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On the way towards integration? From monologic to dialogic encounters in Swedish rural preschools

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ABSTRACT
This article explores preschool practitioners’ perceptions of their encounters with migrant parents in rural preschools. The practitioners’ accounts are analyzed through Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism. This theoretical approach was chosen based on the assumption that a successful integration process is accompanied by the presence of a dialogic stance that embraces difference. The practitioners’ accounts describe a change, in terms of moving from a monologic to a dialogic stance, that in turn indicates a move towards (self-)reflexivity as far as their attitudes towards migrant parents and their own practices are concerned. In addition, the practitioners’ accounts can be understood as describing that they experience an integration process themselves.

KEYWORDS
Integration; rural preschools; migrant families; dialogism

Introduction
Research that addresses questions related to the integration of migrant families in preschools demonstrates a range of challenges in finding a common ground between migrant families and preschool practitioners (De Gioia 2013; Lamb 2020; Lunneblad 2017; Sønsthagen 2020; Tobin 2020; Van Laere, Van Houtte, and Vandenbroeck 2018). Previous research reports on a lack of dialogue and mutual understanding between migrant parents and preschool practitioners (De Gioia 2013; Tobin 2020; Van Laere, Van Houtte, and Vandenbroeck 2018), and shows that preschool practitioners often pay inadequate attention to cultural differences (Sønsthagen 2020; Tobin 2020). Nevertheless, as early childhood education in many Western societies represents the context in which migrant families with children meet the majority society for the first time, preschools remain an important integration arena (Lunneblad 2017; Tobin 2020; Vandekerckhove and Aarssen 2019).

Until recently, preschools in Swedish rural contexts have had little or no experience of cultural diversity. Prior to 2015, the majority of newly arrived families were offered or assigned housing on the outskirts of big cities, and the majority of newly arrived children entered preschools that had been characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity since
the mid-1970s (Ehn 1993; Ronström, Runfors, and Wahlström 1995; Björk-Willén, Gruber, and Puskás 2013). Consequently, previous research on migrant families’ encounters with Swedish preschools concentrated on how integration was accomplished in multicultural urban areas (Lunneblad 2006, 2013, 2017; Ronström, Runfors, and Wahlström 1995). Due to a change in Swedish reception policies and practices, the situation has changed. Between 2010 and 2020, the proportion of children with a foreign background in Swedish educational institutions grew from 20 to 29 percent (Skolverket 2021a, 2021b). At the same time, more and more asylum seekers were assigned housing in rural areas (Skolverket 2017; SCB 2020a, 2020b), with a lower density of residents and with more cultural and linguistic homogeneity. This change has also entailed children with migrant background entering preschools at which the practitioners had little or no experience of receiving newly arrived families.

Since preschool practitioners belong to those representatives of the host society who come into contact with newly arrived migrant families at an early stage, they are often seen as crucial for the families’ integration process. Yet, we know very little about how practitioners who have little or no prior experience of receiving migrant children and their guardians perceive their encounters with the families. Thus, it is of interest to explore how integration is made sense of in a rural context where the newly arrived families can be considered as novices in the society (in our study represented by the preschool) and the preschool practitioners also can be seen as novices in their role as integrators. With these circumstances in mind, the aim of this paper is to explore preschool practitioners’ accounts of integrating with newly arrived families. This study is part of Author 1’s PhD project (2020–2022) on how the integration of newly arrived families is accomplished in educational institutions with little or no previous experience of linguistic and cultural diversity.

State of the art

Earlier research into how cultural differences in beliefs and opinions concerning childcare and preschool practice are tackled in urban multicultural preschools found that these differences are rarely identified or discussed (De Gioia 2013; Garvis 2020; Tobin 2020; Van Laere, Van Houtte, and Vandenbroeck 2018). Research also shows that practitioners’ expectations of migrant parents tend to be guided by values and norms that they hold for parents with majority background (Lunneblad 2013, 2017; Sønsthagen 2020). Earlier research has also shown that paying inadequate attention to cultural differences causes practitioners to tend to view migrant parents who fail to act according to the cultural norms of the majority as deficient. The practitioners try to ‘foster’ the migrant parents to become preschool parents typical of the host society (Lunneblad 2013, 2017; Sønsthagen 2020). In Sweden, studies also indicate that preschool practitioners are uncertain about confronting value differences and handling diversity, which might be rooted in the desire to avoid conflicts (Anderstaf, Lecusay, and Nilsson 2021).

