

Towards a renewed understanding of barriers to immigrant parents' involvement in education

Acta Sociologica

1–15

© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/00016993221110870

journals.sagepub.com/home/asj**Josefine Jahreie** 

Centre for the Study of Professions, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway

Abstract

This article investigates Danish and Norwegian early childhood education and care teachers' expectations of immigrant parents' involvement in kindergarten. The findings are interpreted in terms of the multifaceted interplay between social class relations, culture, migration and hegemonic ideals of intensive parenting and concerted cultivation. By taking the early childhood education and care teachers' standpoint, the article contributes a renewed understanding of previous reports of barriers to immigrant parents' involvement in their children's education. Based on early childhood education and care teachers' accounts, I identify three key tensions: (1) *conflicting perceptions of responsibility*, (2) *conflicting perceptions of children's roles and how to communicate with children* and (3) *conflicting perceptions of what kindergarten is and what constitutes valuable knowledge*. The findings suggest the existence of a distinct Nordic adaptation to intensive parenting, contradicting parts of the dominant understandings of concerted cultivation found in more school-oriented curricular contexts, such as the UK and France, while still maintaining the original key characteristics of concerted cultivation.

Keywords

Parent involvement, immigrant parents, early childhood education and care teachers, intensive parenting, concerted cultivation

Introduction

This article investigates early childhood education and care (ECEC) teachers' expectations of, and reactions to, immigrant parents' involvement in kindergarten. The Nordic countries are renowned for their low levels of inequality, social democratic welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1990) and comprehensive education systems (Einarsdottir et al., 2015). However, studies reveal significant socio-economic disparities between native and immigrant populations, and a high degree of immigrant child poverty has been

Corresponding Author:

Josefine Jahreie, Centre for the Study of Professions, Oslo Metropolitan University, P.O. Box 4, St Olavs Plass, NO-0130 Oslo, Norway.

Email: josefin@oslomet.no

described as ‘the Achilles heel of the Scandinavian welfare state’ (Galloway et al., 2015). There are rising concerns over stratified educational outcomes between students of native and immigrant backgrounds. The recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report states that the Nordic countries make up five of the eight Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries with the largest differences in educational test scores in favour of native-born students when controlling for socio-economic background (OECD, 2019: 185). Studies suggest that the educational achievement of children generally, and children with immigrant backgrounds particularly, is highly associated with their early majority oral language skills and pre-literacy development (Højten et al., 2019). Norwegian and Danish authorities are increasingly implementing various accountability policies and measures to strengthen children’s majority language competency prior to the school transition. These policies are meant to secure equal opportunities and life chances for all children regardless of disparities in individual preconditions, immigrant status and socio-economic status (see, e.g. the Danish government (2018) and the Norwegian Ministry of Education (2020)).

Policy-makers and researchers agree that a well-functioning partnership between teachers and parents is a key factor in ensuring children’s overall educational success and well-being (Epstein, 2016[2011]; Kindergarten Act, 2005; The Day Care Act, 2018). The term *partnership* is widely used to indicate a tight collaborative effort, in which both parties share joint responsibility for children’s educational development and well-being (Epstein, 2016[2011]). However, a growing body of scholarly literature indicates several barriers to the formation and sustenance of positive collaboration between teachers and parents of immigrant descent (Antony-Newman, 2019; Norheim and Moser, 2020). These barriers are widely identified as language barriers, power imbalance, teacher discrimination against immigrant parents and cultural differences between native teachers and parents of immigrant descent (Antony-Newman, 2019; Norheim and Moser, 2020; Huss-Keeler, 1997). However, we know less about ECEC teachers’ expectations of, and reactions to, immigrant parents’ involvement in kindergarten. Along these lines, the current article is guided by the following research questions: (1) *What type of parent involvement do ECEC teachers expect from immigrant parents?* (2) *How do teachers react if immigrant parents do not act in accordance with their expectations?*

Context

Norway and Denmark both have highly subsidised ECEC sectors, in which 97.3% and 84.3% of children aged 3–5 are enrolled in kindergarten, respectively (Glavind and Pade, 2020; Statistics Norway, 2021). Danish ECEC institutions are usually divided into *nurseries* for children aged between 0 and 3 years and *kindergarten* for children 3 and 6. Norwegian kindergartens operate within the same age-determined categories but refer to both age groups as belonging to *kindergarten*. For simplicity, I refer to both administrative structures as *kindergartens*. In both countries, kindergartens are governed under their own laws and regulations, separately from formal education (Kindergarten Act, 2005; The Day Care Act, 2018). However, kindergartens are recognised as educational institutions in both countries and are governed by the Ministry of Education. Formal education in school usually starts the year a child turns six, and starting school involves changing locations from kindergarten facilities to school premises.

The Nordic education system has a long tradition of emphasising democratic values, egalitarianism and social inclusion (Einarsdottir et al., 2015), and the Nordic kindergarten model is often contrasted to more ‘school-readiness’ oriented traditions (Bennett, 2005). Bennett (2005) identified two dominant traditions for ECEC curriculum development. He discerns between *the readiness for school tradition*, largely associated with Belgium, France, Ireland, the Netherlands and the UK, and *the social policy pedagogical tradition*, linked to the Nordic and central European countries. *The readiness for school tradition* is characterised by a prescribed ministerial curriculum with detailed goals in which learning outcomes and formal assessment are often required, teacher-directed activities, and a particular focus on knowledge and skills ‘especially in areas useful for school readiness’ (Bennett, 2005: 12). *The social policy pedagogical tradition*, on the other hand, is distinguished by broad curricular guidelines, no formal

assessment, focus on learning through play, following children's own learning strategies, and 'working with the whole child and her family' (Bennett, 2005: 12).

