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Early childcare as arenas of inclusion: the contribution of staff to recognising parents with refugee backgrounds as significant stakeholders

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ABSTRACT

According to the Norwegian Kindergarten Act, educational staff should work in cooperation and understanding with the guardians of a child. In this article, it is argued that staff must ensure sufficient quality of interactions with all parents, provide them with satisfactory information, and facilitate parental participation, in order for children to have a safe educational environment. This study explores the ways in which early childcare staff could recognise parents with refugee backgrounds as significant stakeholders. The study has followed two early childcare institutions through several data collection methods. Eight staff members and the management has participated. Additionally, parents with refugee backgrounds have been interviewed. The analysis demonstrated that in order for staff to sufficiently recognise the parents with refugee backgrounds, the parents had to interact in the confines of the majority's discourse. Both institutions recognised the parents' backgrounds on an everyday basis; however, staff did not communicate their responsibility in this regard. Finally, parents generally appeared satisfied regarding their cooperation with staff; nevertheless, the staff had not sufficiently communicated the role and responsibility of early childcare to the parents.

KEYWORDS

Early childhood education;
parental cooperation; parents
with refugee background;
recognition; inclusion

Introduction

This study explores how Norwegian early childcare institutions¹ can function as arenas of inclusion for parents with refugee backgrounds, and asks, 'How can staff in early childcare ensure that parents with refugee backgrounds² are recognised as significant stakeholders?' The parental mandate assigned to early childcare highlights the necessity of cooperation with parents to promote children's development (Directorate for Education and Training 2017, 2018, 13). Parents are significant stakeholders, implying that they must have the opportunity to express themselves, be heard and participate;

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and diversity and mutual respect should be appreciated (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2017).

Previous researchers have found a lack of competence in multicultural pedagogy, multilingualism and second language learning in the Norwegian education system, where staff expressed uncertainty in their communication with children and parents of different cultural backgrounds (for research regarding early childcare, see Andersen et al. 2011; Lauritsen 2011; Gotvassli et al. 2012; Sand 2014). Therefore, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (2013) started a national initiative on ‘Competence for Diversity’ – (CfD) for a five-year term, which required educational staff to go through a process of work-based professional development concerning multicultural and multilingual issues.

There has been little international research on migrants’ and refugee families’ transitions to early childcare education systems in their new countries; on parents’ own perspectives regarding early childcare; and on teachers’ and parents’ perceptions of their relationships (De Gioia 2015; Van Laere and Vandebroek 2017; Van Laere, Van Houtte, and Vandebroek 2018). Some of the studies that have been conducted show that early childcare is often dominated by the majority’s discourse and habitus (see among others Sand 2014; De Gioia 2015; Van Laere and Vandebroek 2017; Van Laere, Van Houtte, and Vandebroek 2018; Solberg 2018). It appears that parents often have to act in accordance with the expected conduct and norms of the majority and its institutions (Solberg 2018), to which they tend to be less compliant. As a result, they remain passive towards understanding their child’s performance while interacting with educational staff (Sand 2014).

It has also been evident that parents from minority backgrounds have little knowledge about the daily practices of early childcare; at the same time, they show an eagerness to know more (Van Laere, Van Houtte, and Vandebroek 2018). The main concern of parents is the proper care and supervision of their children, as well as if their children are learning the dominant language and social-emotional skills (Andenæs 2011; De Gioia 2015; Van Laere and Vandebroek 2017; Vuorinen 2018; Sønsthagen 2018). The importance of a common language for interactions between staff and parents has also been illustrated (De Gioia 2013).

This study aims to highlight parents’ role in early childcare and the responsibility of staff in this regard, with the understanding that parents are significant stakeholders with valuable contributions.

Power relations between staff and parents with refugee backgrounds as significant stakeholders

Early childcare staff is an example of a group, which can exert power over others – in this case over parents with refugee backgrounds. Furthermore, even though the education system is typically assigned with the role of stamping out social inequalities from society, it often functions as a reproducer of inequalities instead (see among others Abbott 1988; Bourdieu 1997; Blackledge 2001; Cummins 2009; Baquedano-López, Alexander, and Hernandez 2013). Building on Bourdieu (1997), people are born into a certain social structure, a habitus, which affect their perspectives, thoughts and actions. In a society, the dominant group’s habitus and discourse permeates the education system, hence limiting the opportunity of equal education to children from minority

backgrounds (Bourdieu 1997). Cummins (2009) advocates that teachers always have a choice on how to manage interactions with others, especially with non-dominant groups – in this case parents with refugee backgrounds. The first step to challenge power relations is to critically reflect upon the assumptions concerning what good education or good practice is in diverse contexts (Cummins 2009; Vandebroek, Roets, and Snoeck 2009).