Earlier studies also draw attention to the question of power differences between migrant parents and the preschool staff. These studies show that migrant parents are hesitant to ask questions and express their opinions about the preschool because of language barriers or because they have not yet developed an understanding of the education system and the school culture in the host society (Conus and Fahrni 2019; Tobin 2020; Vuorinen 2020).
In order to avoid misunderstandings and misguided expectations, and to facilitate reflexivity among practitioners regarding their own practices, researchers emphasize the importance of dialogue between the preschool and the migrant families (Baghdasaryan, Lampa, and Osman 2021; Conus and Fahrni 2019; De Gioia 2013; Tobin 2020; Van Laere, Van Houtte, and Vandenbroeck 2018; Van Laere and Vandenbroeck 2017). However, as dialogue is not always easily achieved, the practitioners’ goal should not be to reach consensus, but should rather strive towards creating communicative spaces in which multiple meanings can be discussed and mutual understanding be achieved (Tobin 2020; Van Laere, Van Houtte, and Vandenbroeck 2018; Vandenoort 2009).

This study makes a contribution to the field as it sheds light on how preschool practitioners with little or no previous experience of diversity reflect on their own integration, and how a dialogic stance must be adopted if integration is to be successful.

**Settings and methodology**

Research collaboration was initiated with three preschools in a rural municipality in Southeastern Sweden that had experienced a rapid influx of asylum seekers in 2015 and 2016. The municipality has for a long time been struggling with out-migration of working-age residents and subsequent population ageing. Thus, as in many other rural municipalities, in-migration was seen as a way to reverse the population decline: there was a positive response from the local municipality, and a commitment from civil society to welcome the migrant families (Arora-Jonsson and Larsson 2021; SOU 2017:1). The reception of migrant families has had a strong impact on the participating preschools in terms of diversity. The percentage of children with parents born abroad at the preschools rose between 2015 and 2019 from 5 to 45 percent, 5–14 percent, and 14–27 percent, respectively (SCB 2015-2019). Hence, in two out of three preschools, the practitioners had, before 2015, very little prior experience of receiving migrant families.

The study is based on six focus group interviews conducted in 2020 by Author 1. The use of focus groups was chosen because focus group interviews ‘give participants an opportunity to narrate their personal experiences and to test their interpretations of events and processes with others, and whether confirmed or disputed, the result is a polyvocal production, a multiplicity of voices speaking from a variety of subject positions’ (Goss and Leinbach 1996, 116). The first round of interviews was conducted in each of the three participating preschools, whereas the second round of interviews was conducted online owing to the situation caused by COVID-19 (Thunberg and Arnell 2021). The first focus group interview was an introductory interview that evolved into a genuine conversation about the participating preschool teachers’ experiences of and reflections on working with migrant families. The second focus group interview was conducted three months later and was based on preliminary results from the first round of interviews as well as on a stimulus text chosen by the Authors.

Focus group interviews were conducted with the aim to generate multiple and heterogeneous viewpoints of how preschool practitioners in rural preschools experience ethnic diversification, and to obtain in-depth knowledge of this. The total number of focus group participants was thirteen, with each focus group consisting of 3–5 participants (Kitzinger 1994). All but one participant, who was a childminder, were university-
educated preschool teachers. All were female, had a Swedish background, and all but one had worked for over ten years as preschool practitioners.

The interviews lasted between 90 and 120 min and were video-recorded. In accordance with the guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (2017), the participating practitioners were informed about the advantages and the risks of the study, that participating was voluntary, and that the research data would be treated as strictly confidential (Adler, Salanterä, and Zumstein-Shaha 2019). Information about the study was provided for all participants and written consent was obtained. During the interviews, all informants were given pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. The extracts that are included as illustrations in this paper have been translated with particular consideration of the practitioners’ own way of expressing themselves. Therefore, we have at times applied non-idiomatic translation, in order to ensure that the meaning of the expression is recreated in the target language.

