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## **School Involvement: Refugee Parents' Narrated Contribution to their Children's Education while Resettled in Norway**

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### **Abstract**

*In the majority of research, resettled immigrant and refugee parents are often considered to be less involved with their children's schooling than majority parents. This study challenges such research positions, based on narrative interviews about parenting in exile conducted with refugee parents resettled in Norway. Cultural psychology and positioning theory have inspired the analyses. The choice of methodology and conceptualisations have brought forth a rich vein of material, which illuminated agency and active positions in the parents' narratives about involvement with their children's education. Involvement narratives of success achieved by parents taking action are presented as well as narratives of thwarted agency. Parents' narrated action includes also involvement outside officialdom, such as informal contact with teachers. It is assumed that the latter involvement forms have become invisible in the majority of earlier research on refugee parents' school involvement due to methodological choices, and may have contributed to deficit positioning of refugee parents as passive in school involvement. This article's agency narratives form a sharp contrast to such deficit positioning.*

### **Introduction**

By the time refugee families resettle in exile, their children will often have missed out on years of schooling due to war, flight or periods in temporary exile without the right to education (Alitolppa-niitamo, 2002; Hos, 2014; McBrien, 2005; Thorshaug & Svendsen, 2014). Such children may face considerable educational challenges in host countries. An important consideration is how refugee parents engage in their children's education and how this is reflected in research. Studies of parental engagement have tended to find that refugee parents adopt a more passive role than majority parents in the host country (Alitolppa-niitamo, 2002; Garcia Coll et al., 2002; Githembe, Morrison, Bullock, Kinnison, & Jacobson, 2009; Holm, 2011; Matthiesen, 2016; McBrien, 2011). This article is based on a study of parenting in exile in broad, where refugee parents narrate extensive

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engagement in their children’s education. Their interviews provide rich descriptions of parent involvement. This new evidence will be discussed in the light of existing research, and go on to challenge earlier findings. The article is intended to show:

How existing research positions the involvement of refugee parents and how this obscures some parental contributions.

How parent involvement is narrated in my material.

This study leans on a social constructionist theoretical framework. Consequently, “*the terms in which the world is understood*” are seen as “*products of historically situated interchanges among people*” (Gergen, 1985, p. 267). Hence, I consider parent involvement to be a culturally variable phenomenon that may be achieved in various ways (Intxausti, Etxeberria, & Joaristi, 2013; Knudsen, 2010; Whitmarsh, 2011). Epstein (1997; 2010) is often referenced, as are Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997), whenever there is a need to describe or explain school–parent collaboration. Epstein has formulated six types of parent involvement,<sup>1</sup> for which the school should take the initiative. Despite the fact that the public discourse concerning parent involvement is constantly changing (Dahlstedt, 2009; Knudsen, 2010), Epstein’s types of involvement form the point of departure for a great deal of international research in this area, irrespective of whether the informants are teachers or parents.

The interviews on which this article is based, explore parenting in exile in general. Parental involvement in schooling was not a specific interview topic. However, while analysing the material it became apparent to me that the parents considered their children’s education to be a highly pertinent topic, and as a consequence this was made a subject of specific analysis. In other words, the empirical evidence drove the analysis. The design of this study allows scope for involvement narratives that would easily be disregarded by research that employs pre-defined categories of parent involvement (Epstein, 2010). The study includes interviews with largely the same number of fathers and mothers, and many of the fathers provide rich narratives about parent involvement. Many of the earlier studies that involve ethnic minority parents include very few informant fathers (Holm, 2011; Intxausti et al., 2013; Mapp, 2003; Matthiesen, 2015a, 2015b, 2016).

## The current body of research

### The majority of research

In general, international research often points to the high ambitions that many refugee parents and other non-Western immigrants harbour for their children’s education (Alitolppa-niitamo, 2002; Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013; Garcia Coll

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<sup>1</sup> 1. Help families establish home environments to support children as students.  
 2. School-to-home and home-to-school communications.  
 3. Volunteering. Parent help and support in school.  
 4. Family help for students with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning.  
 5. Parent leaders and representatives in school.  
 6. Collaborating with community. (Epstein, 2010)

