:

- (7) Yes, we call it halal, but now we have received a letter stating that we must stop saying halal; we must call it “general food”... “variation meat”, because there is this thing called haram. Haram is the opposite of halal. And it became very... the children sat looking at those who didn’t eat halal and then it was haram and it was ugly.... you shouldn’t hide that there is pork. After all, these children are growing up in a multicultural society; you just have to accept that situation.

The last sentence in the quotation suggests that the preschool teacher has reflected on these questions – and has come to the conclusion that the preschool teachers ought to deal with this problem more directly and not avoid it, indicating more of a reflection mode consistent with an intercultural approach. At the same time, this insight does not materialise in preschool practice (i.e., interaction mode), especially not if it means drawing a line in the sand vis-à-vis the parents.

5.2 The preschool teachers’ efforts to change views

As we have seen, in relation to the parents, the curriculum and the preschool as an organisation, much effort is made by the preschool teachers to deal with the challenges that come with dietary requests. But such dilemmas must also be managed in relation to the children. The curriculum stipulates that children should be heard and encouraged to participate in the everyday life of preschool:

- (8) In all of this, what are the rights of the child? If I have decided, as a parent, that my child shall be vegetarian. S/he will sit there and see the other children eat and really want to taste it... so what happened with the rights of the child?

Several preschool teachers return to the fact that children are influenced by their parents. In the case of food, the preschool teachers do not think or act according to an intercultural approach. Rather, they refrain from challenging the parents and remain at a conscious multicultural level, whereby they assume that parents want their children to follow certain dietary practices, and in this respect the children become bearers of food-related values and religious symbolism.

At the same time, the children are curious and more open to eating different food. At an early age, the symbolic boundaries are less internalised than they are in adults. Therefore, some of the preschool teachers try to make parents loosen their demands that their children must “eat according to the parents’ culture”. The rationale is that the children should be encouraged to explore and transgress symbolic boundaries: i.e., an intercultural or a transcultural approach. Albeit that it discusses vegan and vegetarian food, this quote illustrates these approaches:

- (9) We inform the parents that “this happens in the eating situation”. Because sometimes it is not about pork in the first place but vegetarian food – if a parent has chosen that. When we say, over and over “this happens in the eating situation and your child doesn’t feel good about it”... many times the parent will change his/her mind and say “OK, at preschool it is OK”. That is to say: “we do what we do at home, but he or she can have what others are having at preschool”.

To convince the parents, the preschool teachers refer to the children’s well-being and comfort. The quote also shows how the preschool teachers, in their interaction with parents, deal differently with the concrete meal situation and demands from parents when it concerns vegetarian or vegan food as opposed to halal meat. The reason for this is that the former has less cultural and religious connotations.

Moving on the preschool teachers use food and the meal situation as an intercultural learning opportunity:

- (10) Meal situations are very good forums for discussion. There is lots about language: “How is that said? How can you say that in English?” There are different dishes, and we talk about how we eat and what they eat in that country. Yesterday one girl said – we had meatloaf – and she said, “I want some more chicken!” – I said, “it’s not chicken, it’s from a cow” – “Cow?” she said and looked very puzzled. I said: “yes, people can eat cow”, and we started to rattle off all different animals that people eat in different countries... and had a very exciting discussion.

Together with the children, the preschool teachers are involved in interaction and reflection that broaden both the children’s and adults’ views on and understanding of different cultures. In this way, the symbolic boundaries of food become visible and, possibly, an object of scrutiny. For the children, this is consistent with the goals of the curriculum.

Frequently, the preschool teachers have intercultural discussions with the children about culture, religion and symbolic boundaries. In these discussions, the children often refer to, or unknowingly reveal, their parents’ attitudes:

- (11) The words “halal” and “haram” are very popular among the children, and they talk about so many things that are forbidden. They ask me: “do you eat pork?” or “are you a Christian?” When I say that “yes, I am”, they go “aah!” or “what?!” They have so much prejudice from their parents.... You cannot eat with your left hand, and me being left-handed! One child said, “eeeh, you are eating with your left hand – you are Sheitan’s daughter!” I said, “what? whose daughter?” – “Sheitan’s”, s/he said. “That’s the devil’s daughter. My mum says you cannot eat with your left hand because then you are Sheitan’s daughter, son or child.” “No, you can eat with both hands; it’s no problem,” I said.

