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<https://doi.org/10.26881/pwe.2025.60.05>

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Racism in Norwegian Kindergartens?¹

Summary

Kindergartens, like all social institutions, function as arenas in which hegemonic constructions of “Norwegianness” are articulated and maintained. These constructions contribute to the reproduction of exclusionary national identities and racialized discourses. Although kindergartens often make efforts to incorporate and value diversity within their pedagogical frameworks, my research, based on interviews with 40 kindergarten teachers, reveals that both children and staff are exposed to various manifestations of racism. At kindergarten level, children may experience forms of othering by peers and adults when they do not embody the dominant norms associated with skin color, cultural background, or religious affiliation. Often they are not even acknowledged to be genuinely Norwegian, raising critical questions about the implicit criteria for national belonging. The data suggest that kindergartens are not insulated from broader societal patterns of racialization, and that racism may be expressed and experienced across multiple relational contexts, including among children, staff, and parents. This chapter seeks to illuminate the diverse forms of racism identified by the participants and to critically engage with their reflections on the complexities of recognizing and addressing racism within early childhood education.

Keywords: early childhood education, racism in Norwegian kindergartens, Norwegian national identity, racialization, institutional racism

Słowa kluczowe: wczesna edukacja, rasizm w norweskich przedszkolach, norweska tożsamość narodowa, kategoryzowanie ze względu na rasę, rasizm instytucjonalny

Introduction

My research, based on interviews with 40 kindergarten teachers, shows that Norwegian children – even kindergartners – are liable to experience forms of othering, from both peers and adults when they do not possess the “correct” skin color, culture, or religion. These children are either not regarded as Norwegian, or they are regarded as “not Norwegian enough.” What determines whether someone is considered Norwegian? Our self-perception is deeply shaped by how we believe others see us. Society creates social frameworks

¹ This article was originally published in Norwegian under the title *Rasisme i barnehagen?* in *Flerkulturelle* praksiser i barnehagen*, edited by Cecilie Fodstad, Therese Bjørnaas, and Svein Sando (Fagbokforlaget 2025). In view of the significance of the issues addressed in the article, the editorial board of *Issues In Early Education* has decided to reprint the text in the journal, with the permission of Fagbokforlaget Publishing House.

that exclude certain bodies from recognition as authentically Norwegian (Ramirez, Lyså 2024). To be considered a person worthy of recognition, one must often look, behave, and operate within the boundaries constructed, regulated, and legitimized by those in positions of power (Foucault 1999). Unfortunately, when Norwegian bodies are assumed to be white, non-white Norwegian bodies are perceived as *Other* (see: Gullestad 2005; Andersson 2010; Massao 2016; Dowling 2020; Harlap, Riese 2021).

In the context of early childhood education, Ragnhild L. Iversen (2020) emphasizes the importance of speaking to children about skin color, as children both notice and comment on visible differences, and white skin tone often functions as the norm. This chapter explores how skin color and other racializing markers shape the boundaries of belonging in kindergarten settings and how these processes may be experienced as racism. As someone who is half-Filipina, I know what it feels like to want to be perceived as Norwegian, and not to be perceived as such. Non-white Norwegians often feel that they are subject to a negotiation of what qualifies as Norwegian” in which whiteness is often seen as the main qualifying factor (Harlap, Riese 2021: 134). My skin color, my non-Nordic phenotypical features, and fact that my mother is from the Philippines are attributes that tend to prevent me from being perceived as Norwegian. As a non-white Norwegian, I have to negotiate my identity every day, and these negotiations are shaped by processes of **racialization** (a term that I will explain later in this article).

My research demonstrates that the majority of kindergartens actively incorporate multicultural diversity into their pedagogical practice. This is reflected by practices such as using songs in various languages, marking holidays and cultural observances from different traditions, and displaying different national flags. Other practices are problematic. For example, I have observed kindergarten teachers using flags to identify what they assume to be their students’ national heritage, even when they were born in Norway and may never have travelled to those countries. Questions such as “What constitutes racism?” and “Who has the authority to define racism?” are central in this context (Titley 2019). Racism in Norwegian kindergartens may be subtle and thus difficult to recognize, both for those subjected to it and for those who may unconsciously perpetrate it. Racist structures often arise in interactions between well-meaning individuals.

The effects of racism and racialization on non-white people are usually more complex and far-reaching than white people imagine. Questions like “Where are you really from?” and statements such as “You are from the Philippines” can feel offensive because I see myself as a Norwegian. Such situations make me feel powerless. Andersson (2010) has described how white Norwegians can act as “symbolic border guards” with the power to determine which non-whites will be allowed to be considered Norwegian and which will not: Whites assign racial identities to non-whites without regard to how they wish to identify themselves. The question “Where are you really from?” can feel like an insinuation that you do not belong here (see Erdal 2022).