et al., 2002; Leirvik, 2010; Louie, 2004; McBrien, 2005, 2011). Many studies point out that while the level of ambition is high, the level of parental engagement in home-school cooperation is low (Alitolppa-niitamo, 2002; Garcia Coll et al., 2002; Githembe et al., 2009; Holm, 2011; McBrien, 2011). Some researchers have sought to explain these findings, suggesting that the educational systems of Western countries have been developed with active parental involvement in mind, and that immigrant parents are rarely able to get involved in the way expected of them by the institutions of their adopted countries (Alitolppa-niitamo, 2002; Garcia Coll et al., 2002; McBrien, 2011). Language barriers are highlighted as an important contributing factor (Alitolppa-niitamo, 2002; Bouakaz, 2009; Garcia Coll et al., 2002; Hope, 2011; Nilsson, Barazanji, Heintzelman, Siddiqi, & Shilla, 2012), while some look to cultural differences to explain the lack of parent involvement, for instance by pointing out that home-school collaboration is not the norm in the refugees' countries of origin (McBrien, 2005). Parents interviewed in a number of studies considered it would show a lack of respect for the teachers if they were to voice an opinion about school matters (Bouakaz, 2009; Garcia Coll et al., 2002; McBrien, 2005, 2011; Whitmarsh, 2011). Holm's PhD thesis (2011) about Somalis in Norwegian schools includes interviews with teachers as well as parents. The interview guide is based on Epstein's categories. One of the findings is that fathers are less involved in their children's education than mothers. Few narratives describe the practical nature of the involvement, particularly of fathers, and engagement is rarely mentioned unless easily allocated to one of Epstein's categories. Thorshaug and Svendsen (2014) report on children who have missed out on school before arrival in Norway. Their report refers to the parents' unrealistic expectations of their children's education, but do not suggest the refugee parents as a potential resource to help alleviate their children's situation.

### **Criticism of the majority of research**

A smaller body of qualitative research based on material from the USA (Auerbach, 2007; Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004; Fine, 1993; Lopez, 2001; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009; Whitmarsh, 2011; Yosso, 2005) criticises the very premise of most research that concludes that parents from non-Western countries are less engaged in their children's education than majority parents. These critics share the view that parental involvement is a socially constructed, culturally variable phenomenon. Consequently, they discover forms of parental involvement which have eluded mainstream research (Auerbach, 2007). Not all the informants in these research projects are refugees. The selection criteria normally include poverty or a working class background, but many informants are immigrants with poor English and limited knowledge of the American school system, a feature they have in common with refugees. Auerbach points out that for 20 years Epstein (1997) has been the sole definer and provider of guiding principles for parental school involvement in the USA, and that the research is often concerned with evaluating Epstein-based programmes. This research normally employs quantitative methodology and/or relies on pre-defined categories of involvement, such as Epstein's six types.<sup>2</sup> Baquedano-López et al. (2013, p. 150) maintain that research on parental involvement is dominated by 'deficit approaches about students and families who are not from the dominant majority' that 'have constructed them as lacking and in need of support'. The critics mentioned above use a

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<sup>2</sup> See footnote 1

qualitative methodology and take a more broadly based approach to parental involvement. The premise on which they base their research has many things in common with the premise on which my own study was based. In the following, I'll borrow Auerbach's (2007) expression 'mainstream' to characterise involvement corresponding with and research based on Epstein's (2010) categories.

Two Swedish research projects recorded the school engagement experience of respectively Arabic speaking (Bouakaz, 2009) and Somali (Olgaç, 2000) parents. Here parents talk of their problems with the Swedish education system, such as the lack of discipline and the symmetrical relationship between teachers and pupils. The parents interviewed by Bouakaz talk of their language problems and point out that lack of information may lead to parental resignation and passivity with respect to home-school collaboration. Matthiesen's (2015a, 2015b, 2016) fieldwork looks at how Somali mothers co-operate with schools in Denmark. The study concludes that the mothers positioned themselves as supportive assistants and responsible parents, but to be considered as good collaborative partners, they had to relinquish any advocacy on behalf of their own children (2015a). She also argued that silence during a parent-teacher meeting must be interpreted as the result of an interaction process rather than as a manifestation of the parents' 'culture' (2015b).

My intention for this article is to go some way towards meeting the need for research that provides rich narratives about the involvement in their children's education of refugee fathers and mothers, ranging from the illiterate to the university educated.

## Methodology

This study's social constructionist framework (Gergen, 1985) is manifest through its interview style and analysis, as is further described below. Inspired by cultural psychology (Cole, 1996), parenting is seen as a socially, culturally and historically situated concept. The meaning of parenting is often naturalized in psychological literature (Burman, 2007), and cultural psychology challenges such naturalization. Parenting in exile explored in this study is thus conceptualized as situated. It is seen as performed in the context of the family's current situation, influenced by the family's past and directed towards the children's expected life trajectory.

The informants are mothers (13) and fathers (12) of 16 families who arrived in Norway 6-12 years before the first interview was conducted. Some of the families' children were also interviewed. Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia were chosen as countries of origin because these nationalities were topping Norway's refugee statistics throughout this settlement period. The parents' educational background reflects the educational variety generally found among parents who have sought refuge in Scandinavia and originate from one of these three countries (Behtoui & Olsson, 2014). The full range is represented, from the illiterate to the university educated. Most of the families included in the study had children of school age or older when they arrived in Norway. These will be given particular prominence in this article. Thorshaug and Svendsen (2014) point out that children who arrive in Norway at a late stage in their school career, are in a particularly vulnerable position. Their family history of war, flight and temporary exile will, combined with the family's socio-economic status in their native country, determine the degree to which these children attended school before arrival in Norway. The study demonstrates considerable variation.

