

Article

Identification, Silence, Separation, and Imagination: Children's Navigations of Christmas in a Religiously Diverse Norwegian Kindergarten

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Abstract: Christmas plays an important role in kindergartens in all the Nordic countries. While for many, Christmas is a time for belonging, for others it is a time for withdrawal or longing. This article applies ethnographic data to examine how staff and children manage Christmas in the context of a religiously diverse Norwegian kindergarten. Describing how Christmas dominates the kindergarten from late November and through December, I analyze how this affects children's practices, narratives, and opportunities to belong. Building on Yuval-Davies' concept of the politics of belonging, I develop a typology of four interrelated ways of navigation: identification, silence, separation, and imagination. This typology illuminates how children may be affected by the politics of belonging, but also how their agency and creativity lead to different ways of navigation, influencing processes of belonging. By providing a child-centered perspective on belonging, this article provides an empirically based contribution to discussions about inclusivity relating to religious and cultural diversity in ECEC.

Keywords: belonging; Christmas; children's navigation; religion; ECEC



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1. Introduction

Christmas dominates an entire season, especially in North America and Europe [1]. The religious and cultural aspects of the holiday are deeply entangled, combining traditions from pre-Christian festivities and Christian traditions celebrating the birth of Jesus, with more recent influences from commercialization and popular culture [2]. Christmas in Norway is still understood as a Christian seasonal celebration, but it is also celebrated by many non-Christians who consider it a cultural tradition. Following Klassen and Scheer, this holiday can be described as simultaneously inclusive and assimilatory. Christmas challenges and defines borders of difference and belonging, resulting in regular struggles and conflicts around the holiday in increasingly diverse societies [1] (p. 3–10). Based on ethnographic data, this article will analyze how Christmas in a religiously diverse Norwegian kindergarten is managed by its participants. The aim of the article is to discuss how Christmas as a site for religious and sociocultural belonging affects children's practices, narratives, and opportunities to belong in the institutional context of kindergarten. By describing and interpreting children's expressions of belonging, as well as discussing how the kindergarten's practices enables and constrains the children's opportunities to belong, this article may contribute to the development of more inclusive practices in relation to religious and cultural holidays in ECEC.

The children's expressions and narrations are seen as social navigation. I follow Vigh's definition, seeing this as ways to act, adjust, and adapt strategies in relation to the way people experience, imagine, interpret, or expect their social environment [3] (p. 420). Social navigation concerns the actor's social position and influence on the context [3] (p. 431). Children's navigation of religion and culture is analyzed as an interaction between their context, their background, and their individual navigational choices. As Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is an important arena for early socialization [4] (p. 25), the

managing and navigation of religion and culture may impact the children's identity formation and sense of belonging. Due to the influence of Christmas in many parts of North America and Europe [1], Christmas serves as a useful site to study dynamics relating to socio-cultural belonging in a religiously diverse setting.

In present day Norway, 87% of children aged 1–2 and more than 97% of children between the ages of 3 and 5 attend kindergarten [5]. These children come from a variety of cultural backgrounds. There is no official data of the religious backgrounds of children in kindergarten but since attendance is so high, the kindergarten population mirrors the total population of the Norwegian society adjusted for age. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that the majority have a mixture of Christian and secular backgrounds, while a sizable minority have backgrounds from other religions and world views [6] (p. 320).

National law regulates Norwegian kindergartens. The Kindergarten Act states that “the kindergarten must be based on fundamental values in the Christian and humanist heritage and traditions”, before adding that these values “also appear in different religions and beliefs and are rooted in human rights [7]. The role of Christian and humanist heritage and traditions, and the relationship to other religions, are interpreted differently by different policy-makers [8] and researchers, particularly when it comes to how the order of the religions mentioned in the object clause should be interpreted [6,9]. Kuusisto and colleagues point out that due to the lack of definition of what Christian and humanist heritage implies, it remains up to the individual kindergarten or staff member to define this [10] (p. 52). How staff members interpret the role of Christian and humanist heritage, and the balancing between majority and minority traditions, may have consequences for their pedagogical choices, and for the children's learning opportunities, inclusion, and belonging.