The experience of racialization can be seriously harmful. Research has shown that children who face exclusion based on skin color, ethnicity, religion, or culture are at increased risk

for psychological distress (Curry, Nyborg 2003; Coll, Pachter 2009). For this reason, it is essential to engage in conversations about racism and racialization from early childhood, despite the discomfort that these conversations may cause.

There is limited research on racism in Norwegian kindergartens, and there is a widespread misconception that racism is not a problem there. My research shows that the kindergarten environment is not immune to various forms of racism and that such dynamics can occur among children, staff, and parents alike. This chapter aims to shed light on the different forms of racism that my participants in Norwegian kindergartens have experienced or observed and to share their reflections on the complexity of this phenomenon. The first step in challenging racism must be to talk about it (Faye 20021: 182). My central research question is therefore:

What forms of racism exist in Norwegian kindergartens, and how can we challenge them?

Theoretical Framework

Prisca B. Massao (2024) has observed that many Norwegians believe it is more shameful to be called a racist than to experience racism. To be sure, racism is a complex phenomenon. Bangstad and Døving (2023) have observed that it can be difficult to define because it manifests itself in different ways. Other scholars, including Andersson (2022) have echoed this view, arguing that it is not necessary to agree upon a single, fixed definition of racism. Still, it is essential to attempt to delineate the phenomenon.

According to Bangstad and Døving (2023: 12), the logic of racism consists of four interrelated processes:

1. Naturalisation – attributing negative characteristics to individuals as if they were innate and immutable.
2. Hierarchisation – ranking people so that some are considered more valuable than others.
3. Generalisation – prejudging individuals based on group affiliation.
4. Exclusion – discriminating on the basis of the above mechanisms.

According to Gullestad (2002), classical racism was an ideology based on the belief that distinct human races could be identified through physical characteristics, such as skin color. These physical differences were thought to directly correspond to traits like intelligence and morality, forming a racial hierarchy in which the “white race” was considered superior. For those who still believe that outward traits are inherently tied to a person’s moral values or intellectual ability, such characteristics continue to serve as markers of social boundaries today.

There is no genetic support for the thesis that human beings belong to more than one race (Saini 2019; Rutherford 2020). We cannot be assigned to different breeds, like dogs or

cats. In fact, grouping humans into Europeans, Africans, and Asians reveals more genetic variation **within** each group than **between** them. Despite the scientific consensus that race is a social construct with no biological foundation, the idea of race continues to shape many aspects of society in Norway (Gullestad 2002; Andersson 2010; Elgvin 2021) and other European countries (Rastas 2005; Essed, Trienekens 2008).

Goldberg (2006) argues that Europe's population exhibits a form of racial avoidance: it denies that race is relevant to social, moral, or political life. Even as contemporary definitions of racism have expanded beyond skin color (for example, antisemitism and Islamophobia), classical racism has not disappeared. The white individual is still perceived as the moral and cultural norm – both in Norway (Eriksen, Sajjad 2020) and across Europe (Lapiņa, Vertelytė 2020). According to a 2017 report from The Norwegian Centre Against Racism titled *We Don't Want to Play with You Because You're Brown*, one in four youth regularly experiences racism at school. A recent event reported on by TV2 News, Norway illustrates how people's treatment in society is still shaped by their skin color: an Associate Professor who grew up in Norway after being adopted from Indonesia, was spat on and called "a fucking Chinese" in broad daylight in central Oslo (Baraldsnes 2024).

Racism involves attributing characteristics to individuals based on their skin color, ethnicity, religion, nationality, or culture. Even positive characteristics (e.g. "Asians are smart"), can still be experienced as racist. Stereotypes like Asians are smart are most often applied to minorities regardless of how they define themselves (Massao, Skogvang 2023: 44). To understand racism, we must first understand racialization.

The concept of **racialization** comes from postcolonial theory, which posits that more than five centuries of European colonization have established and maintained a global power asymmetry between the West and the non-West. This asymmetry continues to shape people's perceptions of themselves. European colonial powers constructed a binary distinction between the "civilized" Western subject and the "uncivilized" non-Western other (Bjørnaas 2021: 59). Edward Said, the founding figure of postcolonial theory, argued that the cultural achievements of Westerners as superior to those of non-Westerners. The East has been viewed as a peripheral Other, while the West has been viewed as a normative ideal (Said 1978: 1–7).

A core tenet of racialization theory is that a majority defines a minority in terms of its perceived otherness. Thus, the majority functions as the norm, while the minority becomes *the Other*. Eriksen (2021: 106) articulates the difference between racism and racialization: "Race becomes a socially constructed category that operates through the lived consequences of racialization. Racialization shifts the focus to the processes through which race/ethnicity/culture is inscribed onto people's identities and relationships, forming the basis for power relations that create and maintain social structures." Racialization stems from a belief in the existence of distinct human races. It refers to the social processes whereby racial meaning is ascribed to people based on their physical appearance (see Li, Yang 2022: 109–111).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993), another prominent theorist of postcolonialism, contends that identity is relational, constructed within systems of difference. In this view,

the Western self is constructed in opposition to a non-Western Other, and the Norwegian self is constructed in opposition to a non-Norwegian Other. Norwegian identity, in this view, is produced in contrast to *the Other*. Specifically, Spivak suggests that non-Western identity is constructed as the negation of the West. For example, when a non-Muslim majority racializes a Muslim minority as misogynistic, it simultaneously racializes itself as egalitarian on the question of women's right. Through racialization, the majority maintains power by othering the minority calling into question its right to exist.