The informants live on the Norwegian west coast, in villages and towns whose populations range from 1,500 to 20,000. A relatively small number of refugee families have settled in each of these communities. This context increases the potential for narratives about informal as well as formal relationships between parents and school professionals.

I conducted all the interviews personally. In most families, mother and father were interviewed together, normally in their family home. Some were interviewed separately. Whenever youngsters were interviewed in the company of their parents, this happened on the family's initiative. Most of the parents were interviewed twice. The topic for all interviews was parenting in exile. The first interviews sought to collect narratives (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) about the informants' time as parents in Norway. Each interview was in part conducted as a life mode interview (Gulbrandsen, 2014; Haavind, 1987). Within the framework of the narrative about yesterday's activities, parental practices were identified and the related meaning making explored. Accounts of parent involvement with the children's school arose not as answers to specific questions, but were spontaneously included in many of the narratives from both time intervals. I see the process of meaning making linked to these involvement narratives as a joint action. According to this study's theoretical framework, I see both the interviewer and the parents as participants in the production of meaning occurring during the interview (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). One can question that the narrated involvement actions might be over reported. However, what are analyzed are not the reported actions, but the parents' narration and positioning of their own contributions.

The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. They have been analysed as texts, and the analysis is inspired by cultural psychology (Cole, 1996) as in Haavind (2000) and Ulvik (2007), and positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009; Søndergaard, 2002). Positioning as 'The discursive production of selves' (Davies & Harré, 1990) has informed the analyses. In analysing the parents' utterances, I have been looking for both what Davies and Harre (1990) call *reflexive* positioning and what they call *interactive* positioning. The reflexive positioning refers to the positioning of oneself. For example, as the talk of two parents, Osman and Fatime, is analysed, they both position themselves as initiators and drivers of collaboration with the school. The interactive positioning refers to the positioning of others, for example when the father Osman positions the teacher as an expert within a limited field. Harré et al (2009, p. 9) emphasizes searching for the 'local moral landscape' of 'rights and duties' inherent in analysed talk. This has informed the third aspect of positioning in the analyses: The positions parents produce for themselves in the narratives – as a place to speak and act from, giving right to certain performance. One example of this is the position the father Hassan gives himself as a friend of the headmaster. In the narratives, it is displayed how the parents position themselves as worthy parents in an interview with a researcher representing the majority. They position themselves in relation to the majority society. In the analyses, I also refer to how refugee parents are positioned through the research literature.

The analysis was organised in categories that emerged from interview sequences about children's education and parental involvement, and were consequently not pre-defined. The involvement stories fall into one of two different types of narrative which my analysis of the complete material has identified, and which I refer to as:

- Involvement narratives of success achieved by taking action
- Involvement narratives of thwarted agency

All names mentioned here are fictitious. For the sake of anonymisation, some of the family details have also been changed.

## Results

The parents position their own contributions to their children's education in Norway in a variety of ways. My analysis of the parents' narratives was based on the following questions:

*How do the parents position themselves and other agents when they talk about home-school collaboration and involvement in their children's education? What practices are represented in the narratives?*

All of the parents interviewed were concerned with their children's education. Most parents talk of various forms of involvement in their schooling. Homework assistance and homework motivation featured prominently among yesterday's activities when reviewed in life mode interviews (Gulbrandsen, 2014). In some families this was the mother's job, others had made it the father's job. One mother positions herself and her husband in this way: 'To us, education is almost sacred'. One father told me that on the wall in their family home there was a picture of a boy from their native country polishing gentlemen's shoes. Whenever he wanted to motivate his children to do their homework, he pointed to the picture on the wall and told them the story of the boy and his non-existent opportunity to go to school. This type of parental motivation by immigrant parents, used to induce greater efforts at school, confirms the findings of earlier research (Leirvik, 2010; Louie, 2004). The diversity identified through analysis of the interviews is here presented mainly through the narratives of four families. These parents provide rich but different descriptions of parental involvement and make use of discourses that emerged through analysis of my other material. All four families had children of school age and over when they arrived in Norway. In two of the families, one of the children joined in during part of our conversation.

## Involvement narratives of success achieved by taking action

In these narratives parents position their own initiative and their own efforts as being key to their children's education. All of these stories describe major challenges throughout the process from the very start, but the parents explain what action they took, and are still taking, in order to address these challenges, and how their efforts were successful. In different ways, these narratives challenge mainstream research in the field.

### **The building of informal networks: getting involved outside officialdom**

Some parents collaborate with the school through informal network mechanisms. We may well ask whether this engagement would be noticeable in studies whose point of departure is Epstein (2010) categories for parental involvement. A number of the parents in my study emphasised the importance of their social contact with school staff. One mother talks of having contacted the teachers at the primary school soon after their arrival in

Norway because her children were being bullied at school: “*And we invited them (the teachers) for a meal at our house. They came to see us and talked with us, and we provided them with information about our country and about our religion.*” The teachers passed on the information to the relevant school classes and the mother found that the bullying decreased.