Detailed supplementary provisions for kindergartens' contents and tasks are articulated in The Framework Plan. Related to children's need for care, the plan demands that staff ensure that all children find “belongingness” in kindergarten [11] (p. 7, 19, 20). Religious and cultural diversity is addressed in several parts of the document. The Framework Plan states that kindergartens should be inclusive communities, and promote equality, diversity, and mutual respect, regardless of the children's religious or cultural backgrounds [11] (p. 8, 9). There are also several process-oriented formulations stating how the staff should work to reach these goals. For instance, “Staff shall introduce the children to and observe important dates, holidays and customs in the Christian tradition and those of other religions and world views represented in the kindergarten” [11] (p. 55). This implies that in a religiously diverse kindergarten, staff should introduce the children to holidays of different religions. However, as will be showed below, previous research finds that working with religiously based holidays is challenging for staff, not only in Norway but also in other Nordic countries.

Several studies from Norway find a gap between the policy documents' instruction to introduce different holidays, and staff members' self-reporting of which holidays they actually include. While all kindergarten reports that they emphasize Christmas, other holidays are often neglected. [6,12–16]. A recent study, however, finds an increase in the staffs' emphasis on minority religion in selected kindergartens [9], suggesting both regional differences and changes in practice. Within the Nordic countries, the role of religion and culture is articulated differently in national policy documents [9,10,17]. Nevertheless, several studies from Sweden, Denmark, and Finland all show that Christmas has a central place in kindergartens [18–26]. A common denominator across the Nordic countries is a tendency among staff to emphasize a secular framing of the holiday. They tend to see Christmas practices as national culture rather than religion [9,12,19–22,24,25]. In this context, Christmas may be seen as practices relating to majority culture. As such, the above research is in line with findings from several researchers concluding that majority discourses tend to dominate in Nordic kindergartens while staff, to a limited degree, reflect upon consequences for inclusion and discriminatory practices [26–30].

While it is broadly documented that Christmas has a central place in Nordic ECEC, I have found no studies concentrating on how Christmas affects children's expressions of belonging in kindergartens.

2. Theoretical Framework

There is a general agreement among scholars that belonging is a fundamental human need. However, there is no agreement about how belonging should be conceptualized and measured [31]. While assessments of belonging often involve measuring individuals' self-perceptions [31], my study is methodologically influenced by an increasing amount of ECEC studies that focus on expressions of belonging as observed through interactions between children, seeing belonging as a relational phenomenon [32–37].

Theoretically, I owe credit to a group of studies applying Yuval-Davies' framework on the politics of belonging [38]. These studies apply a variety of methods to show how belonging is constructed and contested in kindergarten. Here, belonging is not only seen as relations between the individual and the closest community but also as influenced by structural conditions and boundaries. I will explain how I use this framework below.

Yuval-Davies defines belonging as an emotional attachment, a feeling of being "at home" [39] (p. 10). People can belong in many ways and have different attachments. Rather than being a fixed position, belonging is always a dynamic process. Yuval-Davies differentiates between three interrelated analytical facets that shed light on how belonging is constructed. The first is people's social location, the intertwined way people belong to different categories such as sex, race, class, or nation [39] (p. 12). Such categorical belonging may be more or less visible to outsiders. As such, I do not have full access to the children's social location. In my analysis of social location, I will focus on how the place of Christmas in the children's home is mediated. I will pay attention to how this is revealed and constructed but also concealed and challenged through different identity narrations within kindergarten.

Identifications and emotional attachments are Yuval-Davies' second analytical facet. She elaborates on how these are expressed through narratives. Identities are understood as "stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)" [39] (p. 14). These stories are not only verbal but may be constructed as different practices, relating directly or indirectly to perceptions of what being a member of a group might mean. Yuval-Davies argues that "embodied narrations", specific forms of practices, are crucial in the construction and reproduction of group identities [39] (p. 14). Through narrations and practices, people communicate belongings and what their memberships in different groups may mean to them. However, such narrations and practices also strengthen or weaken the way people relate to, and are seen as relating to, different belongings. Yuval-Davies underlines the dialogical construction of identity. She sees narrations and practices as both reflective of and constitutive of identity, involving construction, authorization, and contestation [39] (p. 16).

This relates to Yuval-Davies third facet, namely "ethical and political values". This facet emphasizes how social locations are assessed by oneself and others, allowing insight into how values affect where and how identity boundaries are and should be drawn [40] (p. 203). While belonging centers on individual positions, attachments, values, and identifications, the politics of belonging refers to how power affects the creation, contestation, resistance, or maintenance of boundaries, and how the world's population is separated into "us" and "them" [39] (p. 19–20). Such boundaries are drawn both politically and in everyday life, and they interact with and affect each other.