Previous research on the relationship between social class positions, immigrant parents' involvement and teacher–parent partnerships

The education system is widely perceived to play a key role in the reproduction of social class privileges (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Griffith and Smith, 2005; Jæger, 2009), and several scholars have demonstrated how kindergarten and school pedagogy mirror the hegemonic paradigm of middle-class culture (Griffith and Smith, 2005; Lareau et al., 2016; Reay, 1998; Stefansen and Aarseth, 2011; Stefansen and Skogen, 2010). Bourdieu's scholarly work has been at the forefront of a cultural turn for sociological class theory, described as a cultural class analysis, where various methodologies are utilised to investigate how class is 'lived', expressed and reproduced through cultural tastes and preferences (Savage et al., 2013). In this vein, the relationship between parents and children is widely identified as a critical domain for the transmittance of social class privileges, and scholars inspired by Bourdieu have identified relationships between parents' social class positions and different logics of childrearing (Gillies, 2006; Lareau, 2011; Lareau, 2011; Stefansen and Aarseth, 2011; Vincent and Ball, 2007).

The growing rate of migration creates further nuances in the relationship between teachers and parents and for parents' involvement in children's education. In turn, scholars are increasingly interested in studying the links between parents' class background, the globalisation of people and ideas and parent involvement in children's education (Golden et al., 2021). Contemporary studies on teacher–parent relations and immigrant parent involvement indicate that immigrant parents are statistically less involved in their children's schooling and report more barriers to involvement in kindergarten than native-born parents (Antony-Newman, 2019; Norheim and Moser, 2020). Existing research suggests that immigrant parents' modes of involvement are associated with their socio-economic status (Barglowski, 2019, Joiko, 2021), time spent in the host community, and parents' majority language abilities (Turney and Kao, 2009). A range of studies also finds that immigrant parents with foreign cultural and educational backgrounds often have a distinctive set of expectations of the education system potentially misaligning with local schoolteachers' pedagogic approaches and learning goals (Antony-Newman, 2019).

Previous empirical inquiries into the relationship between teachers and immigrant parents typically depart from the parents' perspective, often comparing the association between parents' background characteristics and their experiences interacting with their children's teachers (Antony-Newman, 2019; Norheim and Moser, 2020). Likewise, most research on the relationship between socio-economic class positions and parenting focuses on the discrepancies in the character of the relationships between native-born working-class and middle-class parents and the education system, or between native-born parents from different ethnic backgrounds (see, e.g. Lareau, 2011). Meanwhile, the ECEC teachers' perspective on the relationship between themselves and immigrant parents has received limited research attention (Norheim and Moser, 2020).

An analytical framework for understanding ECEC teachers' expectations of parent involvement

"Although parenting is a personal, intensive and intuitive experience, it is also infused with class behaviours, values, actions and dispositions" (Vincent and Maxwell, 2016: 270).

Intensive parenting has emerged as a modern Western ideal for how parents, especially mothers, should engage in their children's overall development (Hays, 1996; Shirani et al., 2012). Hays (1996) originally coined the term *intensive mothering*. The use of the term has later been broadened by several scholars to *intensive parenting* as a response to societal changes in perceptions of parenting and family structures

(Shirani et al., 2012). The ideal of intensive parenting demands that parenting should be expert-guided, labour-intensive, emotionally absorbing and child-centred (Hays, 1996). This ideal is closely linked to neoliberal values, whereby the individual parent is held responsible for their child's future outcomes. Since parents' efforts are perceived as decisive for their children's future outcomes, parenting in itself becomes a risk-filled endeavour (Shirani et al., 2012). Along these lines, Lareau (2011), in her seminal study *Unequal Childhoods*, discovered a clear difference in parenting styles between parents from middle-class backgrounds and parents from poor or working-class positions, transcending parents' ethnic and religious backgrounds. Lareau found strong similarities between parents associated with the middle-class on one hand, and the poor and working-class on the other. While the parents belonging to the former category displayed intense engagement in every aspect of their children's everyday lives, including their schooling, the latter were less directly involved in their children's educational development. Rather than systematically cultivating children's social skills and cognitive development, parents from working-class positions relied on their children's natural growth. Lareau (2011) coined these two *cultural logics of child-rearing as concerted cultivation and the accomplishment of natural growth*, respectively.

Parents from working-class positions often rely on teachers taking responsibility for their child's educational development, while they as parents focus primarily on nurturing their children's physical well-being by ensuring that they are happy, fed, safe and clean (Gillies, 2006; Lareau, 2011; Stefansen and Skogen, 2010). Lareau (2011) described the verbal exchanges of working-class families in her study as mainly a one-sided issue of directives from parents to children. In contrast, she and other scholars have observed that middle-class parents more often engage their children in lengthy discussions, aimed at preparing them for conversing and arguing on their own behalf with professional adults such as teachers (Lareau, 2011; Stefansen and Aarseth, 2011). In this way, parents who master *concerted cultivation* facilitate ease in their own and their children's interactions with school officials (Khan, 2011; Lareau, 2011).

An important point is that working-class parents are just as eager as middle-class parents for their children to achieve educational success (Gillies, 2006). However, modes of childrearing associated with the working class are at odds with the normative ideal of *intensive parenting* and *concerted cultivation* in the education system. Consequently, working-class parents often find it harder than middle-class parents to meet institutional expectations from the education system (Gillies, 2006; Lareau et al., 2016; Stefansen and Skogen, 2010). In contrast, by aligning their parenting style to educational standards, middle-class parents better their chances of securing an advantaged position for their children (Vincent and Ball, 2007).