The most comprehensive account of informal contact comes from **Mona and Hassan**, who have seven children. They live in one of the smallest communities included in the study. Hassan came to Norway to seek asylum four years before Mona and the children arrived under a family reunification scheme. Mona and Hassan had never attended school before they arrived in Norway, and they are still illiterate. Nevertheless, Hassan is in full time employment, and Mona has a part time job. Their children arrived in Norway when they were between the ages of seven and 18. At the time, none of them could read or write, and they spoke no English. One of the family's older daughters took part in the interview.

In the sequence below, Hassan starts by talking about his own Norwegian language course:

I started the course in January. And I received a great deal of help from a friend of mine, Alf, he is the headmaster at the school. (...) He is a good mate, I learnt a lot from him, and then he learnt a lot from me (...) Afterwards I applied for family reunification, the family arrived, the kids started going to School. He (the headmaster) helped me with the Internet, and all sorts of things (...) he helped me for free.

The *relationship* between Hassan and Alf is given prominence as a significant element in the continuation of the story. He talks of this as a mutual relationship: ‘I learnt a lot from him, and then he learnt a lot from me’. His position as a friend of the headmaster gives Hassan space to manoeuvre, and he makes use of this space in a number of ways. The narrative makes no distinction between Alf the headmaster and Alf the friend. Later on in the interview it becomes apparent that Alf's Internet assistance was provided in the family home, and that the children were given help to use the Internet as an educational tool. The practical details of how they started school are explained in the following dialogue, to which Hassan's daughter contributes:

Hassan: No, they couldn't write, nor read. They started reading here. Alf is really good, he's a fantastic guy, really excellent, he helped the kids. (...)

Daughter: At first (...) we arrived in the summer, you see. (...) And then after school started we were in a small class, and we had Anne as our guidance teacher.

Hassan: She is really good. (...) She taught me language, Norwegian language, at first. (...) We didn't have a dedicated teacher, only the people who work at the school, the teachers, every now and again. Alf gave them lessons every once in a while, they helped us. And then, he is really good, so the best ones, those who had experience from the school (...) She is really good, she excellent, she taught me (...) grammar, and talking. How to talk to people outside. And then, she is very happy, not angry (...) she taught me again and again and again (...)

Researcher (to Hassan): But did you discuss with the teachers how it might be smart to go about doing this?

Hassan: Yes, me and my mate, he headmaster, we, I had good contact with him.

Hassan also introduces a new position (Harré et al., 2009) which entitles him to voice his opinion: He used to be taught by Anne and has his own experience of her teaching methods. He manages to explain that she, selected from among the very best, was appointed to teach the induction class. When Hassan is asked about the planning of this induction programme for the children, he points out that this was the headmaster's responsibility, and makes a special mention of his private relationship with the headmaster: *me and my mate*. Hassan positions himself and the headmaster as partner agents working together to ensure that the children, who have never attended school, would have a good start to their years of education in Norway. Both Hassan and his daughter consider the teaching programme to have been successful. At the time of the interview, Hassan's eldest daughter had just embarked on a university degree course. She gained university admission six years after arriving in Norway as an illiterate 18-year-old.

### Hassan's narrative in relation to earlier research

The immigrant parents in the study conducted by Intxausti et al. (2013) also seek a personal relationship with the children's teachers. Intxausti et al., Sainsbury and Renzaho (2011) and Mapp (2003) all ask that teachers show greater willingness to accept informal parental contact. As mentioned, Barton et al. (2004) show in their study from the USA how low-income parents in urban areas create their own space for engaging with and influencing their children's public schools. The authors show how the parents create this informal and personal space in which they also take up a position:

“Actions that engage are both about how parents *activate* the resources available to them in a given space in order to *author* a place of their own in schools and about how they use or *express* that place to *position* themselves differently so that they can influence life in schools” (Barton et al., 2004, p. 8).

Hassan activates the resources available to him in a way which echoes the examples referred to by Barton et al. (2004). He optimises his personal relationships by positioning himself as ‘a friend of the headmaster’ and ‘Anne's language student’. This optimisation of the positions to which Hassan's relationships entitle him, enables him to see himself as an important agent. He has a limited grasp of the Norwegian language, can neither read nor write, and has no bureaucratic competence with respect to the Norwegian school system. He therefore belongs to the group of people who in the mainstream research literature is positioned among the most passive and uninvolved in their children's education (Holm, 2011; Lewig, Arney, & Salveron, 2010; McBrien, 2005). Hassan never refers to a single formal meeting. It is far from certain that he would get a high parent involvement score as defined by Epstein (2010). A research study design based on these categories might not even have recognised his engagement. In the same way, Barton et al. (2004) point out that the things that their informant parents talk of, would scarcely “(...) *fit neatly into the requisite list of things good parents do, but their intentions to author a new way of fitting into school life calls traditional notions of engagement into question*” (Barton et al., 2004, p. 8).