As the politics of belonging affects different social positions, it is useful to investigate how different groups are labelled. Here, I find Brekhus' (1998) differentiation between marked and unmarked objects useful. In sociology, Brekhus uses the concept to understand how actors notice one part of a contrast, while the other is ignored. While the marked signifies an exception, the unmarked is taken for granted and naturalized [41]. According to Brekhus, social markedness is characterized by several attributes. The marked is heavily

articulated, in contrast to the unmarked. This exaggerates the importance and distinctiveness of the marked and gives it disproportionate attention. In addition, distinctions within the marked are often ignored, making the category appear more homogenous. While characteristics within the marked group are generalized to all members of the marked category, they are never generalized beyond, in contrast to unmarked categories who are perceived as universal [41]. This may have consequences for social status, and for opportunities to belong. In my analysis, I will show how celebrating Christmas has the naturalized and unmarked position in the kindergarten, while not celebrating is marked as an anomaly.

3. Materials and Methods

This study is based on ethnographic principles [42], analyzing material collected through 20 days of observation in a Norwegian kindergarten in the pre-Christmas period of 2019. The material consists of fieldnotes from observations, interactions, and informal conversations with staff, children, and selected parents in a strategically selected kindergarten. The study is part of a larger ethnographic work involving observations and group interviews with children [43–45]. The kindergarten was selected among five kindergartens with an established cooperation with the author's university. All kindergartens were described as culturally and religiously diverse, and with skilled staff members equipped to supervise students in intercultural communication. A pilot study in two of the kindergartens led to selecting the last one, based on the recruitment of parents. The observations took place in three sections of the kindergarten with a total of 57 children aged 3–5. In total, 43 of the 57 children participated in the study. Their parents gave written consent for their children to be observed and be asked questions that could reveal information about the family's religious background. They also consented to this information being audio recorded. However, as several children in the sections were not a part of the study due to a lack of consent from their parents, the general observations were documented by note taking, avoiding individual details of the non-participatory children. All participants have been anonymized.

My first observations were written down retrospectively because I prioritized building relationships with the children and establishing my position as a researcher [46] (p. 99–101). I later changed approach to bringing my computer and writing on site to gain higher accuracy. I strived to secure ongoing consent from the children [47,48] by providing age-appropriate information and being sensitive to their signals. I also wore a sign stating "RESEARCHER" in capital letters that served as a lighthearted but effective reminder for children and staff members about my role.

The head of the kindergarten described the kindergarten as multicultural, in the sense that nearly half the children had parents with backgrounds from countries other than Norway. Several of the staff had minority backgrounds, both linguistically and religiously. However, they were mainly assistants, and did not play a prominent role in the structured pedagogical happenings I observed. The staff I refer to in my analysis had a majority background, a background shared by me as a researcher. Most of the children were religiously unmarked, in the sense that staff assumed they had secular and/or Christian backgrounds. However, due to the need for religiously based food regulations, the staff knew that 11 of the children had parents identifying as Muslims. In addition, some children were known to have Christian (catholic, orthodox, protestant), Hindu, and Sikh backgrounds. As I, in line with, for instance, Bundgaard (2008), was interested in how the children's identities and relations were constructed at the site, I did not ask parents for background-information such as national background, religion, or language competencies. However, during fieldwork, several observational surprises [49] led me to contact four parents to ask questions about their backgrounds. These conversations are also part of the data material.

During fieldwork, I regularly shared my observations with children, who were eager to hear what I wrote about them. I also discussed my observations with staff members as a way of member checking, as the staff had more information about the contexts and

knew the children better than me. Although the value of member checking is contested, a benefit lies in the enablement of better assessments of the researcher's interpretation of the data [42] (p. 193, 194). As their observations and judgements are open to the threat of positional validity in the same way as the author's, I have strived to be transparent when staff members' observations, information, and interpretation is part of the material [42] (p. 193, 194).

4. Analytical Strategies

As the data are based on ethnographic principles, the analysis is based on an iterative process [42]. Emerging analysis shaped my observations, and observational surprises [49] led to slight changes in the research design, such as including conversations with some of the parents. While knowledge of existing research in the field prepared me to observe Christmas preparations, I was surprised by the extent and intensity of these, and of the differences in the children's way of navigating. Contrasts between the children's statements and expressions made me follow some of the children more closely. These observations also shaped the later stages of analysis, as is common in ethnographic studies [42,49].