These discussions reveal that the preschool teachers’ mode of reflection extends beyond the instrumental multicultural and conscious multicultural approaches. Instead, by drawing the children’s attention to the “cleans and dirties” and “acceptables and unacceptables”: i.e., the

symbolic boundaries of society, they adhere to an intercultural approach. As well, the preschool teachers make efforts to influence the children so that they become more intercultural:

- (12) I say “I can eat halal meat, I can eat my food, I can eat every sort of food, I have more to choose from, because I can eat everything”... they need a counterbalance since of course at home it is “this is how we do things, this is how it is”.

Thus far, we have presented a dozen examples of meal situations where challenges result from divergent views on dietary requests. Values and symbolism permeate these views, and typically such values and symbolism are at odds with one another. Therefore, these dilemmas must be managed by the preschool teachers themselves, something that tends to be done with an unreflective or semi-reflective mode, and an ad hoc-like mode of interaction. The examples given illustrate how the preschool teachers adhere to different understandings of culture and religion and have different modes of reflection and modes of interaction vis-a-vis the children and their parents, as well as to the stipulations of the law, curriculum and the organisational realities of the preschool. A consequence of this is that the preschool teachers handle these issues differently. Yet, a common denominator is that there are two overall approaches: avoidance and attempts to evoke change.

6. Discussion

Swedish preschools shall ensure compliance with universal human rights and the fundamental values of Swedish society (Lpfö 1998/2010). These rights and values should guide the preschools’ climate, activities and methods, at the same time as the preschools should exhibit openness to, tolerance of and appreciation for cultural, ethnic, religious and social differences, and respect for the children’s unique backgrounds. In the eyes of the preschool teachers, this means that the curriculum contains potential ambiguities and contradictory objectives. It also remains unclear to the preschool teachers how these objectives are to be accomplished.

This fact, given the high level of diversity in Swedish preschools, and current debates on migration to Sweden have made food, diet and meal situations sensitive matters. Previous research (Stier & Sandström 2018) shows that preschool teachers must handle the challenges that arise with food, diet and meal situations. Often, they adhere to an instrumental multicultural or conscious multicultural approach in such situations.

Just as in the case with preschool diversity in general (Stier et al. 2012, Stier & Sandström 2018), when the preschool teachers handle dilemmas pertaining to food and dietary requests, they draw upon a conception of culture, a mode of reflection and a mode of interaction. Based on these, four different, yet overlapping, approaches to preschool diversity have been proposed: instrumental multicultural, conscious multicultural, intercultural and transcultural.

In this study, the preschool teachers mainly adhere to an instrumental multicultural approach – and less so to a conscious multicultural approach (illustrated in quotes 1-7). Cultures, ethnicities or religions are viewed as different, static and internally homogenous entities, and the preschool teachers are relatively unaware of themselves as cultural beings. This includes a limited understanding of matters having to do with ethnic and cultural heterogeneity and how such heterogeneity includes ideas about food and meals and related prescribed behaviours and dilemmas.

Cultural values and religious symbolism related to food are components of any culture or society. Meal times are surrounded by rituals and norms, and what is eaten or not is prescribed by taboos and values. Thus – and as we see in the interviews – food, eating and meals are loaded with symbolic meaning. Food defines boundaries between what anthropologists refer to as clean and dirty and what sociologists and others conceptualise as

“us” and “them”. Yet, the preschool teachers are relatively unaware of the social dynamics of such boundaries, and simply see and handle them matter-of-factly. This is expressed in how they talk about the religious and cultural aspects of halal meat, while they give little or no attention to the cultural, ethnic or religious underpinnings of food and meals of Swedish society. This affects their outlook on things and their interaction with children, parents or colleagues (Stier et al. 2012; Stier & Sandström 2018). More specifically, it impacts their view on how far the preschool should go to accommodate food preferences of and dietary requests made by parents.

For the preschool teachers, a multicultural preschool becomes a question of coping with differences, with a distant or exoticising mode of interaction and with focus on the culture, ethnicity or religion of “the other”. In interaction with parents, there is an unwillingness or reluctance to set clear and unambiguous boundaries when it comes to food preferences and religiously motivated dietary requests, consistent with the curriculum, the Education Act or the overall norms of dominant society. Instead, the preschool teachers adhere to different avoidance strategies: i.e., not challenging the parents on their wishes and demands.