It is also important to emphasize that "whiteness" is not a fixed or unchanging category. Rather, it is a complex and evolving social construct that varies across time and context. The binary distinction between the white and the non-white oversimplifies the fluid and relational nature of racial categories. Whiteness is shaped by historical, political, and socio-cultural conditions, and its boundaries shift accordingly (Lapiña, Vertelytè 2020). For example, groups such as Italians and Jews, who are now generally perceived as white in the United States, were once racialized as non-white.

Racism takes many forms, and it can operate subtly as well as crudely. Some actions can be experienced as racist even though they are not intended to be experienced as such. A non-white person who is asked "Where do you come from?" might feel strongly that they are being excluded from the Norwegian community, even if this question was not intended to be racist. As will become evident throughout this article, it is possible to perceive another person's action as racist even when that action is not intended to be perceived as such. For this reason, it is vital to ask: who gets to define a given action as racist?

Empirical Data, Methodology, and Analysis

This study draws on interviews conducted with two distinct groups of kindergarten staff in Norway. Group 1 consisted of 13 kindergarten teachers with non-Western and non-Nordic (hereafter referred to as "non-white"), phenotypical traits, while Group 2 consisted of 27 kindergarten teachers with Western and Nordic (hereafter called "white") phenotypical traits. Participants were from various regions across Norway, including Finnmark, Troms, Agder, Oslo, Møre and Romsdal, Vestlandet, Rogaland, and Trøndelag. All interviews were conducted in the counties where the participants work.

Group 1 was composed of eight men and five women, aged 24 to 45. The men included one who was adopted from Ghana; one was born and raised in Norway to a father from Iraq and a mother from Chile; three men who were born and raised in Norway to foreign-born parents from Eritrea, India, and Turkey, respectively; two were born and raised in Norway to a Norwegian father and an Asian mother from Japan and Vietnam, respectively; and one was born in Afghanistan and arrived in Norway at the age of 16. The five women included one woman who had come to Norway as an adult, having grown up in Iran; one adopted from the Philippines; one born in Somalia who came to Norway as a child; one born and raised in Norway to Thai parents; and one with a Norwegian mother and Moroccan father.

Group 2 was composed of 22 women and five men, aged 23 to 60, all of whom were born and raised in Norway to two parents who were native to Norway themselves. The participants were recruited through direct contact with kindergartens, through existing professional contacts, and using the ‘snowball method’, where participants who knew the researcher introduced them to others.

The empirical data was collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews. The interviews were either individual or group-based, depending on the participants’ preferences. Some members of Group 1 preferred individual interviews, likely due to the personal nature of the subject. In other instances, the format was more incidental; some participants spontaneously invited colleagues to join the conversation. All participants were asked to provide demographic information beforehand to facilitate their assignment to groups. While different questions were put to each group, they were focused on common themes: diversity and racism in early childhood education.

Each interview lasted between 1.5 and 3 hours. The interviews began with open-ended questions, allowing participants to describe their general approaches to diversity in their pedagogical work. Because racism is a sensitive subject for many people, I deliberately postponed addressing it directly until later in the interview. Eventually, the topic emerged organically as participants began sharing past and current experiences with racism.

Despite the sensitivity of the subject, participants did not avoid or hesitate in their responses. All Group 1 members shared their experiences openly. The fact that I am half-Norwegian and half-Filipina seemed to put them at ease. In contrast, some Group 2 members initially responded in a guarded manner, attempting to answer in what they perceived to be the “correct” way. Several began by stating categorically that racism was not a problem in their workplace and that their colleagues were not racists. Nevertheless, most of the participants eventually became more candid and engaged with the topic in a meaningful way. Given my non-white background, I was acutely aware that the participants’ accounts of racism might resonate with me on an emotional level. To mitigate the risk of personal bias and maintain research validity, I applied a range of theoretical perspectives to the data in order to create an analytical distance from my own experiences and mitigate the risk of personal bias (Jacobsen, Postholm 2018).

The project was approved by Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (registration no. 847214) and conducted in accordance with ethical research guidelines. The participants received an information letter and consent form in advance. They were anonymized and assigned pseudonyms. To further protect their identities, I have chosen not to disclose the counties in which they work. On the other hand, I openly discuss the ethnic backgrounds of Group 1 members since they are an important aspect of this research. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants’ consent and then transcribed for analysis.