I analyzed notes from observations using abductive strategies throughout the process [49] and principles of thematic analysis in the later stages of the analytical process [50]. While the direction of focus during the fieldwork may be described as a first stage of analysis, the next stage involved reading and re-reading the fieldnotes, focusing on interactions related to the Christmas preparations. This led to the development of data-driven categories for the different ways children seemed to navigate Christmas by statements and actions. By examining how children participated in different practices by actions and narrations, I established four partly overlapping ways of navigating Christmas: identification, silence, separation, and imagination (examples of the findings that led to the constructions of this typology will be further elaborated on in Section 5). Separation and imagination stood out as contrasting ways of handling difference during my observations, while silence gradually emerged as a contrast to the frequent sharing of experiences related to Christmas (analyzed as identification). Rereading the fieldnotes and searching for the frequency of different children's names mentioned in conversations at circle time and other activity sessions made this contrast more striking.

The next stage of the analysis focused on extending my theoretical framework and reading my data considering different theories. Applying Brekhus' call to analyze the continuum of a group [41] made me realize that I shared a blind spot with the practitioners, as I had taken the unmarked children's practices of identification for granted. Reworking my analysis by applying Brekhus' perspectives opened up a more nuanced understanding of the categories of navigation and helped me to analyze how the different ways of navigation had different consequences for the construction of social positions. After a process of reading my material in light of different theories in line with an abductive analytical strategy [49], Yuval-Davies' (2011) theoretical framework of belonging was chosen because it allowed for an investigation of the navigation of Christmas from different viewpoints. Her emphasis on narrations and practices also made it possible to use observations as data to analyze children's expressions of belonging.

In the following sections, I will describe examples of observations leading to the development of the typology of identification, silence, separation, and imagination as ways of navigating Christmas. The typology will be used to explain what is going on among children when navigating Christmas in a culturally diverse kindergarten. I will show how the children's narrations and practices give different expressions of belonging, partly reflecting their social locations. I will emphasize the discussion of imagination and separation, as these highlight important and demanding ethical questions relating to practitioners' handling of diversity and belonging in ECEC, relevant for the development of inclusive practices.

5. Results

From late November, Christmas preparations shaped the everyday life of everyone in the kindergarten. Each section I observed had their own cluster of rooms, in addition to a large, shared common room. Each section had small models of the Nativity scene, an Advent calendar made of heart-shaped gingerbread, an “Elf on the shelf” figure, informational posters about different words and symbols related to Christmas, and an increasing amount of Christmas decorations made by the children. In one room, there was a blackboard counting the days to Christmas eve, and in the common room, there was a big Christmas tree. The staff organized regular circle time events where they lit candles, one candle for each week of Advent. They also arranged several Christmas-related crafts and baking sessions. Parents were invited to take part in the celebration of St. Lucy’s day. This included eating breakfast and buns in kindergarten, while the oldest children dressed in white and sang about St. Lucy. They also sang other songs, both Christian Christmas hymns, secular Christmas songs, and non-religious songs unrelated to Christmas. Later, the children visited the local nursing home to sing for the elderly residents.

The manager of the kindergarten expressed awareness of the task of teaching children about the religious background of Christmas as a holiday. This was secured in several ways. A local vicar visited to tell the Nativity story to the children, the staff staged the same story at a different event, and the oldest children went to the local church for a Christmas service that included taking part in a Nativity play. However, there were also several Christmas events that were not necessarily connected to Christianity, such as a special meal with Christmas porridge, a “Santa-day” where the children were invited to dress in red in preparation for a visit from “Santa”, and a lunch where the children were invited to dress up in nice clothes and eat a traditional Christmas dinner.

The Christmas preparations were involving, engaging, and all-encompassing, continuously inviting the children’s participation. I generally perceived the atmosphere as warm, and my overall impression was that Christmas activities generated a lot of joy and excitement. The children were given daily opportunities to share their experiences from home, in tune with the preparations in kindergarten. Most of the children seemed to participate with enthusiasm and anticipation, and shared examples of practices and experiences from their home resembling the kindergarten’s Christmas preparation, expressing identification as Christmas celebrators. This contributed to an impression that Christmas included everyone. However, over time I noticed that while some children shared a lot, other children regularly stayed silent. The silence, however, gave no clear signals as to whether the children felt that they belonged in the Christmas practices or not.