Another situation where the dominant group – in this case early childcare staff – can exert power over parents from non-dominant groups is in the perception of engagement. Researchers state that educational staff often perceive parents of different race, class, cultural, economic capital or migrant status as less engaged in their children's education. Additionally, these parents' can be seen as needing to learn the cultural ways of the system, rather than as active, engaged agents with valuable contributions who can advocate on behalf of their children (Baquedano-López, Alexander, and Hernandez 2013; Goodall and Montgomery 2014). Thus, following Bourdieu (1997), one can claim that the dominant group has the power to define indicators of engagement. Indicators of engagement as perceived by Norwegian early childcare staff can be (a) that parents take initiative in the interactions, by asking questions and informing staff about the child's home life, (b) ensuring that the child has the correct clothes for different weather conditions for outdoor play, and (c) bringing and picking up the child within the expected time slots. These indicators are not necessarily in line with the indicators of the parents from non-dominant groups, which may be (d) facilitating a safe home environment, (e) physical and psychological closeness, and (f) security for the child. The staffs' indicators for engagement are (1) not necessarily communicated to the parents, (2) the staff may not be aware of d, e, and f, (3) the staff may not show any interest in d, e and f, and (4) d, e, and f may not be awarded any value. Thus, the dominant groups' discourse and habitus permeates the early childcare institutions (Bourdieu 1997). Furthermore, staff in early childcare institutions may also occasionally choose their own interests over those of parents, thus suppressing and exerting power in situations where the interests of the parties collides (Ministry of Education and Research 2018).

Recognition of significant stakeholders

The study is based on the understanding of recognition, which includes notions like 'I appreciate you, I see you, and I try to understand your feelings and seek to share them' (Schibbye 2013, 39, my translation). There are varieties of temperaments that are considered appropriate and acceptable by the majority, thus reflecting cultural values (Palludan 2013, 52). People who act in accordance with the dominant temperament of any organisational body achieve legitimacy and status and are often perceived as respectable. Those who deviate can be seen as inferior, invisible and different. It is easier for childcare staff to prioritise parents that are in accordance with their own understanding of appropriate behaviour or those who follow their lead, merely through a dialogue and by facilitating a mutual exchange of views and experiences (Bergersen 2017, 41). Thus, they can also neutralise or ignore those whom they perceive to be problematic (Lipsky 1980). It is argued that the reproduction of inequalities in educational institutions is linked to social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997), as well as to the feeling of recognition

(Palludan 2013), thereby risking suppression of minorities (parents with refugee backgrounds) in educational institutions.

Honneth (2008) describes three levels of recognition: love, legal justice and social appreciation. Love, in professional capacity, is linked to care. It consists of mutual confirmation of each other's specific needs where individuals are dependent on each other. When bringing their children to early childcare institutions, parents have to trust that the staff will take care of their children. Legal justice refers to the individual rights of people deserving a standard of living that could morally orient them (Honneth 2008, 127). In Norway, every child has the right to attend early childcare together with children of their own age, which is one aspect of legal justice (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2017). It is possible to argue that legal justice should also include a sense of belonging, where the individuals feel recognised as an important member of a community (Guibernau 2013). Although the feeling of belonging can reassure us by confirming and recognising our value as a human being in a community, it can also evoke a feeling of anxiety and stress whenever one feels 'inadequate, undervalued, misunderstood or ignored within the group' (Guibernau 2013, 34). Legal justice dictates which characteristics a person should possess, whereas social appreciation looks at the characteristics of the value system, which enables the assessment of the value of a person's attributes (Honneth 2008, 122–123). When socially appreciated, an individual experiences him or herself as a member of a social group, with certain attributes that are socially valued and acknowledged (Honneth 2008, 137).