In the analysis, I draw upon *intensive parenting* (Hays, 1996) and Lareau's (2011) pairing of *concerted cultivation* and *the accomplishment of natural growth* as analytical concepts. Few have applied this lens to investigate how ECEC teachers react to immigrant parents' involvement in kindergarten and how this affects their relationships. Though Bourdieu, Hays and Lareau originally described the social class structures, parenting practices and ideals of French and American societies, their analytical concepts have proven highly relevant across different national and political contexts. Previous empirical research from the Nordic region suggests that their analytical concepts are useful for describing social class relations, even in more egalitarian social democratic welfare states such as Denmark and Norway (Jæger, 2009; Stefansen and Aarseth, 2011; Stefansen and Skogen, 2010).

Study and methods

The article departs from interviews with 22 ECEC teachers in Copenhagen (11) and Oslo (11) from April 2019 to January 2020. The interviews were semi-structured individual and group interviews with ECEC teachers with university bachelor's degrees granting them the status of a professional *pedagogue* (Denmark) or *kindergarten teacher* (Norway).

The original aim of the study was to explore how ECEC teachers work with children of minority language backgrounds' language development from children's first day of kindergarten until they transition to school, focusing primarily on which actors, texts and institutions partake in ECEC teachers' everyday work (Smith, 2005). The teachers were not explicitly questioned about parents' social class positions or parenting practices, nor were they asked to compare native and immigrant parents. However, during the interviews, it quickly became apparent that the teachers viewed the quality of their collaboration with parents as the most deciding and frustrating aspect of their work with children's language development. The relationship between teachers and parents proved deeply intertwined with almost every aspect of the teachers' pedagogic work. This inspired me to initiate a thorough analysis of the teachers' descriptions of their relationships with immigrant parents and how they perceive these parents' involvement in kindergarten.

The ECEC teachers were recruited from publicly subsidised kindergartens in low-income, high-minority neighbourhoods in Oslo and Copenhagen. I recruited participants from these areas for my study to maximise the utility of information concerning the assessment and school preparation of children of minority language backgrounds (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Therefore, when I speak of immigrant parents, I mainly refer to the segment of the immigrant population belonging to poor or working-class backgrounds (Lareau, 2011). The ECEC teachers did not use social class terminology when describing the parents; rather, they categorised the parents of the kindergarteners as immigrant parents, often in disadvantaged life circumstances, indicating that most immigrant parents could be classified as having working-class or poor social positions (Lareau, 2011). The teachers' educational level and teacher status arguably situate the teachers in this study as representatives of the middle-class (Lareau, 2011).

In the *first stage* of the analysis, I transcribed the audio-recorded interviews verbatim. Sections from the interviews were translated into English from Danish and Norwegian. Pseudonyms replaced names of people and places¹. The data material was later coded in three stages using NVivo12. I started by *first* taking an inductive approach to investigating ECEC teachers' descriptions of their everyday work with minority language children's language development and their accounts of collaborating with immigrant parents. During the *second stage*, I focused further on the ECEC teachers' accounts of parent interactions and their recounting of episodes involving minor or major conflicts over parents' involvement or presumed lack of involvement – a recurring theme during the interviews. When analysing teacher–parent interactions, it became apparent that the teachers' anecdotes bore striking resemblance across the two national contexts. I found these similarities particularly interesting and chose to further investigate the institutional relations shaping these mirroring accounts of tensions in teachers' relationships with immigrant parents.

In the *third stage*, Hay's concept of intensive parenting, alongside Lareau's concepts of the accomplishment of natural growth and concerted cultivation, were applied as an analytical lens to investigate the ECEC teachers' accounts of parents' breaching their expectations of desirable parent involvement. I turned my attention towards the relationship between social class positions, the education system and parenting ideals, and particularly how these institutional relations underpin tensions in ECEC teachers' descriptions of their interactions with immigrant parents.

Based on the ECEC teachers' accounts, I identified three key tensions. The tensions are underpinned by teachers' experiences of themselves and parents having different perceptions, in turn leading to a mismatch in expectations influencing their collaboration. In the forthcoming section, the findings are presented thematically, identifying both the ECEC teachers' expectations, how they respond to immigrant parents' modes of childrearing and the teachers implicitly draw on ideals from *concerted cultivation* in their communication of how parents should involve themselves in their child's language development.

However, while the accomplishment of natural growth and the three key tensions identified in this study must be understood as conceptual lenses to unpack teacher–parent interactions, they should be viewed only as abstractions of the complex reality of this relationship. Since parenting ideals are not a static structure determining parent and teacher behaviour, concepts such as *intensive parenting* should rather be viewed as part of a discourse actively drawn upon in parenting and informing 'ideal' parent

involvement and ECEC teacher–parent relations. The analysis is not meant as a value judgement of various parenting styles but as a descriptive analysis.

Teacher expectations of parent involvement, reactions and experiences of tensions

The teachers partaking in this study generally spoke about immigrant parents during the interviews, primarily due to the low number of children with native backgrounds in their kindergarten. Although the kindergarten facilities are situated in low-income neighbourhoods, it did not necessarily mean that the migrant families living there were unresourceful or that they do not have higher education. Several teachers mentioned that they observed differences in parents' modes of involvement between different groups of immigrant parents, depending on their level of education. The following is an excerpt from my interview with Norwegian ECEC teacher Turid.

Many of those who live here are refugees with low socioeconomic status [...] They may never get a job because they do not have strong enough Norwegian skills. [...] I observe that [parents] have different backgrounds, and I see how they are together as a family. [...] [The Syrian families] are like a Norwegian family, they do a lot of activities with their children, they care a lot about their children's upbringing, and they talk a lot with [the staff].