The overall question that guided the first round of interviews was what challenges and opportunities had arisen due to receiving migrant families, and what approaches and strategies were used to handle the increased diversity. A preliminary analysis of these interviews revealed that the preschool practitioners experienced a significant amount of change in their attitudes towards the migrant families. This finding informed the questions for the second round of interviews, in which the focus was on how the changes perceived by the practitioners were affecting their everyday practice and attitudes. Thus, the questions for the second round, designed by the two authors together, were intended to expose what the perceived changes entail in more detail.

To further focus the practitioners’ attention on the core topic of the study – encounters with migrant families in Swedish preschools – and to establish a common communicative ground for the interviews (Hydén and Bülow 2003), a stimulus text was given to all participants before the second round of interviews (Törrönen 2002). The stimulus text was a shortened version of an ethnographic study focusing on integration in preschools in the 1980s (Ehn 1993). The interview questions related to the stimulus text were used to guide the practitioners to interpret the experiences of integrating migrant families in suburban Swedish preschools in the 1980s and to compare them with their own experiences. This resulted in a reflexive mode among the participants, as they moved back and forth between now and then, trying to capture the core of their experiences. The participants were open and generous during these discussions, and many of the narratives that emerged were co-constructed by the group.

Data analysis was conducted in three stages. The first two steps were conducted by Author 1 and the third step by the two authors together. After the second round of interviews had been conducted and all interviews transcribed verbatim, the data was chunked into small units, depicting narratives, which were marked by a descriptor (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Leech and Onwuegbuzie 2008). Next, the complexity that was found in the narrative trajectories was reduced through identifying and reviewing the narratives related to the key question about how the integration of newly arrived families had been accomplished from the practitioners’ perspective. In this step, thematic maps were used that included a moving back-and-forth process between the descriptors and the data, to validate the emerging narratives and to identify the assumptions underpinning them. Subsequently, the analysis was enhanced through exploring connectivity among the narratives related to continuity and change as regards to collaboration with the children’s
guardians in a Bakhtinian sense (Bakhtin 1981; De Fina 2021). In other words, our analysis of the practitioners’ narratives is based on Bakhtinian ideas on dialogicity (Bakhtin 1986).

**Theoretical framework**

Integration of newcomers into a new society is a process consisting of different elements: the settlement of newcomers in a society, the interaction between newcomers and members of the host society, and the social change that follows the immigration flows (Penninx 2019). Nevertheless, as Penninx (2019) emphasizes, due to the inequality of power and resources, the host society’s way of receiving and perceiving the newcomer is of paramount importance for the outcome of the integration process. This is why the perceptions of representatives of the host society may play a crucial role in the integration process. Questions of relevance are how or to what degree the migrant families are required to adapt to the majority norms, and how or to what degree their cultures and worldviews are accepted. Hence, at stake are the majority representatives’ perceptions and reactions to difference and diversity (Penninx 2019).

One way to explore the preschool practitioners’ accounts of their perceptions of their encounters with the migrant families is to analyze them from a Bakhtinian perspective. This perspective on the practitioners’ accounts draws on the theory of dialogism, according to which all utterances are responses to preceding ones. Thus, the practitioners’ accounts are seen as responses to their earlier experiences and beliefs, and in relation to surrounding (contextual) discourses and utterances (Bakhtin 1981).

To answer the questions regarding how the practitioners handle difference and the degree to which they take into account the migrant family’s perspectives, we also make use of Bakhtin’s conceptualization of difference and otherness (Bakhtin 1981, 1984, 1990). According to Bakhtin (1990), we all see the world from different horizons and thus the ‘others’ are not only those whom we perceive as the Other, but everyone with whom we interact: we are all ‘others’ to each other. To take the others’ perspectives into account in a dialogic interaction deepens one’s understanding of the world. Dialogism, thus, embraces difference and otherness. At the same time, a failure to take the other’s perspectives into account and denying or rejecting difference amount to what Bakhtin calls ‘monologism’. Monologism strives towards unity and value sameness in preference to diversity (Bakhtin 1984).