Methods

This study takes a critical approach, with a focus on thick descriptions (Geertz 1994; Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg 2011). The aim has been to understand the social world by examining the participants' interpretations of it, using in-depth information and rich data (Braun and Clarke 2013). Two early childcare institutions³ involved in CfD were strategically chosen as the sample of the study. The institutions were located in two small towns in the western part of Norway, and the researcher visited them over a period of two years. The multiple data collection methods used were as follows:

- (1) Research-directed process, wherein diaries were written by staff
- (2) Individual and focus group interviews of the same staff
- (3) Interviews of management
- (4) Interviews of parents with refugee backgrounds
- (5) Participatory observations of daily meetings between staff and parents
- (6) Observations of parents' conversations and meetings

Table 1 provides an overview of the demographics of the two institutions and information on data collection methods. In institution 1, one department from each age range was followed.

Researcher-directed diaries were also seen as a part of the staffs' multicultural professional development. The purpose was to obtain a record of the experiences and reflections of the staff regarding their interaction with parents over a specified period of time (Braun and Clarke 2013). The staff made regular entries over a period of approximately

Table 1. Demographics and information on data collection methods.

	Institution 1	Institution 2
Number of children and departments	57	27
	2 department for 1–3 year olds	1 department for 1–3 years
	2 department for 3–5 year olds	1 department for 3–5 years
Countries of origin, children	7	8
Number of children with a refugee background	7	14
Number of employees	22	11
Number of pedagogically qualified staff	9	5
Countries of origin, employees	3	3
Number of participants (staff), diaries	4	4
Number of entries, diaries	91	33
Number of participants, staff interviews	4	4
Number of participants (staff) focus group interviews	4	4
Number of participants, management interviews	2	1
Number of parent interviews – number of parents interviewed	4–5	6–8
Background of the parents interviewed		
<i>Ethiopia</i>	2	3
<i>Eritrea</i>	3	2
<i>Syria</i>		1
<i>Ghana</i>		1
<i>Somalia</i>		
Number of observations entrance hall	19	8
Number of observations, parents' conversations	2	2
Number of observations, parents' meetings	2	1

one month during the fall of 2016 and the spring of 2017. The staff was provided information on how and when to fill out their diaries, and some reflective questions (Appendix 1). The participant observations for interactions between staff and parents in the entrance hall, conducted in the winter of 2016–2017, ensured gathering of the researcher's own insights into these particular interactions (Lofland et al. 2006). In order to make the situation as natural as possible, interaction with children was done during activities and a notebook was used to write down the observations, which were expanded in more detail afterwards (Lofland et al. 2006). Interviews with staff and management conducted during the spring of 2017 and 2018 (focus groups), provided insights into their interpretations of their daily interactions and relationships with parents, as well as their perceptions regarding cultural diversity (Appendices 3 and 4). The staffs' contribution to recognising parents with refugee backgrounds as significant stakeholders is the main issue addressed in this study. In order to explore how the parents perceived the concept of early childcare, their relationship with the staff, and other relevant elements, the parent interviews were conducted in spring of 2017 (Appendix 2). Five interviews required Tigrinya and Arabic translators. Observing parents' conversations (spring of 2018) and meetings (fall of 2018) obtained a holistic view on the cooperation and interactions between staff and parents. Fictional names have been used for the participants in this report.

The analysis was conducted by organising data and sorting the units (early childcare and the different participants) and materials (interviews, participants' diaries, and the different observations) (Madison 2012). Most of the codes were inductive, and were derived from reading the material; the rest were deductive, and were derived from the observation and interview guides. Thereafter, theoretical concepts available in the data material were identified, thus guiding the concepts used in the discussion. Based on the

research question, the data material was ‘tied together into a descriptive statement’ (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 207).

The study complies with the National Ethical Guidelines for Research (NESH 2016) and has been approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

Result 1: becoming significant stakeholders through sufficient Norwegian language skills and understanding of social codes

The findings suggest that in order to be recognised as significant stakeholders, the parents had to fulfil at least three criteria:

- (1) Parents should possess a certain amount of Norwegian language skills.
- (2) There should be a good chemistry, or a positive relationship between parents and staff, which can make up for the lack of Norwegian competence.
- (3) Parents should know how to act and understand the social codes of the institution.

In both focus groups, the staff discussed the benefits that parents and children who had a good grasp of the Norwegian language had. The staff in institution 1 expressed the uncertainty they felt when parents spoke their home language in the entrance hall. One of the teachers questioned if parents should speak Norwegian with their children when entering the institution in order for the staff to be able to understand the entire communication. The diaries and observations showed that the overall communication between the participants in their daily meetings was quite short, due to language barriers, parents being in a hurry, and the insufficient chemistry between staff and parents, regardless of their background.