Turid noticed that compared to other groups of immigrant parents in their neighbourhood, many comparatively highly educated Syrian parents had quickly entered the labour force, were highly involved in their children's kindergarten and more resembled 'Norwegian families' than other groups. Turid's example of the Syrian families serves as a good example of how social class and migration backgrounds may overlap in identifying people and groups as 'like us' or 'not like us'. Contradictory to the immigrant parents, the 'the Norwegian family' appears class-less in this excerpt. Descriptions of native-born parents were mainly used by teachers as a way of contrasting their experiences with parents of immigrant descent. However, due to my line of questioning mostly revolving around teachers' work with children of minority language backgrounds and the few native-born children enrolled in the kindergartens, actual descriptions of teachers' interactions with native-born parents are far between. The analysis of Danish and Norwegian ECEC teachers' experiences of interacting with parents pointed to several similar matching accounts of breached expectations and tensions in teacher relationships with parents, particularly in instances in which teachers perceive that a child has severe language developmental issues. Most of these tensions can be interpreted as expressions of ECEC teachers' rejection of *the accomplishment of natural growth* (Lareau, 2011), and should be read with this in mind. Additionally, some of the findings indicate that the perceived conflicting understandings in some instances are also underpinned by differing curricular traditions (Bennett, 2005).

Conflicting perceptions of responsibility

The first tension identified in teachers' accounts relates to disagreements over who is responsible for children's language development. The teachers viewed the quality of their collaboration with parents as something that could either benefit or potentially sabotage their pedagogic work. The teachers in both countries shared common frustrations regarding parents who delegate to them full responsibility for their child's language development, as teachers perceived this as a shared responsibility that should be undertaken in close collaboration. An overreaching theme in the interviews with both the Danish and Norwegian teachers was their frustration with parents' seeming conviction that a child's language developmental issue would 'sort itself out in due time' (Danish ECEC teacher Merete). Parents' seeming conviction in non-intervention was perceived by teachers as a detrimental barrier not only for their collaboration with parents but also for children's future educational success.

The ECEC teachers saw it as their responsibility to involve parents in their pedagogic work and expected parents to actively engage in their children's language development. As Christina, a Norwegian teacher, says, 'You don't just work with children, but with families, the parents. It's a package deal.' Along these lines, Danish ECEC teacher Camilla argued that ECEC teachers' pedagogic work in kindergarten could only support children's language development up to a certain point.

Camilla: If we [the ECEC teachers] are to step up [our game], we must activate the parents because we cannot help [the children] just by teaching them more [in kindergarten]. What is missing is the parents' active participation... that they take responsibility for their child's development, right? They can't just drop off their children and expect us to make them "school-ready" and teach them Danish. But the issue is that they need to step out onto the court. They need to speak to their children.

The need to work with 'the entire family' was perceived by Christina, Camilla and the other ECEC teachers as a prerequisite for their job, not a choice per se. Teachers were sympathetic towards parents who were struggling with difficult life circumstances, and teachers in both countries made efforts to help parents to 'do desired involvement' by, for example, inviting parents to come read aloud for the children in their mother tongue. They also made several adjustments for parents who have trouble reading, using pictograms when communicating or informing parents that instead of reading books, they can talk with their children about the pictures. Nonetheless, they strived towards a 'partnership-like' relationship and encouraged the same type of involvement from all parents, regardless of their socio-economic background or immigrant status. The teachers perceived that this type of partnership relationship with parents were most efficient for enhancing children's language development and overall 'school-readiness'. Desired parent involvement was described by teachers as parents taking responsibility for their child's overall development, asking for ECEC teachers' advice, taking ECEC teachers' concerns seriously, reading to their children, engaging in educational play at home, and initiating lengthy everyday conversations with their children. The teachers became frustrated and worried if they experienced that parent dismissed their concerns regarding a child's language development. In this group interview, Danish ECEC teachers Karen and Anne addressed how parents' focus on other aspects of their child's needs, such as their language development, creates tensions in the ECEC teachers' attempts to involve them in their pedagogic work.

Karen: What all our parents have in common, regardless of if they are illiterate, stay at home, unemployed, or if they speak Arabic, Finnish or Danish, is that they are all very concerned about their child's upbringing and wellbeing. The parents express much love when it comes to their child's wellbeing: they make sure that the children have beautiful clothes, et cetera, but what can I say... school and their child's [language] development is seemingly not as highly regarded.

Anne: It's like the parents aren't aware of how much impact it would have [for their children's language development] if they would partake in educational play with their children when they get home from kindergarten. They don't understand, even if you [as an ECEC teacher] tell them. We always have meetings with the parents after the [mandatory biannual] language assessments. We always tell them, "Talk to your children on your way home from school or kindergarten. Take 15 min to look around and talk [about what you see] and read something." Right? But I do not think that they are aware of how much it matters that they as parents partake in *that* work.

Anne and other ECEC teachers were puzzled and frustrated by some parents' refusal to take an active role in their children's language development, despite expressing so much love and care in all other aspects of their children's lives. Therefore, they saw it as their responsibility to encourage parents to initiate enriching activities, such as educational play, at home.

The Norwegian ECEC teachers, such as Turid, voiced similar concerns:

Turid: We are part of [a project] in our city district, where we lend out books to parents and read to the children in kindergarten. We think it is important that the children are read to every day.

Interviewer: At home?

Turid: In kindergarten. It is not easy to control what happens at home, and unfortunately, there is very little borrowing of books from the parents. [...] There are just three out of 18 parents who voluntarily borrow books. The others will maybe borrow a book home if we put it directly into their child's backpack, but we never get those books back. So, I do not believe there are many books in the [children's] homes, and, sadly, the language development work [in kindergarten] is not sufficiently followed up at home.