From the dialogical perspective, consensus is neither a goal nor a means. Instead, differences and conflicts between different interpretations, worldviews and discourses constitute the characteristic and the creative force of a dialogue (Bakhtin 1981). The perceptions of others that are not challenged through dialogue remain objectified images and stereotypes, and contribute to a monologic stance (Bakhtin 1984). A monologic stance is further contrasted to a dialogic stance as it is characterized by speaking to, rather than with, others. A monologic stance may therefore be seen when ‘someone who knows and possesses the truth instructs someone who is ignorant of it and in error … ’ (Bakhtin 1984, 81). In other words, taking a monologic stance implies that one does not aim for, expect, or take into account any response. This is why a successful integration process requires a dialogic stance that opens up not only for difference, but also for an exchange of opinions and perspectives.
Findings

The practitioners’ accounts revealed that they had undergone a series of changes as regards to their perceptions, approaches and practices regarding the migrant parents. This experience was shared by all informants. The accounts of change emerged during the first round of interviews. The talk about change evolved at the intersection of contrasting narratives organized under the following headings: accounts of otherness and we-ness, from dysfunctional to functional communication, from monologic expectations to responsive incorporation, and from uncertain monologism towards confident dialogism. While describing what they considered as a change and making their role in it clear, the preschool practitioners switched between describing ‘that’s how is it now’ and ‘that’s-how-it-was then’.

Accounts of otherness and we-ness

‘There is always a fear of the unknown’, stated one preschool practitioner, referring to her first experiences with welcoming newly arrived migrant families to the preschool. ‘Earlier it was more “them and us” and now it is not, that is the major difference, as I can feel’, described another practitioner. Her experience of change ranged from seeing the newcomers as ‘the others’ to including them in a common preschool-weness, in the sense that the migrant parents were included in the broad category of parents. Some of the informants also admitted that in the beginning they had stereotypical ideas about the migrant families but, as the following example shows, these ideas had faded away:

Bodil: I had many stereotypes ... But these stereotypes were heavily challenged, and they are not there anymore.
Interviewer: Why is that? Why are they not there anymore?
Bodil: Because I changed my mindset, because I think it was wrong.
Anna: Yes, and the insight that they are just like us.
Interviewer: ... It’s interesting what you are talking about now, that something has happened.
Bodil: Yes, something has happened, but it is hard to find the core ... in it. But it is probably because we got close to them. You have to get close, in order to dispel your stereotypes, thoughts and opinions.

These experiences of change in the practitioners’ perceptions of the ‘otherness’ of the migrant families illustrate a salient theme in the preschool practitioners’ talk about how it was then, in comparison with how it is now. According to the practitioners’ accounts, their perceptions of the migrant families were initially based on objectified images of the ‘other’ families. In the statements of Bodil and Anna, the change is attributed to their encounters with the migrant families. In addition, the statements can be interpreted as accounts of a change from a monologic stance that characterized the practitioners’ way of thinking before they ‘got close’ to the migrant families, to a dialogic stance that emerged as a consequence of their meeting with ‘them’. The accounts of change from otherness to we-ness also indicate that this perceived change has occurred in the practitioners’ mindset. Thus, the change is attributed to challenging their own stereotypes and fears, rather than to any actions taken by the migrant parents.
From dysfunctional to functional communication

One of the early practical challenges faced by the preschool practitioners was a difficulty with verbal communication. Meeting the newly arrived families was a new experience for them, in the sense that they started to take care of children with whose guardians they did not share a common language. At first, the practitioners had to solve the challenges on their own.

Rakel: and then we had to use sign language and, as we said, there were misunderstandings and laughter, but sometimes also a lot of hopelessness because … you felt that you really could not make yourself understood and it was their … it was so insecure for them (the migrant parents) to leave their children here at that time since everything was new to them too …

The extract exemplifies the preschool practitioners’ talk about the insecurity that was attributed to the lack of a common language. It also shows that the practitioners put themselves into the parents’ situation and reflected on the insecurity that the lack of a common language caused for the parents. Thus, the practitioners took a dialogic stance, taking into account the migrant parents’ perspectives on the effects of inadequate communication.