### Mainstream involvement by active initiators

A number of the parents, I interviewed, position themselves as a key resource for dealing with the special needs of children who arrive in their country of refuge with an educational deficit. **Osman** and **Fatime** are the parents of two different families, and both talk of

practices that would easily fit into Epstein (2010) mainstream involvement categories. They position themselves as initiators to and drivers of collaboration with the school, and with a rich practice of parent involvement. Such examples of parents exercising agency challenges previous studies which depict refugee parents as passive.

Three of **Osman**'s children were born in his native country. He arrived in Norway four years ahead of his wife and his children. They live in a small town. Osman was able to complete his upper secondary education in his native country, but war stopped him from going on to higher education. In Norway he managed to get himself a full-time job at an early stage, which he still maintains. When his three daughters arrived in Norway, Huda was six years old, Khadra eight and Faiza nine, and before they arrived only Faiza had sporadically been able to attend school. Osman had acquired some knowledge of Norwegian society and language before the children arrived.

Osman talks repeatedly of educational challenges, and about taking the same course of action on every occasion: "*Then I talked to the school*". In liaison with the school, they found a solution: "*I talked to the school because they [the daughters] needed more help with the language. Then they got it and things improved. They were given another two hours at school*". In this narrative Osman is the one who takes initiative vis-à-vis the school. He identifies a need, and he takes action. This is the process he sets in motion: "*I talked to the school... They got it... Things improved*". Osman authors his agent position as the father of school children through his narrative of *negotiation*. Narratives about parents who view interfering with the teacher's work as disrespect (Lewig et al., 2010) or which reflect the view that meetings at the school mean trouble (Garcia Coll et al., 2002; McBrien, 2005; Whitmarsh, 2011), are often mentioned in research literature that deals with non-Western immigrants. They are however absent from Osman's story. His initiative is also in stark contrast to Holm's (2011) findings, that teachers generally find it difficult to engage with fathers. Osman positions himself as the initiator, and he provides rich examples of how this happens.

Osman also points to other aspects of his own effort:

"Faiza was a quick learner. But Khadra needed more help. (...) Things were a bit difficult for her. So I tried talking to the school and tried to support her. Tried to teach her multiplication, teach her division. (...) Until she got to 4<sup>th</sup> year. (...) and then after 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year, then it was a bit like that again. So I talked to the school, and again they helped. They said that sometimes some pupils lose ground, and then they need help."

According to his own account, Osman is a father who not only makes demands on the school. His narrative introduces *homework assistance* as another aspect of his own agent position. The homework assistance he provides is described as being extensive enough to warrant calling it home teaching, because the children need to catch up after having missed out on school. When he later asks the school for more help, he conveys the teacher's comment: "*They have said that sometimes some pupils lose ground, and then they need help*". Here Osman refers to a *dialogue practice*. Talking to the school also involves *listening*. Here and elsewhere in the interview he taps into the teacher's expertise. He listens to the teacher's experience, which informs his efforts to understand his own child. This statement positions the teacher as the expert within a limited field. Osman nevertheless takes up the position of having comprehensive knowledge of his own

children's learning process. Osman intensified his level of assistance, as recommended by the teacher. How to go about doing so, he found out by himself:

Osman: So I had to give her more help at home. No one told me to, but I had to ask every day what they had learnt, what more they needed. What they were meant to learn. I had to explain. I had to buy more books. For there was now a second language (*English*), they need that. (...) They (*the other children*) have studied for four years at the school. So they (*my children*) didn't start at the same level. So they had to put in more work and had to borrow books from the library so they could read more until they had caught up with the others.

Researcher: So at the time you had to help them with their homework every day?

Osman: Every day. Until this day I help them. (...) For I have discovered that unless you are with your children, sitting down, they will spend longer on doing their homework, and sometimes they will cheat and not finish their work. Especially Huda. I received two notes from the school, so now I accompany her. (...) But I say: "*You mustn't cheat. You have to finish. Unless you finish, you will not be allowed to go to football*".

According to Osman, the homework assistance element of his agent position is authored by himself. He has personally come up with the ideas for what needs to be done, and his actions are informed by the experience he has accumulated. His homework assistance is described as a creative and experience-based practice, which requires perseverance. At the time of the interview he was still providing it. When he finds that his youngest daughter is trying to dodge her homework, he introduces the fifth element of his agent position as the father of a school child: *boundary setting practices*. First homework, then football. And if the homework is not done, she will have to quit football.

All of the elements in Osman's involvement practice fit in with the current parent involvement discourse (Epstein, 2010), also in accordance to Knudsen's (2010) analysis. Yet his narrative points to two differences between his family and ethnic Norwegian families: his three children have to learn all subjects in a language which is still new to them and even he as a helper is only a novice learner. Furthermore, the two older children have missed out on the first years of school and have to learn an awful lot more in the course of a school year than their classmates. In addition to his extensive homework assistance, Osman tries to compensate by buying and borrowing books that are suitable for the children's real level of competency. Compared to ethnic Norwegian parents, Osman has to provide more homework assistance as well as take more actions.