Several staff members explained that they aimed to make the Christmas preparations inclusive. However, they differed in their approach. Some seemed to take it for granted that Christmas was inclusive and belonged to everyone. Others seemed more conscious of the risk that not all the children might feel equally included and tried to normalize the fact that not all people celebrate the same holidays. On some occasions, they used the Islamic holiday of Id to justify that some of the children with Muslim backgrounds did not celebrate Christmas. However, the religious background of the children was rarely addressed. The following occasion was an exception:

4 December 2019: It is circle time, and Kari tells the children about different Christmas symbols, illustrating with artefacts. Several children comment that they have stars in their windows at home, while Hodan says she has not. Kari comments in a friendly tone: “No, because it is not the case that everyone celebrates the same. And does it matter?”. “Nooo”, several children reply. “Because, Kari, you don’t celebrate Halloween”, Stian comments. Kari confirms that she is “not very fond of Halloween”, and adds “and at Hodan’s place, they are not so. . .no, they celebrate Id instead.” Oda raises her hand and is allowed to speak. “They do not celebrate Christmas because they are Muslims”, she states. “Yes, Hodan and Maryam and Muhammad and Amir who is not here are Muslims”, Kari says. “And I”, Esmā adds. “Yes, and you”, Kari confirms.

While talking about Christmas symbols, several children use the opportunity to connect it verbally to their home background. Only one child comments that she does not have a star. Kari tries to normalize the situation. Aided by another child, she uses herself as an example, not being fond of Halloween, which has recently been celebrated in the kindergarten. She seems to choose her words carefully, saying that Hodan's family celebrate Id instead. Another child attributes the non-celebration of Christmas to being Muslim. Kari confirms, and adds that three of the other present children, as well as one not present, are Muslims. However, I did not notice any of these children speaking about their relationship to Christmas (or about their religious background), either during this session nor on other occasions. Rather, they often stay silent during circle time. Esmā, however, often participates, and declares her fondness for Christmas several times. Asking other staff-members, I learn that they believe Esmā has some Christmas celebrations at home, in contrast to the other mentioned children. It is noticeable then, that Kari momentarily forgets to mention Esmā when she mentions the Muslim children in the group.

It is fully possible that some of the children's lack of participation was not related to Christmas being the subject. However, in my observations, the children with experiences of Christmas from home clearly had more opportunities to participate in conversations, both during circle time, during activities such as baking, crafting, and listening to music, and in informal conversations.

While staff told me that several children did not celebrate Christmas at home, they sometimes disagreed about whom it concerned, and were open about having limited information. Hodan was the only child who was explicit about not celebrating, although another child also mentioned not having a Christmas tree. Hodan, however, repeatedly stated that she did not celebrate Christmas. The following conversation took place during mealtime. The children were seated at small tables, four children at each table.

2 December 2019: "I don't have a Christmas calendar", Hodan says. "Why not?", Karsten asks. "Because I don't celebrate Christmas", she replies. "I have a Christmas calendar", Karsten states. "I have two Christmas calendars", Joey says loudly, he sits at the same table. "I have three Christmas calendars", Esmā says even more loudly, sitting at another table. "I have four", another child joins in, before another enthusiastically says "I have five!", and yet another child loudly states "I have ten Christmas calendars!". "I don't have a Christmas calendar", Hodan repeats. "Why not", Karsten asks the same question yet again. "Because I don't celebrate Christmas!" Hodan answers loudly.

Regularly, it was hard to know if the children were talking about their experiences, or if they were pretending. I discussed my observations with the staff, and they agreed. As one teacher said, "I think you have to put a lot of the statements on the account for nonsense". Sometimes, the statements were clearly playful and unrealistic, as in the example above where some children claimed to have an unlikely amount of Christmas calendars. Still, these statements were a clear contrast to Hodan's repeated statements of not celebrating Christmas.

Sometimes, the imagination took place as playful comments or exaggerations. At other times, I registered small cues, statements that seemed odd, although not necessarily untrue. For instance, one boy, Zeshan, shifted between strange statements and convincing talk about how he was decorating his house for Christmas. During circle time sessions, he spoke about his Advent calendar made of square gingerbread (to me, an unusual variation of the kindergarten's gingerbread-hearts), and in conversation with me and his peers, he told us about his miniature Christmas tree decorated with marbles, as well as his giant Christmas tree that was so big that he could hardly see the top. I suspected he was making things up but was unable to conclude before I asked his mother. She confirmed that they did not decorate their home or celebrate Christmas.