The data corpus comprised over 100 pages of transcriptions. I conducted a thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke 2006), combining inductive coding with theoretical interpretation in an iterative process, moving back and forth between the empirical material and relevant

theoretical concepts. As I began to identify recurring patterns, I developed initial codes such as “lack of knowledge,” “discomfort,” “pork ban,” “exclusion,” “skin color,” and “Norwegian culture.” These codes were then clustered into broader descriptive themes, including: “staff discomfort surrounding the topic of racism,” “Islamophobia,” “racism among children,” and “varied understandings of racism in practice.” In the next phase of analysis, these themes were refined through engagement with theoretical frameworks on racism (Braun, Clarke 2006: 86). Throughout the analysis, I maintained a continuous dialogue between empirical findings and theoretical perspectives, creating categories based on their relevance to the research question (Tjora 2012: 185).

Four overarching themes emerged across participants and were identified as central findings: various forms of racism and racialization in kindergartens; Islamophobia in kindergartens; racism among children, discomfort or reluctance surrounding the topic of racism.

To illustrate the diverse expressions of racism and critically engage with them, the first three themes are discussed in relation to the selected theoretical frameworks. The aim is to explore the relationship between theoretical perspectives on racism and the lived experience of racism. I intentionally refrain from making ethical judgments or suggesting concrete solutions to the problems confronting the participants. I want to understand which current theoretical models of racism are relevant for understanding the processes at play.

Different Forms of Racism in Norwegian Kindergartens

In this section I will present and discuss the participants’ narratives with respect to the three themes mentioned above.

All participants stated that they sought to encourage kindergartners’ respect for multicultural diversity. Several participants mentioned activities such as singing in different languages, celebrating different holidays, displaying flags from different countries, and providing brown dolls. Some mentioned that when children ask for a “skin-colored” pencil, they consciously offer them a black or brown crayon. The representation of difference as a norm is described by Angell (2011) as “recognition through cultural pluralism,” although she argues that such an approach can easily lead to simplifications and exaggerations. Most participants had reflected on the fact that racism can remain a suppressed topic even when diversity is a focal point of their pedagogical work. Even the participants who emphasized that there are many ways to be Norwegian occasionally used language that displayed an “us versus them” logic – as when someone observed, “the multicultural children play well with the Norwegian children.”

All the participants in Group 1, with one exception, reported having experienced racism in the kindergarten setting – primarily in their interactions with other staff members and parents. The one participant who did not interpret her experiences as racism explained that both children and parents were initially skeptical of her because she looked different and was Muslim, but that she did not view this as racism. Nearly all participants from both groups had

experienced various forms of racism in their kindergarten, particularly Islamophobia (racism directed at Muslims), racism among children (e.g. racist remarks, bullying, and exclusion), and racializing discourses and practices by both adults and children (e.g. exclusion from the Norwegian “we” within the kindergarten based on cultural and phenotypical traits). For instance, all participants shared stories about children who expressed that they did not want to play with another child because of their brown skin. Most participants were uncertain about how to handle such situations. They were unsure whether such incidents constitute racism; indeed, most believed that children are incapable of being racist. They tended to view these incidents as isolated incidents which did not significantly influence children’s preferences or choices of friends. However, all participants concluded that they lacked sufficient knowledge about the topic, partly due to a certain anxiety surrounding the issue.

Group 2 acknowledged that they often feared confronting colleagues who made racist remarks because doing so could cause discomfort. Group 1 reflected on the difficulty of speaking up when experiencing racism, out of fear of being accused of overreacting or being overly sensitive.

Direct and Subtle Forms of Racism

All participants in Group 1 reported that they had experienced and continue to experience racialization and racism in their everyday lives. Many also shared instances of racism within the kindergarten setting. A kindergarten teacher named Faiza, whose parents are from Somalia, described how she was treated differently by both parents and colleagues at a previous kindergarten where she worked. She referred to this as “everyday racism.” She recounted an incident at a social event when her manager, who was showing sexual interest in her, said that “he had never been with someone exotic.” She was unsure whether this could be classified as racism, noting that people who behave this way do not necessarily have bad intentions – “they just lack knowledge.” Faiza described an incident that she considered an example of racism, although she was not sure if others would perceive it that way:

A father told my manager that he didn’t want me to change his child’s diaper because I was dark-skinned. He had also told the other staff that he felt uncomfortable around me. I asked my manager whether it was acceptable to behave like that. My manager agreed that the father’s attitude wasn’t good but said he was “one of those SIAN (Stop Islamization of Norway) members” and that I shouldn’t let it bother me. My other colleagues said the father had freedom of speech. I didn’t change that child’s diaper, and I left the kindergarten shortly after.