**Fatime** is a specialist teacher who used to practice her profession in her native country. Her son Daban is her eldest. He was eight when they arrived in Norway as quota refugees and were resettled in a small town. She tells me that Daban was put in an induction class in the town centre. One day Fatime asked to be present during the induction class. She did not like the situation she observed:

Fatime: It was a large classroom with six assistants allocated to the same number of languages. And none of them were – I realise now, because I know them – none of them were trained (...) There were two Norwegian guidance teachers and children of six different nationalities and different ages, and it was chaos (...) I discussed this in English with one of the guidance teachers afterwards. I said I was surprised to find a class like this in Norway considering the country's fantastic school system. But she said: "*You haven't any choice, this is mandatory*". But I said: "*You need to listen to what I and the others are*

*saying. This is wrong!*" "But no, you're not allowed (to withdraw Daban)". (It was) just like the regime in my native country.

After a few months Daban was allowed to spend two days a week at his local school with the other 3<sup>rd</sup> year pupils. Her impression of this class was entirely different. On his first day with the class they went for a walk, and Fatime was waiting as they arrived back:

When they returned from the walk, the teacher was holding Daban by the hand, and with her other hand she held another boy from our native country. Two refugee children. She held the hands of only these two, and walked in front of all the other children. (...) I liked this situation very much. And I told the teacher that this school system is entirely different to the approach used in my native country. This is the first time I have seen children walking with their teacher. And the teacher caring for the two of them.

Fatime went to the headmaster and asked if Daban could join the 3<sup>rd</sup> years all week. The headmaster argued against this, saying that Daban would first have to learn more Norwegian. Fatime argued that she, who was from a linguistic minority in her native country, started school without knowing the language of the teaching medium: "No, Daban is a child. He won't need long (...), after 2-3 months things were OK for us (when she was a child)". Then he said that: "We'll deal with this". And then Daban started 3<sup>rd</sup> year.

Fatime takes up the position as an expert. This allows her to assess the other people's competence, and she finds it is not good enough in the induction class. She describes how she takes the initiative to negotiate with the headmaster and how she then makes use of her own formal competence as an educationalist as well as her own experience as an ethnic minority child attending a majority school. Her wishes for her son are accepted.

### **Osman and Fatime's narratives seen in relation to earlier research**

As we have already seen, many of the informants in the studies conducted by Holm (2011), Bouakaz (2009) and Olgac et al. (2000) in Norway and Sweden are dissatisfied with the lack of discipline in the school and with teaching methods they are at a loss to understand. Osman raises no problems of this kind, and Fatime takes the exact opposite stance. With the exception of the induction class, she thinks Norwegian schools are far superior to schools in her own native country. When asked what values from her native country she considers most important to retain, she answers: "I have noted that the things that are important when you raise a child, are all integrated with what they teach them at school". She considers her own most important native values as being congruent with the values that her children encounter in the Norwegian school system. In this way she conveys a sense of continuity. At the same time she positions the Norwegian school system as being better at safeguarding these values than the schools in her native country.

Unlike some of Hassan's forms of engagement, which could easily be disregarded by the parent involvement standards described in Norwegian (Holm, 2011) and American (Epstein, 1997, 2010) research, most of Osman's and Fatime's narratives would be recognized within a current mainstream parent involvement discourse (Epstein, 2010). The amazing aspect of the rich agent position that emerges from the analysis of Osman's narrative, is the *contrast* between this and the way that fathers from a refugee background

are normally positioned in the mainstream research – as passive and disinterested parents who are difficult to get hold of.

As mentioned above, Osman explains his efforts by pointing out that an intensive programme is required when children need to catch up while grappling with language challenges. Like many other refugee parents in exile in Western countries (Alitolppaniitamo, 2002; Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Leirvik, 2010; McBrien, 2005; Thorshaug & Svendsen, 2014), he also harbours a strong desire for his children to go on to higher education:

They must study. My recommendation to them is a university college, at the very least. I never had the opportunity! My children are here in this country, they have more opportunities than me, so they must study. They must study, and they must work hard.

Osman talks of his own considerable effort to ensure that this may be possible. There appears to be a great degree of congruence between his own idea of the effort required of him, and his educational ambitions on his children's behalf. In this way he is representative of the parents in this study. Thorshaug and Svendsen (2014), who specifically deal with the education of new arrivals with little schooling before they arrived in Norway, fail to mention the parents as a potential resource that might help alleviate the situation. On the contrary, their focus is on the problems created by the parents' unrealistic educational ambitions for their children. The problems appear to be concerned with the parents', often unrealistic, expectations with respect to the level of education that their children might be able to achieve, and at what speed. Proposals for action seek to ensure that "(...) *they are put in a better position to give realistic and good advice to their children with respect to future life choices*". Osman's narrative may provide additional nuance to Thorshaug and Svendsen's description of this problem and their failure to refer to parents as a resource.