The narrative about how it was in the beginning was contrasted with narratives about how the situation changed after the arrival of language trainees who shared a common language with the migrant parents. The language trainees had no previous experience of working in Swedish preschools, and their Swedish was rudimentary when they arrived at the preschool. They were newly arrived migrants and learners of Swedish. They were assigned to the preschools as part of the process of integration into the Swedish labor market, obtaining language practice within a field of interest. Thus, their most valued competence was their ability to communicate with the migrant families in their first language.

Nevertheless, as the practitioners narrated, they initially expected the language trainees to convey information about the preschool’s rules and routines to the migrant parents and in this way solve the problems with misunderstandings. However, this expectation was challenged, because the language trainees lacked the necessary experience and knowledge of how Swedish preschools worked. As one of the practitioners explained:

Annica: So, we must explain to them (the language trainees) very, very clearly, just in the same way as to the parents. And then it is not so easy for them to talk about the preschool, as she did not understand herself … It can be something as simple as the fact that preschool is for everyone … that it should be equal for all children, and that is not always so easy for them to explain.

As the extract shows, the preschool practitioners realized that linguistic competence alone cannot solve the challenges of communication. They became aware of the fact that mediating the values and norms that are specific for Swedish preschools requires a common frame of reference about Swedish preschool practice that the language trainees lacked. The accounts of the realization that language is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but is embedded with social and cultural meanings represents an emerging dialogic stance among the practitioners. In contrast, the practitioners’ expectations that the language trainees could solve the communications problems with the parents, with
the associated failure to take into account the fact that they lacked experience of Swedish preschools, represents a monologic stance.

The realization that translating between two languages is a necessary but not sufficient condition for successful communication with the migrant guardians led to various measures taken in the preschools. This change included a reframing of the language trainees’ role. As it was narrated, the trainees’ role changed from that of communicator to that of mediator. They were no longer expected to take care of all communication with the parents on their own. The practitioners resumed their professional role and facilitated a dialogic interaction between all three partners: the practitioners, the language trainees as mediators, and the guardians. In addition, the practitioners’ accounts show that the language trainees gradually gained sufficient experience of preschool practices, and thus internalized the values and cultural codes of the Swedish preschool. For this reason, they eventually became able to manage dialogic encounters with the migrant parents on their own, and in this way build bridges between the migrants and the preschool.

**From monologic expectations to responsive incorporation**

The change in the composition of the parents’ group led to professional insecurity, because the migrant families acted differently than Swedish parents. For example, unlike the Swedish parents, the migrant parents did not understand why it was important to stick to a strict timetable or why their children needed lined waterproof pants. A growing awareness that the migrant parents did not automatically ‘know’ what was expected of them led the preschool practitioners to eventually acknowledge the importance of being responsive to the parents’ perspectives. This awareness is exemplified in the following lines:

Annica: … we have to be responsive, we have to listen to them, we have to meet … Earlier it was more ‘this is the way it works and now you have to adjust to it’. Now it is like we need to talk more …

Annica’s account describes a recognition of the need to become more responsive to the migrant parents’ perspectives. This account contrasts with a narrative about an expectation of a unilateral adjustment to Swedish preschool practice. What we can see here is a shift from a monologic to a dialogic stance that includes making room for, and being responsive to, the migrant families’ perspectives.

Other accounts of taking a dialogic stance stress the importance of collaborating with the migrant parents and reflecting about the pedagogical ideas behind certain rules and routines. In one of the preschools, the practitioners emphasized the key role of parent-active introduction that had recently been introduced. They stated that parent-active introduction made it possible to ‘get access to the parents for a whole day’ and to find out more about the family’s background and the children’s living conditions. Another argument for parent-active introduction was the importance of giving the parents the ‘experience’ of preschool practice, instead of trying to explain what it was about. The practitioners described that the dialogues with the migrant parents led them to realize that there were great differences regarding childcare between Sweden and the countries where the parents came from. This made the preschool practitioners acknowledge the
difficulties for the migrant parents in understanding all the taken-for-granted socio-cultural codes that underpin Swedish preschool practice. This awareness can be exemplified by the following extract.