Parents' disinterest in bringing library books home from kindergarten was perceived by Turid and other ECEC teachers as an implicit rejection of the teachers' invitation to participate in their pedagogic work, thus breaching with the type of relationship they sought to have with parents.

Conflicting perceptions of children's roles and how to communicate with children

In this second section, I address teachers' descriptions of themselves and some parents having conflicting perceptions of how to communicate with children. In the first excerpt, the Norwegian ECEC teacher Ruth mentions how she experiences the way in which some parents communicate with their children as sabotaging children's language development.

Ruth: Some [children] struggle even more [than they need to] because their parents speak to them differently at home than we [ECEC teachers] would do. We speak *with* the children; many [parents] speak *to* their children. They are busy, and it is not their fault, because, for some, this is what they are used to.

Several ECEC teachers reported observing that many immigrant parents with low educational backgrounds mainly issue directives to their children rather than initiating more extensive conversations. If we look back at the previous interview excerpts with Camilla ('(...) they need to step out onto the court, they need to speak to their children') and with Karen and Anne ('We always tell them, "Talk with your children on your way home from school or kindergarten"'), the perceived issue of how parents communicate with their children is intertwined and overlapping with the other tensions mentioned. The Danish ECEC teacher Anne described the logic behind the one-sided communication between parent and child as 'children should be seen, but not heard'. Besides struggling with learning the majority language, several teachers observed that many children in kindergarten showed slow development in their first language. The teachers viewed this as a substantial disadvantage for children learning a second language. Aisha and several other ECEC teachers ascribed much of the children's delayed language development to their parents' lack of engagement in daily conversations with their children:

Aisha: We have one girl, soon to be five. She does not speak, only nods and points. Not because she cannot speak but because she sees no reason to. When her parents drop her off in the morning, it is just [mimics a nod from the child's parents], hand her over to an employee and leaves. [...] She says *nothing* [throughout the day]. You hope that she at least understands... that she at least hears what you are saying [...] It is a bit worrying, since she is supposed to start school next year. Where she will meet demands... There will be teachers who ask her questions, and she is expected to answer, but she does not have the vocabulary, and she is not used to an adult asking her questions and answering back to them.

To address the issue of silent communication, Aisha and a speech therapist arranged a meeting with the girl's parents to convince the father, in particular, to communicate differently with his daughter. However, 'the girl's father did not think it was necessary to talk with her [...] "She is only four," he

said' (Aisha). This meeting resulted in Aisha and her colleagues setting rules that pressured him to speak to his daughter:

He must say "Goodbye," and [the daughter] has to answer him, he must ask her how her day has been, and then she needs to answer. He needs to pressure himself to speak to her. [On their walk home], he should say 'look at that nice car,' 'look at that little man,' or whatever, just so that she can listen [to something].

The ECEC teachers' and some parents' conflicting understandings of what children need and who is responsible for children's language development create tensions in teacher–parent relationships. Several other ECEC teachers told similar stories like those of Aisha, Karen, Anne, Camilla and Ruth of parents loving their children but not speaking enough with them. In the discussion, I further discuss how the issue of communication can be linked to a deeper-rooted ongoing debate concerning children's roles and children's rights.

Conflicting understandings of what kindergarten is and what constitutes valuable knowledge

The ECEC teachers expressed frustration with what they perceived as parents' misunderstandings or failings to recognise what kindergarten *is* in the Nordic context, what children are supposed to learn in kindergarten and *how* they should acquire these skills and knowledge. They also often pointed to how conflicting views regarding what kind of activities are or are not pedagogically enriching could create tension in their collaboration with parents.

Both the Danish and Norwegian teachers presented views of the mandate of kindergarten aligning with the Nordic kindergarten model: valuing learning through play, following children's own learning strategies, and a rejection of implementing 'school-like activities' in kindergarten. However, pre-academic skills such as knowing the alphabet and counting are nevertheless focused upon during the last year of kindergarten. The interviewed ECEC teachers were especially frustrated with parents who focused on enhancing their children's ability to speak English, learning the alphabet or count. Simultaneously, teachers reported that some parents were disappointed with the kindergarten's focus on 'learning through play'. Here, Norwegian teachers Roger and Christina recount interactions with a disappointed mother and eager parents:

Roger: [mimicking the mother] "So what do you do in kindergarten? Nothing?" [...] We had a French mother here last semester who said, "Norwegian kindergartens... what are the children learning?" She felt she had to keep her child at home one day each week to focus on school preparation. I have received similar comments from other [parents] from other parts of Europe as well. And then [on the other hand], you have those who think that [kindergarten] is just somewhere to place your child when you're at home or at work. So, there are both.

Christina: When I worked in the nursery department [*småbarnsavdeling*], there were some parent-teacher conferences where I had to explain "this is not a school." This was in the nursery, and the parents were concerned with "a, b, c, 1, 2, 3" and informed us that they were practising this at home.

Conflicting understandings and expectations of what role kindergartens serve and what types of knowledge and skills are useful for children to learn to underpin several of the tensions identified in the teachers' descriptive accounts. Roger and Christina's stories point to an interesting paradox of what makes up 'desired parent involvement'. I received no information concerning the French mother's socio-economic status. Nevertheless, Roger's account of their interaction situates her beliefs within a 'readiness for school' tradition of curricular development often associated with French ECEC curricula (Bennett, 2005). This could indicate that ECEC teachers' and parents', such as the mother's, pedagogic beliefs

draw on two different lines of curricular traditions. In cases such as that of the French mother, the issue was not that she did not involve herself *enough* in her child's language development or that she did not cultivate her child's development at home. Rather, she and other parents were doing it in a manner misaligned with the ECEC teachers' pedagogic approaches and national curriculum. Thus, there was no *lack* of involvement, but what teachers perceived as parents' performing a 'misunderstood' type of involvement.