## **Involvement narratives of thwarted agency**

Whenever home-school collaboration came up as a topic in the course of my interviews, parents generally voiced a positive attitude.<sup>3</sup> Some of the narratives are, however, dominated by problems. The parents who talk most extensively about problems with home-school collaboration describe how their initiatives to tackle the situation with the school were unsuccessful. I will refer to two narratives by way of example. These were the stories told by Assef and Amina, and by the above-mentioned Fatime in her second interview.

### **Assef and Amina: Aiming for a foot in both cultures**

Assef and Amina have many children, the youngest of whom is 13 years old at the time of the interview. Before they came to Norway they had spent seven years in exile in a neighbouring country. In Norway they were immediately resettled in the small town where they still live. Amina is a trained teacher and Assef is university educated. However, because they both have been struggling to concentrate, they have been unable to learn

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<sup>3</sup> Please note that parents were never asked specifically about this, unless they had broached the subject themselves.

Norwegian. They had enlisted the services of an adult daughter to act as interpreter for our interview. The children's education was a high priority for these parents:

Assef: It was really important for us when we arrived (*in Norway*) that the children would receive an education. We have always focused on that. Regrettably, there were no opportunities for this when we were living in the neighbouring country, for refugees were not allowed to go to school.

The parents' focus on their children's education is conveyed through a continuity narrative. Education has always been a priority. The seven years spent in their neighbouring country meant that their children's education had been discontinued. Now that they have ended up in Norway, this brings an opportunity for the children to continue learning. The price they need to pay, is having to receive this education in a completely new language, and having to relate to a school that forms part of a very different cultural context. They narrate being prepared for this:

Assef: We wanted them to learn both the Norwegian language and the culture, but it was also very important to us that they would remember their own background and culture. We wanted them to remember that they are Muslims, that they come from our native country (...), while at the same time learn Norwegian, and have a foot in both cultures. It was really difficult to find the balance. They mustn't become too Norwegian, nor too (*from their native country*).

Some of the cultural price the family have to pay for access to education seems to Assef as being unnecessary obstacles in engaging with education. Assef talks about his daughter's swimming lessons, where different cultural practices clash. Instead of having his wish granted for the school to help his daughter maintain a foot in both cultures, he finds that on this occasion the school will not budge: "*My daughter Meryam, she started primary school here, she had never experienced getting undressed and having showers at school, and wearing a bikini for swimming*". The family has arrived in a country where swimming lessons are mandatory and where swimming is taught in mixed-gender classes to children wearing swimming costumes, bikinis or swimming trunks. In Norway all the girls shower in a communal shower after swimming classes and PE; the boys do the same in a separate communal shower. This clashes with his daughter's sense of modesty, and her religious upbringing to be covered up.

Assef: When they are young we focus on the need to cover up, and to show respect for yourself and your own body, this is very important for Muslims (...). So that was the first obstacle we encountered, that she refused to join in with the swimming. She wanted clothes that covered her, or she wouldn't join in. And after PE, she didn't want to shower with the others, she preferred coming home to shower.

This is narrated as Meryam's own protest, which concurs with her own account that she provides later on in the interview. A meeting is held at the school about the mode of dress during swimming lessons and the opportunity to shower at home after PE:

Assef: And when we were at the meeting we asked (...). And we said "*you mustn't expect her to act just like the other pupils. For that's not what she has been taught. And it's not*

*that we don't want her to learn (to swim), but that you will have to let her... She needs to respect the lessons, but...".*

The demand that his daughter should be allowed to cover up during swimming lessons was not accepted. Meryam, who at the time of the interview was 19 years old, came into the living room during the interview. She gave her own account of her experience at the time:

Meryam: I joined them for swimming from the very beginning. It felt like the most natural thing to do, for me to be wearing a T-shirt. But after a while I was no longer allowed (*by the school*) to wear it, I had to wear a swimming costume. And that was the end of it. I had only just learnt how to lie on top of the water, as it were. To float on the water. I found it really difficult; I spent a long time getting to that point. So I can't really swim. That was the end of the swimming.

According to Meryam, she was forced by her teachers to swim with fewer clothes on, and therefore stopped attending the swimming lessons. Assef expressed a wish for his children to '*have one foot in both cultures*'. Meryam herself expresses disappointment with the school. Assef feels that it is difficult to find the right balance, to gain having *a foot in both cultures*. They consider the cultural price they are expected to pay for schooling opportunity in Norway as unnecessarily high. Neither father nor daughter feels that the school supported the integration project.

#### **Fatime: The school failed us when we needed it the most**

In Fatime's second interview her position with respect to the school was other than in her first interview. This time she talks about her 12-year-old daughter Sara.

Fatime: Yes, she was bullied for many years at school. Things were really difficult for her for many years, and I tried to find a solution at the school, but I didn't succeed. Because, I'm sorry, but the teacher was unable to co-operate on this matter, to co-operate with me.

This is all about the pupils' interpersonal practice. The pupils do not come up to scratch.

Fatime: It makes me sad and very angry. I said (*to Sara*) that I feel terribly guilty. For I came here to Europe in the hope that my children would have a good life. Growth, education, health services and living in safety. But unfortunately, Sara gets ill here.