Lisa: Yes, and there is so much that it unspoken, which must be very difficult, I believe. It must be ever so difficult. We think that it is something one just should know or understand … it is so stupid to believe that, because, how could one know that? That it should be lined waterproof pants …

Lisa’s narrative exemplifies a self-reflexivity about the unspoken rules of the preschool culture, and an awareness of how these rules differentially affect those guardians who did not have a Swedish preschool experience themselves. In addition, through taking a dialogical stance, the practitioners became aware that their expectations were not culturally neutral.

Responsivity is found in narratives concerning arrangements made to meet the migrant families’ preferences related to some issues but not to others. While respecting the preschool’s timetable and making sure that the children had clothing that was suitable for the weather was not negotiable: respecting the parents’ wishes about food preferences based on religious grounds was a matter of course. The practitioners stated that if the parents wished that their children should not visit a church during Advent, they arranged another activity for the children. The accounts also show that the practitioners made use of several strategies to incorporate the families’ culture and traditions into the preschool’s work. At the same time, the practitioners’ accounts also show that the democratic values on which the curriculum is based are non-negotiable.

From uncertain monologism towards confident dialogism

‘We are basically all humans, and if you can understand each other’s thoughts, it is not so frightening anymore’, reflected one of the practitioners on her experience of opening a dialogue with the migrant parents. Her colleagues’ accounts of a transformation from insecurity to professional confidence describe a similar process. What they identified as a key factor in this process is a growing reflexivity regarding otherness. From a Bakhtinian perspective, this transformation can be seen as a realization that the guardians, like themselves, ‘read’ everyday life through the lens of their own experiences and frame of reference (Bakhtin 1981). In other words, the practitioners realized that they were just as much ‘others’ as the families they saw as ‘others’. This can be interpreted as a recognition of the existence of the fully valid voices of others, (in this case the migrant parents), which is a precondition of the dialogue to encompass ‘an intersection of worldviews’ (Bakhtin 1984, 289).

The accounts of regaining professional confidence also reveal that the practitioners started to adopt a dialogic stance. In their case, this implied a different way of approaching and entering into interaction and discussion with the migrant parents.

Rakel: I feel that we do not hesitate to have those discussions anymore, like you said (Susanne), that we can have discussions about what our standpoint is, and what their standpoint is, and not stop there but (continue) to discuss there. Then I think the parents change and feel that … yes, maybe they get a different view of us too, a different … it might be that they feel confident because we dare to be honest and open, so they can be that too.
As the excerpt shows, when the preschool practitioners eventually reached the core of dialogical communication in terms of ‘remaining in otherness’, they were able to explore and negotiate differences in experiences and points of view between themselves and the migrant parents. In turn, the practitioners described that the dialogical encounters enriched not only their understanding and knowledge of the parents’ experiences and perspectives, but also their own awareness about which values they could or could not compromise over.

The accounts of the preschool practitioners reveal that the values that have a clear anchoring in the Swedish preschool curriculum, one of which is everyone’s equal value, were not negotiable. This was expressed through narratives of how important it was to make clear to the parents the impossibility of deviating from, for example, the principle of the equal value of women and men, and the right of every child to develop regardless of functional diversity. The following illustrates the experiences of preschool practitioners when they encountered a value conflict:

Interviewer: If you think about collaboration with the parents … what has changed in your contact with the parents?
Bodil: I have a good example. We had a father … who definitely did not think we women should decide anything … And once we wanted to give him information, he refused to accept a female interpreter, and would only accept a male interpreter. And then I got so angry, so I went to talk to the father and spoke with him as best as I could, and explained how it works in Sweden, and everyone’s equal value … Do you remember Katarina?
Katarina: Yes, I do.
Bodil: I stood outside and all the other staff were around, thinking ‘how will this end …’. After that, it turned and got better with that parent, actually.
Katarina: Yes, it did.
Bodil: It got better. After that, it was possible to communicate (with him) and so on.