The father’s demand that Faiza not change his child’s diaper fits the classic definition of racism. The father categorized her based on her biological characteristics, which he associated with negative moral qualities. One could infer that he believed the “white race” to be superior to the “brown race.” At a minimum, according to Andersson (2022: 42),

incidents of racism involve devaluing others and treating them differently based on their skin color. In this case, Faisa's skin color was referenced in an attempt to prevent her from performing the same tasks as her colleagues.

Faisa experienced direct discriminatory treatment, which violates fundamental democratic rights and is illegal under *The Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act* (Likestillings- og diskrimineringsloven 2017, §§ 6–7). *The Norwegian framework plan for kindergartens* (Kunnskapsdepartementet 2017) clearly states that kindergartens must discourage all forms of discrimination and explicitly mentions racism. It is unacceptable to justify the father's racist demand, as Faisa's manager and colleagues did, on the grounds that he is entitled to "freedom of speech." While parents do have the right to participate in decisions regarding their child's welfare and upbringing (Glaser 2023), they do **not** have the right to dictate which adult should perform which tasks at the workplace. This could have been treated as a learning opportunity if the child had expressed any anxiety about being around Faisa, but he had not. On the contrary, she said the child was very fond of her and would often seek her out for comfort and care. It is noteworthy that Faisa's colleagues dismissed the seriousness of the situation by referencing the father's political affiliation with SIAN. SIAN stands for "Stop the Islamization of Norway," a group that opposes the religion of Islam but claims not to oppose people of color in general. According to Faisa, she never disclosed her religion and did not display any visible markers of being Muslim. From a theoretical standpoint, the father's behavior can still be considered racist, as it was Faisa's skin color – not her religion – that served as the basis for exclusion.

Subtle and Unspoken Forms of Racism: Mistrust and Racialization

Several participants in Group 1 reported experiencing a more subtle form of racism – not overtly expressed, but still present and perceptible in the form of suspicion or mistrust. Ali, whose parents come from Afghanistan, shared the following experience:

I was very sick for a period, and then suddenly got worse. I vomited at work. When I called my manager to say I was going home, there was zero concern about the fact that I was actually ill – the focus was on whether I had informed my immediate supervisor. Two weeks later, my manager brought it up again, questioning whether I had really been sick. She didn't believe me. And I had literally thrown up.

Markus, who was adopted from Ghana, also reported experiencing a subtle form of racism, one that he found difficult to confront because he wasn't entirely sure whether it was truly about his skin color. He explained:

I'm Norwegian, with Norwegian parents. I don't have a different culture, and I don't speak any language other than Norwegian. But when a child gets hurt, it feels like it's my fault. Not

the fault of my other colleagues – just mine. It's probably a combination of me being male and multicultural, I don't know. I just didn't get the same trust from the start. That mistrust lingers. I'm the one who gets the emails or phone calls when something has happened, and they ask, 'Why didn't you look after that child?' One time I was blamed for an incident by my manager, but I wasn't even at work that day.

Before sharing his experience, Markus clearly affirms his Norwegian identity by stating that his parents are Norwegian, he speaks Norwegian, and the only culture he knows is Norwegian. Despite being Norwegian, his daily negotiations of identity with staff and parents at the kindergarten were marked by racialization. He was simply not treated with the same level of trust as his white colleagues, and he attributed this to his identity as an adopted person with a different skin color. But he wasn't certain that this was true. Many non-white individuals find that subtle forms of racism are especially difficult to deal with (see Orupabo et al. 2022). Although we cannot know for certain whether the incidents described by Markus and Ali were prompted by their skin color, and therefore qualify as racism, both men clearly suspected that their race was to blame for the lack of trust shown to them by their colleagues. Both Ali and Markus seemed to feel that their place in Norwegian society was being challenged on the basis of their skin color (Zhao 2013; McIntosh 2015; Tyldum 2019; Führer 2022). Markus experienced racialization: he was defined by his superiors as someone who does not do his job properly. As previously mentioned, Norwegians' own conception of "Norwegianness" is still strongly tied to being white. Markus's skin color is relevant to his daily work at the kindergarten since he feels that there is a conflict between his non-white appearance and his Norwegian cultural identity.

Flag Displays: Symbolism, Inclusion, and Racial Boundaries

Most participants said that they highlighted diversity in their pedagogical work. One common activity was hanging flags to visually represent the international diversity of a group of children. Kjersti (Group 2), shared her experience:

We hung up flags to show how good we were at including diversity, and it was kind of a big deal. But then some parents asked, 'Why have you hung the Somali flag at my son's spot? He's Norwegian.' We took down the Somali flag, and it sparked a discussion at our kindergarten. Their son was born and raised in Norway, so the parents thought he was Norwegian. Later, we consulted the parents before hanging up flags, but maybe we should have talked to the kids as well? But is this racism? I do know the intention was good.