After many years of resistance fighting in her native country and seven years in a neighbouring country, Europe was the solution for this family if their children were to have a future. While Fatime in her first interview explains how the Europe project has succeeded, this second narrative is about the things that have not been a success. Her conscience troubles her for having dragged her children here, but she also blames the teacher:

Fatime: But it is Sara's teacher who is responsible, I believe. (...)

Researcher: What do you think this teacher did wrong?

Fatime: I think that she, she never took account of what I was saying. I've been complaining a lot. Every time we talked I told her that Sara has a lot of problems. (...) But

she took no notice. It was not important to her. Perhaps the children in the classroom also bully (*others*), for Sara said that: "*It's not only me. They bully me, but at break-time they bully the kids from Africa as well.*" (...) and she (*the teacher*) is only concerned with the subjects, not with...

Assef and Fatime both engage with their children's education by talking to a teacher when a problem arises. Fatime says that she has raised the topic of Sara's problems in every conversation she has ever had with the teacher, but she has never prevailed. Assef talks about a meeting with the school concerning their different customs in relation to PE and swimming. The parents and the pupil came up with suggestions for resolving the matter but failed to win acceptance. The parents of both families have tried to communicate through the formal home-school collaboration channels in order to solve the problems, but have got nowhere.

Bouakaz (2009) and Olgac et al. (2000) provide examples of studies which highlight the views of parents and give an insight into the reasons why immigrant parents may take up a resigned and disengaged position. In this present study, nobody has expressed resignation to the point that they have stopped communicating with the school. But Assef and Fatime's narratives may well resemble back-stories that explain why parents become as passive and disengaged as the mainstream research suggests. It would be pertinent to see these narratives in the light of the limited positions made available to mothers, as with Matthiesen's (2015a, 2015b) analysis of her material. Assef and Fatime attempted to advocate for their respective children, but success escaped them. Fatime, on the other hand, had previously positioned herself as a critic of Norwegian educational practices on behalf of her son, at which point she won acceptance for her arguments and achieved the change she wanted.

## Discussion and conclusion

The choice of methodology and conceptualisations in this study has brought forth a rich vein of material, which made active positions analysable in the narratives of refugee parents who talk about their own involvement with their children's education. In the mainstream research, immigrant and refugee parents are often positioned as less involved with their children's education than majority parents. The material analysed in this study challenges this mainstream research in various ways.

War, flight and temporary exile closer to home have meant that children of school age in most of the families interviewed have been unable to attend school for shorter or longer periods at a time. When the families are resettled, the children's need for parental assistance is therefore greater than in the majority population.

In general, their involvement narratives tell of the success they have achieved by taking action. This study is open-ended and exploratory without any pre-defined categories of data collection, which makes it possible to identify involvement outside of the mainstream research categories. In some narratives, the parents refer to their own role in informal networks that involve teachers and headmasters as being key to their children's success at school. In this way, even uneducated parents are able to assume positions of importance for their children's education. Furthermore, my analysis has also found mainstream involvement by parents who take up the position as active initiators. A wide variety of

agent positions are available to refugee parents illuminated through their narratives of school involvement. These positions allow the parents to identify their children's educational needs and to take the initiative to engage with their education whether in liaison with the teachers or on their own. These agency narratives form a sharp contrast to the deficit positioning of immigrant and refugee parents, which is prevalent in the majority of research on parent involvement.

In Mathiessen's (2015b) study, refugee parents position themselves as *agents* with respect to school-home-collaboration, but analysis has found that there is no room to challenge and criticise the school if parents are to retain their position as *supportive assistants and responsible parents*. The parents in my study position themselves as contact initiators vis-à-vis the school, and as advocates for their own children, to a much greater degree than in Mathiessen's study (2015b). There may be many reasons for this difference, but it is tempting to consider the community context as a relevant factor. Mathiessen's (2015b, p. 4) families live in "urban setting in a larger town in Denmark", while the families in this study live in villages and small towns in Norway. Smaller communities and closer contact between parents and teachers may mean that refugee parents will have a larger number of positions available to them when in contact with the school.

However, the parents did not always prevail. Some of the involvement narratives in my material refer to thwarted agency. In these instances, the parents talk of themselves as active users of formal channels in an attempt to improve their children's plight at school, but they were unsuccessful. These narratives of thwarted agency may well describe the types of incident that led to refugee parents being conceptualised as passive and disengaged in much of the research in this field (Lewig et al., 2010; McBrien, 2005, 2011). Other parents have explained their sense of resignation as a result of having tried and failed (Bouakaz, 2009; Olgaç, 2000). Mathiessen's (2015b) analysis refers to this as *the processes of silencing*. The narratives in this study may be seen as prequels to such *processes of silencing*.

There is reason to continue researching refugee and migrant parents' involvement in their children's education by utilising broad exploratory qualitative study designs. This study demonstrates that such designs may invite rich narratives to emerge and uncover a variety of parent positions. A number of studies based on similar designs may help challenge the mainstream research in the field.

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