On the one hand, Bodil’s account can be understood as an example of a monologic stance in the sense that she is ‘teaching’ the parent how things work in Sweden, and rejects a different standpoint regarding the value of women. On the other hand, the account can be seen as a dialogic encounter in which two value systems meet and where Bodil takes a professional stance. Bodil’s account of the value conflict can thus be seen as an example of taking a dialogic stance when faced with differences. This way, their approach stands in strong contrast to the practitioners’ prior monologic perceptions of and approaches toward the migrant parents, which were based on objectified images of otherness, leading to insecurity towards handling differences in a dialogic manner. In this case, Bodil’s straightforwardness had positive consequences for future dialogues with the parent.

In conclusion, dialogic encounters promote cultural negotiation because they enable different perspectives and opinions to come to light, and in this way create trust between migrant parents and practitioners. Nevertheless, since taking a dialogic stance does not even out differences and only brings them to the fore, dialogic encounters may also lead to professional dilemmas when faced with value conflicts in the practitioners’ everyday practice.

**Discussion**

Educational institutions create both opportunities and limitations for the integration of newcomers. Preschools have historically and culturally determined ways of operating
through everyday practice that is structured and maintained with the help of unwritten rules and rituals (Penninx 2019). Thus, when welcoming newly arrived families, preschool practitioners navigate between the perceptions of what a Swedish preschool is and what the newcomers represent.

The results presented in this paper illustrate how practitioners with little or no experience of diversity among children and their parents make sense of integrating the parents into the Swedish preschool, and integrating themselves into a multicultural preschool. Our results show that the practitioners’ accounts describe a change from a monologic to a dialogic stance. This change can first and foremost be understood as an incorporation of the newcomers’ perspectives into the practitioners’ preconceptions about Swedish preschool practice. Nevertheless, the evolving dialogic stance does not necessarily change their conviction about the necessity of certain basic routines, nor about the values that are firmly anchored in the Swedish preschool curriculum. However, through dialogic encounters, the practitioners adopted a culturally reflexive stance regarding their own practices and values. This stance, in turn, increased their professional confidence, which is necessary to face and negotiate the cultural differences associated with otherness. As a consequence, their professional ability to distinguish between what they could and could not compromise about was enhanced.

Earlier research calls for dialogic approaches and culturally sensitive practices in early childhood education (Baghdasaryan, Lampa, and Osman 2021; De Gioia 2013; Lamb 2020; Sønsthagen 2020; Tobin 2020; Van Laere, Van Houtte, and Vandenbroeck 2018). The results of this study confirm that self-reflexivity is a precondition for adopting a dialogic stance, while dialogic encounters with the newcomers at the same time facilitate culturally responsive practices.

The implications of this study for policy and practice are that it is important to ensure that everyday practice in preschool is organized and structured in such a way that dialogical encounters between the practitioners and migrant families are possible. This is in line with the findings of earlier studies about school-family relationships in multicultural settings, which show that teachers must foster dialogue with parents in order to build relationships associated with equity, trust, and cooperation (Conus and Fahrni 2019; Nikoloudaki et al. 2018; Tobin 2020). Earlier research also highlights the importance of cultural reflexivity as a means of integration (Lunneblad 2017), and of building trusting relationships between the newcomers and the preschools (Lamb 2020; Sønsthagen 2020). Our findings indicate that preschool practitioners must be supported such that they can critically reflect on their expectations of migrant families, and strive to gain a cultural reflexive stance toward their own practice (Van Laere and Vandenbroeck 2017).

In conclusion, we argue that recognizing that preschools operate in a socio-cultural context in which the expectations on parents are governed by taken-for-granted assumptions bound to that context is one of the most valuable insights that members of the host country must make in order to find the right adaptation requirements for newly arrived families (Lunneblad 2017; Sønsthagen 2020). Recognizing that members of the host society are just as much ‘others’ as the families they see as ‘others’ highlights the importance of two-way communication that leads to common ground. Finding common ground does not mean deciding once and for all who is to adapt to what, but rather creating an arena for mutual understanding that will, hopefully, lead to compromises on both sides (Tobin 2020; Vandenbroeck 2009).
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