Thun (2015: 204) writes, "Feeling recognized and included in the Norwegian community regardless of ethnic background and religious affiliation is important for children growing up in Norway today." But what criteria define people as Norwegian and entitle them to belong to the Norwegian community? According to Eriksen (2010), there exists a grey area

where the boundary between inclusion and exclusion is negotiated. For the kindergarten staff to hang the “wrong” flag above a child, assigning them an identity that they may not be comfortable with, might function as a form of racialization.

One could argue that hanging flags like this operates like a kind of **multicultural alibi** (Lauritsen 2011). Kjersti acknowledges as much when she says that they hang flags “to show how good [they] are at including diversity.” Staff need to be made aware that such activities are not necessarily experienced positively by the children concerned. While some children may enjoy being associated with a non-Norwegian flag, others may feel rejected, as if they are being excluded from the national “we” (Andersson 2010).

Although associating a child with the “wrong” flag does not necessarily constitute racism, staff should recognize that flag displays can inadvertently reinforce boundaries of belonging. Thun (2015: 205) concludes: “How adults in the kindergarten express their understanding of ‘Norwegianness,’ ‘Norwegian culture,’ and ‘other cultures’ will influence how children perceive themselves and their own belonging in the community.”

Islamophobia in Kindergarten

Several participants in both groups experienced hostile attitudes among staff, particularly towards Muslims. One informant from Group 2 describes a staff meeting where someone asked whether the kindergarten “really needs more Muslim employees.” Several participants in Group 1 described a toxic work culture in which colleagues speak negatively about Muslims or the challenges of working with Muslim children. Nora, who is half Norwegian and half Moroccan, says that when a Muslim child displays “undesirable behavior,” it is often linked to Islam or “Muslim culture.” She said that at lunch her colleagues would talk openly about how afraid they were to speak to Muslim parents about the behavior of their children. She explained: “They believe the father will take it out on the mother, as Muslim fathers allegedly blame the mother if something is wrong with their child. For my colleagues, Muslims are scary.”

According to Sayyid (2014), Islamophobia manifests itself as rumors and myths about Muslims and Islam that masquerade as “common sense.” The non-Muslim majority has a loud voice in Western societies, but Muslim voices are seldom heard. Kindergarten staff members act as witnesses of truth (Gardell 2011), portraying Muslims as dangerous and difficult, without giving Muslims themselves a chance to speak for themselves. Islamophobia also manifests itself in the unfair treatment of Muslims within institutions (Sayyid 2014). One informant in each group said that their Muslim colleagues are often discriminated against, especially when it concerns their religious practices. Gayan said: “I find it very discriminatory that Muslims have to pray in the bathroom and must keep it hidden that they need to pray. Imagine that – they have to use their bathroom breaks to pray.” Adrian (Group 2) agreed: “My Muslim colleagues want to pray, you know, but they aren’t allowed

to take time for that. Meanwhile, white employees take multiple smoke breaks a day, and that's totally fine."

Most participants in Group 2 said that they have good and functioning routines regarding the Muslim prohibition against pork consumption. Several in Group 1, however, mentioned that they have witnessed colleagues not respecting this prohibition. Frank, who is half Norwegian and half Vietnamese, tells of an incident in which an employee gave salami to a Muslim child and then laughed, saying: "Is it really that important?" Another informant says Muslim children are frequently mocked by other staff in the staff room, who say things like, "They can't even distinguish between pork and other kinds of meat." Some participants also said that parents are kept in the dark when pork is given intentionally or accidentally to children. Leo, who is half Norwegian and half Japanese, shared an Islamophobic incident he witnessed:

The other day we were going to make sausage stew. When a colleague put pork sausages in the pot, I had to remind him that there are children who don't eat pork. I said we need to make a portion with chicken sausages. He responded something like, 'Whatever, then.' I clearly told him it's not 'whatever.' But he only made it with pork sausages and didn't care about the Muslim children, who ate pork without knowing it.

Døving and Kraft (2013) observe that when Islam is a topic in the media, it is almost always in connection with integration. In general, participants in both groups saw an "us versus them" attitude being exhibited towards Muslims in the kindergarten. They referenced comments like, "Muslims have come to **us (Norwegians)**, so they should abide by **our** kindergarten rules." Døving and Kraft (2013) argue that a hallmark of Islamophobic discourse is the notion that Muslims threaten Western identity because they lack a willingness to integrate. Leo's colleague, and others who don't care if Muslim children eat pork, illustrate that Islamophobic attitudes are present in the Norwegian kindergarten. The idea seems to be that since most Norwegians eat pork, they should not have to accommodate those who do not. Reza, whose parents come from Turkey, made this comment: "There are so many staff in the kindergarten who don't respect that Muslims don't eat pork, but they don't disregard allergies or other food restrictions. Their attitude is that since Muslims don't die from it, it's fine."

These actions can be understood through Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of **mimicry**, which he uses to define the complex and ambivalent relationship between colonizer and colonized. Colonial mimicry refers to the desire of colonizers for the colonized to imitate their culture and values. By imitating the colonizers, the colonized undergo a process of transformation or "civilizing" so that they begin to resemble them. They never become identical to them, however; they forever remain imitators. For Bhabha, this form of imitation represents the colonizer's desire to make *the Other* more recognizable and controllable – "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 1994: 122).