Such strategies include pointing to but not enforcing curriculum stipulations, relabeling, redefining or circumventing the problem or controversy, remaining passive, using ‘cooling strategies’, using *noa* words or serving halal meat to all children. In quote 8, the preschool teacher’s reflection mode is consistent with an intercultural approach, whereas his/her interaction lacks the clear boundary-setting of such an approach. Additionally, quote 9 is a rare example where the preschool teachers question and argue against the views of the parents, and try to make them change their stance. In this sense, they adhere to more of an intercultural approach. At the same time, this quote revolves around vegan and vegetarian food, not culturally, ethnically or religiously motivated dietary requests.

There are additional examples of the intercultural approach (e.g. quotes 9-12). Here, the preschool teachers’ interaction with the children is more focused on laying bare and discussing cultural, ethnic and religious differences – and relates such discussion to food, eating and the symbolic boundaries and values surrounding food. In these instances, the preschool teachers try to stimulate the children’s curiosity and willingness to explore these things. Quotes 9-12 exemplify an intercultural interaction mode. In addition, there are fragments from the transcultural approach (e.g., in quote 9). In this sense, for children food is a tangible and focal part of everyday life to reflect on and discuss. Yet, the preschool teachers need an in-depth understanding of the fact that food is more than matter. It is a symbol that defines cultural, ethnic and religious boundaries and that regulates the relationships between individuals.

Moreover, the children are used as intermediaries – to inform the parents about values, methods and food-related ideas. In one respect, this is also an avoidance strategy – i.e., the children are used to influence or change the parents’ dietary requests. An outcome of this is that the parents better understand – and, in turn, accept – the preschool’s way of working. Another is that the children become “squeezed” between the expectations and demands of their parents and the preschool.

The avoidance strategies (particularly in their communication with the parents) that the preschool teachers describe are typical for a multicultural-instrumental approach. Hence, their understanding of culture as such and the cultural underpinnings and symbolic power of food is relatively shallow and their mode of reflection largely unconscious. By renaming the food or by serving halal meat to everyone, their mode of interaction is largely void of boundary setting. At the same time, in their interaction with the children, the preschool teachers exhibit more of a multicultural-conscious or intercultural approach. With the children, cultural values and symbolic boundaries are explored in a more relaxed manner. Given the heated discussions on halal meat in Swedish preschools, this is unsurprising.

7. Conclusions

The results show that the preschool teachers – as well as the preschools as organisations – have problems handling dietary requests from parents. Their approaches vary with regard to how they view culture, how they reflect upon these issues and how they interact with children, parents and colleagues. Many of them come across as relatively instrumental and unconscious in their approaches, whereas others are more intercultural in their ways and, for instance, see the value and potential of diversity. Common to all of them is that they use avoidance strategies and use the children to influence the parents' views on food and eating.

In stark contrast to the strong emphasis on gender equality in Sweden, which also permeates the preschools and materialises in their work with gender pedagogy, much less ideological consensus and legal clarity surround questions of culture, ethnicity and religion. Neither the curriculum nor the law is sufficiently specific in these matters.

Why is that? The adherence to multiculturalism may have led to vaguely defined boundaries to what a society should accept in terms of culturally, ethnically and religiously motivated claims on society, whereas boundaries and tolerance for variations with regards to gender and the treatment of boys and girls in preschools are less open to compromise. The preschool teachers have been trained in gender matters and are confident in handling them in relation to parents, whereas there is no professional guide pertaining to cultural, ethnic and religious diversity or dietary requests based on these. Instead, the preschool teachers must develop their own approaches to these questions as they arise in everyday practice. As such, the preschool teachers would benefit from support that can help them to work towards the objectives of the curriculum.

What has been analysed in this study are focus group interview data: i.e., accounts of a limited number of preschool teachers, not what they *do* in their everyday practice. Yet, the study is valuable and trustworthy since it provides new knowledge on how preschool teachers reason around these matters. In focus group interviews, the presence of others may decrease the participants' willingness to share their thoughts, at the same time as the design allows for more breadth and width when light is being shed on a particular topic. Therefore, the benefits of such this study exceed its limitations.

About the authors



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