When several children described their Christmas trees during circle time, Zeeshan stated that "Tomorrow, I'm going to fetch a Christmas tree from the forest for my home, because we don't have a Christmas tree". He later added, thoughtfully, "But maybe if we are buying a saw for the Christmas tree, we need money for the saw". Here, it

seemed he imagined how he could solve the apparent discrepancy between his home environment and his peers', not seeing his family's traditions as a hinderance but perhaps their economic situation.

In one instance, a Christmas activity led to physical exclusion. In mid-December, the three sections I observed went for a joint visit to the Church. All the parents received written information about the planned excursion. Staff told me that they did not ask for explicit feedback from the parents, but still some of the Muslim parents approached them to tell them that they, as Muslims, had no problems with their children visiting the church to learn. However, Hodan's parents made clear that they did not want their daughter to attend the service. At the day of departure, she turned out to be the only one not allowed to join. She cried openly when the other children left, clearly distressed. Several staff members seemed uncomfortable with the situation, and some of the children expressed worry and compassion. After intense discussions among staff, one of the teachers stayed back with Hodan and, among other activities, gave her the valued responsibility of decorating the lunch table for the children in her section. When I returned from the church, Hodan greeted me with a big smile, proud of how she had helped, showcasing a piece of gingerbread she got as a reward. She ate it slowly, sharing small pieces with one of her returning friends. While getting seated, her friend Joey asks her: "Are you a Muslim?" Simultaneously, one of the staff members raises her voice, instructing the children to join in singing a song. "Joey, was it written Isra in the church", Hodan whispers back to her friend. "No", Joey answers. Then the staff member starts singing, and Joey and Hodan join in. In my interpretation, Hodan showed curiosity about the place her friends had visited without her and connected it to knowledge about Church being a site for celebrating Isra, the Muslim name for Jesus. Joey, however, did not seem to relate to Hodan's terminology, or the emphasis on text, and the conversation was put to an end by the joint singing. Later, Hodan recalled the experience as a day she felt very sad.

6. Discussion

Christmas played a dominant role in the everyday life of the kindergarten throughout December. This resembles findings from previous research on Christmas in kindergartens [12–14,16,19–22,24,25]. Although staff members explicitly said that not all people celebrate Christmas, these statements went alongside the heavy emphasis on Christmas in kindergarten, which shaped the material and social environment for more than a month of the year. The children navigated this environment in different ways.

Building on Yuval-Davies, I analyzed the children's navigation of Christmas in kindergarten through practices and narrations as expressions of their belongings. Yuval-Davies specifies that "specific repetitive practices, relating to specific social and cultural spaces, which link individual and collective behavior, are crucial for the construction and reproduction of identity narratives and constructions of attachment" [39] (p. 15, 16). The Christmas preparations consist of numerous such practices. Different social locations provide different possibilities for the children's navigation of these practices. While important aspects of the social locations of the children's homes initially are unknown to other children and staff members, the children's navigation of Christmas through narrations and practices affects how they are identified in the kindergarten context.

In the following, I shall return to my research question, namely how Christmas as a site for religious and sociocultural belonging affects children's practices, narratives, and opportunities to belong in the institutional context of kindergarten. In order to develop answers to this question, I will discuss the individual categories of my typology: identification, silence, separation, and imagination. I will develop the analysis of how these four different ways of navigation result in confirming, concealing, or challenging the identification of their social location in relation to Christmas. In addition, I will discuss how the kindergarten's Christmas practices enables and constrains their space for navigation and, consequently, the children's opportunity to belong.

6.1. Identification

All children participated in numerous activities related to Christmas. For children from social locations with a similar approach to Christmas as the kindergarten, the pre-Christmas period gave frequent opportunities for identity confirmation. Many children eagerly shared experiences, identifying practices from home with the practices in kindergarten. The fit between their social location and the pedagogical context of the kindergarten supported inclusion. As belonging is understood as a feeling of being “at home” [39] (p. 10), narrations from children that show identification with the practices in kindergarten are seen as indications of belonging.

Several studies have cautioned that children with a majority background get a privileged position in kindergarten [26–30]. My observations indicate that this is amplified during the pre-Christmas period. While staff had limited information about the majority children’s religious background, the unmarked, and hence normalized, position [41] in the kindergarten was celebrating Christmas.