Moreover, teachers' expressed frustration with several parents' enthusiasm over what they interpret as enriching outcomes from their children's iPad use.

Ruth: There is a lot of iPad use in another language [than Norwegian], and English TV channels, children's shows.

Christina: Probably. I think there is some uncertainty or denial [amongst parents]. [The parents] often portray it like, "Oh, he understands so much English [because of the iPad]: Apple, Orange!" The child's response is instant, right, but it's just a form of mimicking. If I were to ask them [in English]: "Could you hand me an orange?", they would not necessarily understand [what I was asking for]. [...] They [Parents] claim that "he knows so many English words," but then there's no [actual] comprehension.

In Norway and Denmark, English is a subject taught from primary school, but for children who struggle in their first language and Norwegian/Danish, the ECEC teachers believe that the excessive use of digital screens hinders rather than facilitates a positive learning environment. However, some parents interpret their children's learning outcomes differently from ECEC teachers. These findings were also profound in Denmark:

Camilla: I think a lot of our children are placed with an iPad [at home]. And parents believe, and some Danish parents, too, that it is really enriching for children's development. They think that if a child has the right apps, they will learn [a lot of valuable skills]... but they do not.

Casper: Some children here have a very weak vocabulary, both in Danish and in their mother tongue. But when you put on the song... do you know "Baby Shark" [a children's song, sung in English, popular on YouTube]?

Interviewer: Yes [mumbles the song].

Casper: Precisely! So, when you put that song on, it does not matter if [the children] can speak or not, everyone can sing "baby shark duh duh duh duh duh," or the other one, "Johny Johny Yes Papa."

Camilla: And everything is from YouTube, right. And at the same time, the child scores 0% [out of a hundred on the annual Danish language assessment].

Camilla underlines that she and her colleagues do not exclusively experience tensions concerning children's 'at-home screen use' with immigrant parents. However, Camilla and Casper perceive excessive YouTube watching as particularly disturbing for minority language children's language development, as they notice that several already have difficulties expressing themselves in both their mother tongue and Danish.

Discussion

The analysis shows how teachers' expectations of parents' involvement are infused with regional and classed understandings of what children should learn in kindergarten and what the division of tasks and responsibilities between teachers and parents should be. ECEC teachers' breached expectations of

immigrant parent involvement can be understood in terms of a complex interplay among social class positions, immigration and the idealisation of intensive parenting and concerted cultivation in the education system (Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2011; Lareau et al., 2016). These powerful institutional relations serve as grounds for ECEC teachers' experience of tensions and a mismatch in pedagogic beliefs and role expectations, implicitly underpinning tensions in teacher–immigrant parent relations in several ways. Based on ECEC teachers' accounts, I identified three interlinked key tensions: (1) *conflicting perceptions of responsibility*, (2) *conflicting perceptions of children's roles and how to communicate with children* and (3) *conflicting perceptions of what kindergarten is and what constitutes valuable knowledge*.

An *intensive* parenting ideal shapes how ECEC teachers view responsibility and the parents' role in children's educational development (Hays, 1996), and they expect their relationship with parents to take the form of a close *partnership* (Epstein, 2016[2011]). According to teachers' descriptive accounts, several parents with immigrant backgrounds are not interested in joining a *partnership* on the teachers' terms and might expect another form of relationship with their child's teacher. Thus, the three key tensions can be understood as barriers to the formation of the partnership that the teachers are striving for with parents.

Moreover, the findings suggest that the teachers reject *the accomplishment of natural growth* as an acceptable parenting strategy and perceive this style of parenting as a threat to children's language development (Lareau, 2011). However, the teachers' worries about what they describe as parents' ways of issuing directives to their children, instead of engaging them in discussions, also mirrors current debates within the field of sociology of childhood and the growing focus on children's democratic rights (also mentioned in The Day Care Act (2018) and Kindergarten Act (2005)). Accordingly, the tension of communication may be underpinned by a deeper-rooted conflict concerning views of children's roles and democratic rights – to what degree a child has a right to be heard and how children should be perceived and treated by adults (see also Gulløv and Kampmann (2021)). These findings align with Lareau's (2011) descriptions of children's differing roles in poor/working-class and middle-class families. In Lareau's study, she found that children's meanings were more highly appreciated in middle-class families than in the poor and working-class families, in which children's voices were more often overlooked or ignored as irrelevant. The increasing focus on the topic of children's democratic rights emerged after the original publishing of Lareau's famous study in 2003, arguably *views of children's roles* could thus be introduced as a new dimension to Lareau's original typology of concerted cultivation (See Lareau (2011: 31)), also serving as an interesting avenue for future research.

Lareau (2011) and Hays (1996) note the relationship between economic and historical developments, local culture and parenting ideals in their scholarly work. Scholars have previously called for more research attention to how parents in underprivileged positions approach the educational cultivation of their children, but also how different cultural contexts shape how 'correct educational cultivation' is perceived in different cultivational contexts (Golden et al., 2021). This study serves as an empirical example of this relationship, as the findings suggest that there exists a distinct Nordic adaptation to *intensive parenting*. This adaptation contradicts parts of the dominating understandings of *concerted cultivation* in Anglo-Saxon countries, while still maintaining the same general characteristics of expert guidance, child-centredness and aligning enriching home activities to kindergarten curricula (Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2011; Stefansen and Aarseth, 2011). While the Nordic approach to concerted cultivation arguably aligns with the *social pedagogy policy tradition* of curricular development (Bennett, 2005), previous studies of concerted cultivation in Anglo-Saxon countries seem to mirror types of pedagogic approaches widely associated with the *readiness for school tradition*. For example, Vincent and Ball's (2007) describe how high-end London nurseries offer extra activities such as ballet and French classes or how the middle-class mothers in Reay's (1998) study enrolled their pre-school children in extracurricular mathematics classes. The Danish and Norwegian ECEC teachers in this current study seem to, on the other hand, reject parents' enthusiasm for such types of activities. The ECEC teachers' experience of parents' understanding of concerted cultivation breaching their own becomes particularly evident in instances in which immigrant parents implement concerted cultivation strategies from their home countries and experience friction with ECEC teachers as a consequence. This can be seen in, for example, Christina's emphasis on