Although it is uncommon for kindergarten staff to ignore or dismiss religious practices like the Muslim prohibition against pork consumption, Frank, Reza, and Leo report that their colleagues are doing precisely that. Their attitude is expressed by means of relativizing statements like “they don’t die from it.” Here again, the Muslim prohibition against pork consumption is regarded as foreign and “not Norwegian.” One might say that when Muslim children are served pork, they are being forced to mimic proper Norwegian behavior. A clear division between demographics is thus erected; it is **we** who are in the majority who must civilize **them**. By consciously serving pork, these colleagues are consciously making a statement about which religion should be respected in Norway and which religion should not.

You Can’t Come to My Birthday Because You’re Brown

Research shows that children under one year see skin color and phenotypic traits, but it is not until the age of three to four that they associate skin color with negative qualities and characteristics (Lorentzen, Raundalen 1995). This is also supported by Hirschfeld and Gelman’s (1997: 217) research: “By 3 years of age, children readily infer that members of one racial group are dirty, untrustworthy, and dull, while members of another racial group are clean, honest, and bright.” Recent research shows that such associations often occur as unconscious biases (Sangrigoli, De Schonen 2004; Banaji et al. 2013; Liu et al. 2018; Eriksen, Sajjad 2020). Almost all participants believed that children cannot be racist, and if children displayed racist attitudes, these were learned from parents, siblings, or media. More than half of the participants mentioned that racism could be a form of bullying, but unlike bullying, racism was often an isolated incident. The participants reflected on the complexity related to children’s racist attitudes. One informant said: “It’s silly to make a big deal out of something that might not even exist in the children’s minds.” Another said:

What if I make a big deal out of something that only makes the situation worse? I have experienced a child not wanting to play with another child because the child wore the wrong color dress. We must not plant ideas in the children’s heads.

Although children may not be aware of their biases, staff have a duty to intervene and actively engage when a child experiences racism in kindergarten.

Almost all participants reported that there was no preventive work being done against racism in their kindergarten, although the issue might be addressed reactively when incidents occurred. A recurring incident mentioned by nearly all participants involved a white child telling a non-white child that she did not want to play with her because she was ‘brown and disgusting.’ Vilde, who was adopted from the Philippines, says:

I work with the older children in the kindergarten, those aged 4 to 6, and I often hear comments like, ‘I don’t want to sit with him because he’s brown,’ and ‘You have to wipe my

bottom properly because I don't want to be as black as her.' Children are excluded because of their skin color. Especially, I have heard: 'You can't come to my birthday because you're brown.'

This is confirmed by Gayan: "I often experience that white girls don't want to play with Somali girls. They often say things like 'yuck' and 'she's disgusting and dirty.'" Maria (Group 2) says: "I actually have quite a few examples of racism among children. Children making statements like: 'I don't want to play with the brown doll, it's ugly,' and 'I don't want to sit with him because he is brown and disgusting.' This is typical for three- to five-year-olds." Participants, especially in group 2, express uncertainty about what to say to a child who expresses racist views. The perception is that if a child cannot be racist and therefore has no intention or knowledge of expressing racism, it is difficult and perhaps unnecessary to have a conversation about racism. Christina (Group 2) reflects on this uncertainty:

A girl in my kindergarten told me she doesn't like the colors brown and black. It was about her only liking rainbow colors because she associated them with unicorns, but one day she was talking with another girl about face paint and said she didn't want brown paint on her face because she didn't want to look like poop. But, this was about not wanting to look like poop, and can't really be racism, right?

Christina says she is unsure whether it should be considered racism, as the girl seems to associate the color brown with feces rather than with skin color in general. However, it is evident that, for the girl, the color brown carries a negative connotation – it represents something she does not want to resemble. In kindergarten, it is essential to address various forms of racism and racialization through open conversations – regardless of whether the behavior is intentional or unconscious. Talking to children about racism does not mean 'planting ideas' that weren't already there. On the contrary, it is more harmful to dismiss or ignore possible discrimination than to risk misinterpreting a child's intent. Staff must engage in dialogue to understand why some children may view brown skin as undesirable. In order to equip children with the understanding they need, staff must be capable of identifying and naming racism, thereby teaching why such expressions and actions are unacceptable (Berlak, Moyenda 2001).

Children's Interest in Skin Color

Most people in group 1 experience that children are interested in skin color and often ask other children why they are brown. Faiza believes that brown skin color must be compared to something positive, since it is often compared to feces or something dirty and scary. She says:

When children ask me why I am brown, I usually say that I have eaten a lot of chocolate cake, and I say the same when children don't want to play with a child because the child looks like poop. I say a little humorously: 'They don't look like poop, but chocolate.'