While religious and cultural backgrounds were rarely addressed, it was apparent that it influenced the children’s opportunities related to Christmas. However, the differences were not clear cut. In contrast to the many children that were religiously unmarked, staff members were aware of children’s Muslim background when it influenced food regulations. However, this was not a general predictor of the families’ relationship to Christmas or of the children’s navigation of Christmas. While staff had an impression that several families did not celebrate, only Hodan was exempt from joining the excursion to church, and there were also children with Muslim backgrounds that shared experiences from Christmas preparations at home. Lappalainen (2006) remarks how parents with non-Lutheran background differ in their approach to their children’s participation during Christmas celebrations. Statistically, it is not surprising to see similar diversity among Muslims in a Norwegian context. A recent report found that more than 1/3 of Norwegian Muslims decorate their homes for Christmas, give Christmas gifts, and eat particularly good food on Christmas eve, while less than 1/3 report not celebrating Christmas [51] (p. 28). As warned by Schirilla (2020), however, kindergarten staff are at risk generalizing practices based on religious stereotypes [52], and above I showed how Kari seemed to forget Esma’s Muslim identity, possibly because she shared narratives, experiences, and positive emotions related to Christmas.

6.2. Silence

Several children gave few signals about how they viewed Christmas in kindergarten, or how Christmas was handled in their home. This may have several causes, both related to the children’s personality, their Norwegian language skills, and their cultural backgrounds. Giæver states that experiences related to Norwegian language and culture give an increased possibility to dominate in exchanges in kindergarten [27]. My observations resemble her findings. Therefore, the children’s silence may be a result of the pedagogical context. Silence, however, is not necessarily a passive strategy. Staying silent in the role of the observer, the children may keep ownership of their own experiences, observing and learning the cultural codes of the kindergarten. Seeing silent children as owners of agency does not, however, remove the staff’s responsibility to include.

Children navigating the Christmas celebrations through silence gave an ambiguous reflection of their identity and their sense of belonging. Lacking definite information about their social location, they could be both positioned as outsiders and insiders or somewhere between. However, being silent made the children stay unmarked, and as the unmarked and taken for granted position was celebrating Christmas, silence gave an impression of belonging. Still, being silent when in a minoritized social location may be seen as unevenly distributed “invisible work”, unacknowledged and often lonely [53].

6.3. Separation

One child repeatedly expressed that she did not celebrate Christmas. By doing this, she undertook demanding boundary work with the risk of being marginalized by staff and peers, marked as different, and potentially not belonging. The combination of the pedagogical context, Hodan's social location, and her navigational choices made her a marked outsider to the kindergarten's community of Christmas celebrators. While belonging is a complex process, involving both individual competencies, motivations, and perceptions, these are enabled and constrained by opportunities to belong [31]. For Hodan, the contrast between her home environment and the kindergarten's emphasis on Christmas constrained these opportunities.

Yuval-Davies remarks how ethics of care are developed to transcend constructions of belonging, encompassing caring emotions as guiding different relations [39]. Such an ethic was visible in the episode when Hodan was excluded from the kindergarten's excursion to the local church. Her emotions of being left out clearly affected the staff, who did their best to repair the damage, giving her an alternative role of being a helper, showing her importance for the group, and rewarding her work with a piece of gingerbread.

While Hodan was physically excluded from the others during the church excursion, she had stated her difference for weeks before the excursion happened. Staff regularly performed actions that planted seeds for viewing religious and cultural differences as ordinary, as when Kari compared Hodan's lack of Christmas celebration with her own reluctance towards Halloween. In this way, there was an opening for Hodan to claim her difference and remind others of her presence as part of the group. These reminders seemed to make the staff more conscious of finding ways of being inclusive and viewing the kindergarten as a community of difference. Still, in contrast to the statements of difference, Christmas shaped the life of kindergarten in an all-encompassing way during late November and through December. In addition, the lack of common religious literacy constrained opportunities for the children to learn from each other, as when Hodan wondered if "Isra" was written in the church.

Hodan's repeated statements of separation may be seen as a way of craving belonging. She insisted on taking up space, even if the pedagogical context was repeatedly centered around a topic that did not include her experiences. Conversations with the staff in the kindergarten confirmed that Hodan's statements and emotional reactions made them question the dominance of the Christmas period in kindergarten, and whether their pedagogy was inclusive enough. Still, for Hodan, the social and physical exclusion came with an emotional price that seemed against the kindergarten's principles of inclusion.