communicating to immigrant parents that kindergarten in the Nordics is ‘not a school’. In this sense, parents’ modes of performing concerted cultivation, and whether these pursuits are successful, are not only dependent on parents’ distribution of capital but also mirror dominant pedagogic beliefs in the local context, suggesting there is no single form of concerted cultivation that is applicable to all national contexts, but rather multiple adaptations varying by national traditions for curriculum development. The ECEC teachers’ accounts suggest that they believe many immigrant parents do not comprehend what the social mandate of kindergarten are or what is expected of them as parents in their current local communities. If we borrow Lareau’s terminology, the teachers seem to indicate that some immigrant parents do not understand the *Nordic rules of the game* (Lareau et al., 2016). It is, however, not a given that parents would automatically accept ECEC teachers’ pedagogic beliefs even if they understood what these beliefs entailed.

The article contributes not only to developing our understanding of ECEC teachers’ relations with immigrant parents but also ECEC teachers’ role in the reproduction of social class privileges and attempts to resist stratified educational outcomes. The article’s focus on the ECEC teachers’ standpoint helps to develop our understanding of the complex relationship between teachers and parents of immigrant descent by illuminating the comparatively under-researched perspective of ECEC teachers’ expectations of, and reaction to, immigrant parents’ involvement in kindergarten, instead of focusing primarily on the parents’ experiences. This point is important, as parents and ECEC teachers do not necessarily interpret each other’s actions as intended. The current study’s findings mirror what we already know from previous research – that parents from poor and working-class backgrounds tend to prefer a clear division between what happens at the parents’ workplace and in the children’s educational institutions and what happens at home (Lareau, 2011). While middle-class parents, on the other hand, are often more willing to blur the lines between home and work/school/kindergarten and foster a sense of continuity between the two spheres by intentionally aligning enriching activities at home with curricular activities of their children’s kindergarten/school (Stefansen and Aarseth, 2011; Vincent and Ball, 2007). The teachers in the current studies’ accounts of several immigrant parents with poor or working-class backgrounds’ reliance on what can be identified as the accomplishment of natural growth, align with Stefansen and Skogen’s (2010) findings in their study of Norwegian native-born working-class parents’ involvement in kindergarten. As such, several of the tensions that teachers report in the current study, can possibly largely be explained by the parents’ social class backgrounds. Prior studies departing from the parents’ perspective suggest that this is because parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to both trust and rely more on professionals’ knowledge than parents from higher socio-economic class positions, believing that teachers will know and do what is in their child’s best interest (Gillies, 2006; Lareau, 2011; Stefansen and Skogen, 2010). This delegation of responsibility from parent to teacher, as the current study findings also indicate, can potentially be misunderstood by teachers as immigrant parents ‘not caring’ about their children’s education instead of a possible humble gesture on the parents’ part (Antony-Newman, 2019; Huss-Keeler, 1997). These patterns can evidently have a negative outcome for parents who choose this strategy and their children, in contrast to parents who engage more intensely in their children’s language learning, particularly for those of migrant descent. As previously mentioned, it is important to note the variability of characteristics and outcomes among immigrant families. Far from all migrants live in precarious socio-economic circumstances; however, migration may complicate class positions and create situations in which parents must deal with unfamiliar institutional structures, such as kindergarten. Existing empirical research (see, e.g. Barglowski, 2019) and the current study’s findings indicate that teachers might cooperate with some migrants better than with others, which may also be an issue of parents’ social class positions. The context of the current study limits it to describing ECEC teacher perceptions of immigrant parents residing in low-income, high-minority areas in Denmark and Norway. However, teachers’ expectations and perceptions of immigrant parents’ involvement in these neighbourhoods are arguably linked to hegemonic beliefs about ‘good parenting’ and conflicting curricular traditions transcending the particularities of the local contexts of this current study (Bennett, 2005; Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2011).

Concluding remarks

Ideal constructs of what are considered desirable ways of ‘doing’ intensive parenting and performing concerted cultivation seem to vary by national context and curricular traditions. The increasing global migration of families and the changing contextual circumstances of kindergarten and teacher–parent relationships call for more empirical studies exploring the degree of mismatch between the local expectations of teachers and parents across different migrant groups, both by country of origin and by socio-economic background. Studying teachers’ expectations of parent involvement presents a fruitful opportunity for unpacking ideal constructs of desirable forms of parent involvement, and how the reproduction of stratified educational outcomes is produced and challenged in the complex relationships between teachers, parents and children. Lastly, there is a need for culturally sensitive policies and practices that can broaden the existing patterns of parental behaviours and facilitate more successful cooperation between ECEC teachers and parents of immigrant descent.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Ann Christin Nilsen, Sølvi Mausethagen, Vegard Jarness and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions and feedback on this article.


Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Josefine Jahreie  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3899-996X>

Note

1. The study complies with the Norwegian National Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Humanities, Law and Theology and is approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

References

- Antony-Newman M (2019) Parental involvement of immigrant parents: A meta-synthesis. *Educational Review* 71(3): 362–381.
- Barglowski K (2019) Migrants’ class and parenting: The role of cultural capital in migrants’ inequalities in education. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45(11): 1970–1987.
- Bennett J (2005) Curriculum issues in national policy-making. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 13(2): 5–23.
- Bourdieu P and Passeron J-C (1977) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: Sage.
- Danish government (2018) *Ét Danmark uden paralelsamfund: Ingen ghettoer i 2030 [One Denmark without parallel societies: No ghettos in 2030]*.
- Einarsdottir J, Purola A-M, Johansson EM, et al. (2015) Democracy, caring and competence: Values perspectives in ECEC curricula in the Nordic countries. *International Journal of Early Years Education* 23(1): 97–114. DOI: 10.1080/09669760.2014.970521.
- Epstein JL (2016[2011]) *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools*. Boulder: Routledge.

- Esping-Andersen G (1990) *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Flyvbjerg B (2006) Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 12(2): 219–245.
- Galloway TA, Gustafsson B, Pedersen PJ, et al. (2015) Immigrant child poverty: the achilles heel of the scandinavian welfare state. In: Garner TI and Short KS (eds) *Measurement of Poverty, Deprivation, and Economic Mobility*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pp.185–219.
- Gillies V (2006) Working class mothers and school life: Exploring the role of emotional capital. *Gender and Education* 18(3): 281–293.
- Glavind N and Pade S (2020) Udviklingstendenser for dagpleje og daginstitutioner 2020 [Developmental tendencies in daycare 2020].
- Golden D, Erdreich L, Stefansen K, et al. (2021) Class, education and parenting: Cross-cultural perspectives. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 42(4): 453–459.
- Griffith AI and Smith DE (2005) *Mothering for Schooling*. New York: Routledge Falmer.
- Gulløv E and Kampmann J (2021) Civilisation of parents [civilisering af forældre]. *Dansk Pædagogisk Tidsskrift* 2021(4).
- Hays S (1996) *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Højen A, Bleses D, Jensen P, et al. (2019) Patterns of educational achievement among groups of immigrant children in Denmark emerge already in preschool second-language and preliteracy skills. *Applied Psycholinguistics* 40(4): 853–875.
- Huss-Keeler RL (1997) Teacher perception of ethnic and linguistic minority parental involvement and its relationships to children's language and literacy learning: A case study. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 13(2): 171–182.
- Jæger MM (2009) Equal access but unequal outcomes: Cultural capital and educational choice in a meritocratic society. *Social Forces* 87(4): 1943–1971.
- Joiko S (2021) Parenting strategies in the context of South-South migration. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 42(4): 506–520.
- Khan S (2011) *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St Paul's School*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kindergarten Act (2005) Lov om barnehager LOV-2005-06-17-64. Retrieved from <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLE/lov/2005-06-17-64>
- Lareau A (2011) *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lareau A, Adia Evans S and Yee A (2016) The rules of the game and the uncertain transmission of advantage: middle-class parents' search for an urban kindergarten. *Sociology of Education* 89(4): 279–299.
- Norheim H and Moser T (2020) Barriers and facilitators for partnerships between parents with immigrant backgrounds and professionals in ECEC: A review based on empirical research. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 28(6): 789–805.
- OECD (2019) *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where all Students can Succeed*. Paris: OECD.
- Reay D (1998) Engendering social reproduction: Mothers in the educational marketplace. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 19(2): 195–209.
- Savage M, Devine F, Cunningham N, et al. (2013) A new model of social class? Findings from the BBC's great British class survey experiment. *Sociology* 47(2): 219–250.
- Shirani F, Henwood K and Coltart C (2012) Meeting the challenges of intensive parenting culture: Gender, risk management and the moral parent. *Sociology* 46(1): 25–40.
- Smith D (2005) *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People*. Lanham MD: AltaMira press.

- Statistics Norway (2021) Barnehager [Kindergartens]. Available at: <https://www.ssb.no/barnehager> (accessed 19 May 2021).
- Stefansen K and Aarseth H (2011) Enriching intimacy: The role of the emotional in the “resourcing” of middle-class children. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 32(3): 389–405.
- Stefansen K and Skogen K (2010) Selective identification, quiet distancing: Understanding the working-class response to the nordic daycare model. *The Sociological Review* 58(4): 587–603.
- The Day Care Act (2018) Bekendtgørelse af lov om dag-, fritids- og klubtilbud m.v. til børn og unge [The Day Care Act].
- The Norwegian Ministry of Education (2020) Meld. St. 6 (2019–2020) Tett på – tidlig innsats og inkluderende fellesskap i barnehage, skole og SFO [White paper: Close by: Early intervention and inclusive communities in kindergarten and school]. Retrieved from <https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/3dacd48f7c94401ebefc91549a5d08cd/no/pdfs/stm201920200006000dddpdfs.pdf>
- Turney K and Kao G (2009) Barriers to school involvement: Are immigrant parents disadvantaged?. *The Journal of Educational Research* 102(4): 257–271. DOI: 10.3200/JOER.102.4.257-271.
- Vincent C and Ball SJ (2007) “Making up” the middle-class child: Families, activities and class dispositions. *Sociology* 41(6): 1061–1077.
- Vincent C and Maxwell C (2016) Parenting priorities and pressures: Furthering understanding of “concerted cultivation”. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 37(2): 269–281.

Author biography

Josefine Jahreie is a PhD candidate at the Centre for the Study of Professions at Oslo Metropolitan University. Her doctoral dissertation focuses on investigating social constructions of ‘school-readiness’, and specifically how increasing emphasis on school readiness shapes ECEC teachers’ work of preparing children of migrant and minority language descent for formal schooling.