Like Faisa, Ismail, who has parents from Eritrea, uses humor when talking with children about skin color:

When children ask me why I'm brown, I usually say it's because I've been in the sun for a long time – and they laugh. It's a mix of humor and honesty in the same moment. Children are naturally curious, especially about people who look different from themselves, and that curiosity is a good thing. It's important for us to show them that being brown is something positive.

Conversations about skin color are an important way to prevent racism. In these discussions, it's crucial that staff avoid confronting or correcting the child too harshly and instead approach the topic with curiosity. A good way to begin is by asking open-ended questions like, 'What makes brown skin disgusting?' or 'What else does the color brown remind you of?' Even when there's no intentional racism, such conversations create valuable opportunities to explore the child's thoughts. Adults can gently guide the child to consider other associations with the color brown – not just negative ones like feces, but also neutral or positive things, such as squirrels and chocolate.

Furthermore, Lorentzen and Raundalen's (1995) research highlights that empathy is essential in counteracting racism. For instance, staff might respond to a child expressing a racist view by asking, 'How would you feel if someone didn't want to play with you because of your skin or hair color?' In anti-racism work, it's important to present differences as something valuable – but equally crucial is helping children recognize what they have in common. Larsen and Slåtten (2015) emphasize that focusing on similarities strengthens a sense of community and lays the foundation for friendship. They also point out that forming friendships and having positive experiences with children who are different is one of the most effective ways to prevent racism.

Children Can't Be Racists: Racism Without Racists?

The participants tended to focus more on the children expressing racist behavior than on those experiencing it, largely because they struggled with the idea that young children – who 'cannot be racists' – could engage in racism. This reflects a broader theme in the racism debate in Norway: many non-white individuals report experiencing racism from people who do not see themselves as racist. But how can racism be addressed if no one identifies as a racist? In a kindergarten setting, this becomes particularly complex. While children at this age are not racists in a conscious sense, their expressions and attitudes can still reflect

unconscious biases. And even when such remarks are unintended, racism always has a recipient – someone who is affected by it.

The political philosopher Frantz Fanon explored how colonization deeply affected the mental health and identity of the colonized. According to Fanon (2002), ‘the white gaze’ transforms the native – who was once carefree in their own body – into what he calls ‘a negro’s body.’ This gaze reduces the natives’ subjectivity to stereotypical, racist representations imposed by the colonizers. Fanon argues that colonialism created an inferiority complex in the native, filling them with jealousy toward the Western colonizer (Fanon 2002). The native then desires to identify with white culture, values, and ideals, believing that only by doing so can they elevate their status as a human being. This leads to a continual striving to become like the oppressor, positioning the white colonizer as the figure of power while the native places themselves under the authority of white validation. Ultimately, the native’s desire to be white is, in fact, a desire for higher human status.

Inferiority complex and self-hate – referred to as internalized racism – affect those who experience racism, and this can occur even in kindergarten. For example, one informant described a girl who, after being repeatedly rejected by other children because of her brown skin, tried to scratch off her skin color from her arm, saying it was ‘wrong.’ Research shows that children who experience racism may develop what is known as minority stress: when children begin to believe they are inferior due to their skin color, physical traits, ethnicity, culture, or religion, it can lead to mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety later in life (Curry, Nyborg 2003; Coll, Pachter 2009; Slopen, Williams 2014). A child excluded because of their skin color will experience this exclusion as painful and distressing, potentially leading to negative beliefs about their own worth and social value. Therefore, the primary focus in kindergarten should be on the recipients of racism – children who face rejection from others solely because of their skin color, whether by being refused to sit with, hold hands with, or play with.

There is no single formula for what to say to a child, and sometimes the child may not be ready to engage in conversations about such complex and serious topics. What matters most in these discussions is that staff affirm the child’s skin color is not wrong and that the child is valued. Staff must reassure the child that they have an equal place of belonging within the community. Yuval-Davis (2011) defines belonging as feeling ‘at home’. Therefore, staff should facilitate activities that create a shared sense of ‘we,’ especially for those children who are more at risk of exclusion from the Norwegian ‘we’ in kindergarten. As Mørreaunet (2023) highlights, being in kindergarten **is** about finding one’s place within the community.

Concluding remarks

Like all other institutions, kindergartens are spaces where dominant ideas of “Norwegianness” are expressed, often reinforcing exclusionary notions of national identity and racialized

concepts. Although kindergartens may effectively emphasize and include diversity in their educational practices, both staff and children still experience various forms of racism within these settings. Differences in how staff understand and interpret racism make it a complex issue, often leading to discomfort and avoidance that hinder open dialogue. Therefore, it is the responsibility of kindergarten staff to develop a shared understanding of racism and to educate themselves about its many manifestations. Only through this collective awareness and commitment can kindergartens effectively counteract racism, as outlined in the *Norwegian Kindergarten Framework Plan*.

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