6.4. Imagination

Some of the children talked as if they celebrated Christmas at home, making use of imagination to take part in the dominant conversations. Imagination seemed like a resource in bridging the gap between home and kindergarten and obtaining some sort of experience through pretense, as well as avoiding being different. While not being given a position to partake from their family background, two of the children repeatedly took the position by playing, imagining, or pretending, while other children occasionally seemed to use imagination as a tool.

Anderson talks about all communities as imagined [54]. Observing Zeshan, this term came to life in an upside-down way. Zeshan seemed to imagine himself as belonging to the community of Christmas celebrators, a community taking up so much space in kindergarten, and being framed within such positive feelings. By using his imagination, he took a position alongside children who could more easily feel at home when Christmas was the subject. Through his narrations, he altered his family position as an outsider to an imagined position of an insider to the kindergarten's community of Christmas celebrators. This shows how social locations may be transgressed through identity narratives as pointed out by Yuval-Davies (2011), but it also shows how children's creative navigation may hide actual diversity in the context of kindergarten.

7. Conclusions

The context of ECEC is a setting heavily shaped by Christmas preparations. In my findings, celebrating Christmas had an unmarked and privileged position in kindergarten, shaping activities and interactions for a significant part of the institutional year. While transmitting cultural traditions is a part of kindergarten's task [11], the dominance of Christmas gives the children different possibilities. This has several consequences.

In my observations, the Christmas preparations generated a lot of joy among children across diverse backgrounds. Several children shared experiences and expectations related to their celebrations at home, showing identification with the kindergarten's practices. But it also created a need for some children to navigate differences between their home and the institutional setting. Their way of navigating was not a pure reflection of their home culture, but also reflected agency and creativity. Though Hodan's physical exclusion was obvious, she also navigated her position through narratives of separation throughout the pre-Christmas period. In contrast, children's navigation through silence and imagination contributed to carving out their positions of belonging and disclosed the larger diversity of the group.

The tensions of Christmas seem intrinsic to the holiday [1]. Hence, it cannot be expected that staff in kindergartens solve the challenges, neither between religious and cultural perspectives nor directed towards the fact that children may need to negotiate differences between their homes and their institutional contexts. Staff may, however, support children in their navigation. First, they can work to uncover more of these differences. Second, they can consider to what extent the holiday should shape everyday life in the kindergartens. Third, they can secure representations of other religions through their pedagogical work, to provide alternative arenas for identification. Fourth, they can consider how they can support the children's visible and more invisible work of navigation, acknowledging that navigational work is always harder when the waters are unknown.

My analysis supports the need for an intersectional perspective of belonging [39], and of a nuanced and child-centered approach to religious diversity in ECEC [52]. In addition to religious and cultural diversity, factors such as immigration history, language competency, and economical positions may also contribute to relations to holidays, the latest indicated through Zeshaan's reflections about the need for money to buy his much-wanted Christmas tree.

This article has provided an empirically based contribution to discussions about religious and cultural diversity in ECEC by providing a child-centered perspective of belonging. Theoretically, the typology of different ways of navigating belonging contributes to discussions about how the politics of belonging affect children. Johansson and Rosell show how children's belonging in preschool cannot be taken for granted simply because they are a part of a peer group/preschool group. Hence, they call for practices that see belonging as an important pedagogical issue, being aware of barriers and opportunities for belonging, as well as the children's expression of belonging [33]. This study shows how dominant cultural expressions, such as Christmas, create particular possibilities and limitations, and how the children's expressions of belonging may be both direct and subtle. But my study also shows diversity and creativity in how children navigate their environment, trying to belong. An awareness of children's expressions of belonging provides a child-centered starting point for discussions of inclusive practices relating to the navigation of religious and cultural holidays in ECEC.

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Informed Consent Statement: Age-appropriate ongoing consent was obtained orally from all children involved in the study, and in written from their parents. To secure voluntarily and informed consent, no pressure was applied to include all families in the kindergarten. Hence, not all children in

the kindergarten were included in this study. As this study was conducted as part of the day-to-day activities in the kindergarten, I interacted with some of the non-participatory children during the observations, rather than rejecting them. However, I did not obtain any personal information from non-participatory children. Consent from the staff members was initially given orally, and confirmed on every occasion of observation, before being secured in writing by the staff members I followed more closely. Substitute teachers and visitors such as the local vicar were informed orally and gave oral consent to be observed as part of the project.

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