There were several incidents of no communication at all at both institutions. In institution 1, the entrance hall was downstairs, and it was an expected norm for parents to follow their children upstairs. However, one mother, Maria, deviated from this norm quite often. This situation became evident in the first round of diaries and observations, and remained the same when the focus group interview was conducted one and a half year later. Both the teacher and the assistant teacher described in their diaries that it was challenging to communicate and cooperate with her on several occasions due to her lack of Norwegian language skills. The teacher questioned if Maria was in a hurry or if she found it difficult to talk with the staff. After a while, the assistant teacher started to reflect more on the situation: ‘Michael [her child] is just sent upstairs alone. The mother does not even come to the stairs to shout “Hi”. Perhaps she does not understand/think that she should come and say good morning and follow him upstairs?’ (Personal communication, assistant teacher, spring 2017). In her interview, the teacher said that she eventually did talk to Maria about the situation, and informed her that she should follow her son upstairs; however, she did not ask about her reasons for not doing so. Another mother in the same department, Shewit, has been exemplified for engaging in longer communication with staff. She was the prime initiator in asking questions about her child’s day. The staff described her as ‘easy to talk to’ and ‘she is very Norwegian, she is delightful’. There were incidents when there was no communication with Shewit as well, about which the assistant teacher stated in her diary: ‘I did not see that Johanna came, so the mother just sent her into the kitchen at a different department. We waved to each

other in the window. It was perfectly fine for me, usually she comes in' (Personal communication, assistant teacher, spring 2017).

Observations from parents' conversations revealed that knowing how to act was an important factor. The language issue was not a factor, considering that translators were used when necessary. In general, the teachers directed the content of the communication, asking the parents for their comments along the way. One of them, however, did not do this until late in the conversation. Thus, Selam did not speak before the teacher asked her a direct question. Thereafter, Selam became more active. One of the teachers had a different approach than the rest. She started the conversation asking for Mohammed and Shurika's opinion, and brought an album with pictures of the child's day in early childcare. This approach engaged the parents more actively in the conversations and made their interactions better.

Comparing Maria and Shewit, it appears that Shewit, who fulfilled the three criteria, was thus recognised as a significant stakeholder and achieved legitimacy and status as those parents from the majority background (De Gioia 2013; Palludan 2013; Solberg 2018). In the parents' conversations, the teachers mainly directed the content and they did not involve the parents in a mutual dialogue (Schibbye 2009; Bergersen 2017). By highlighting the Norwegian language, habitus and conduct, and by not seeking alternative explanatory models for the parents' conduct, it can be claimed that the staff exerted power over parents for not being able to follow their norms, thus, risking suppression (Bourdieu 1997; Cummins 2009; Palludan 2013; De Gioia 2015; Van Laere and Vandebroek 2017; Solberg 2018; Van Laere, Van Houtte, and Vandebroek 2018). As Honneth (2008) explains, this is typical of a modern society wherein various groups try to increase the value of their own way of living. As the staffs' habitus is associated with the majority's discourse, it probably becomes natural for them to appreciate persons who act accordingly. Additionally, the ways in which staff talk about parents can inform the quality of the interaction (Lipsky 1980). As they described Maria with negative terms, and Shewit with positive terms, it became evident that the staff regarded these two mothers very differently. It appears that the staff perceived Maria as less engaged in her child's everyday life in early childcare, and that she needed to learn the institution's system and discourse (Baquedano-López, Alexander, and Hernandez 2013; Goodall and Montgomery 2014). Furthermore, the staff did not actively try to understand Maria's perceptions and the reasons for her actions (Bourdieu 1997).

The issue of 'good chemistry' determining the staffs' relations with parents might rest on the notion of habitus. It could be challenging to pinpoint habitus, as it forms our worldview, thoughts, and actions, which are inculcated into patterns of behaviour within a social group (Bourdieu 1997; Blackledge 2001). Educational staff is expected to recognise parents as significant stakeholders, thereby considering them to be on equal grounds, and recognising them according to the standards of love/care, legal justice, and social appreciation. Furthermore, a mutual dialogue where different views can be challenged and cultural gaps could be bridged is a necessity (Honneth 2008; Schibbye 2009, 2013; Vandebroek, Roets, and Snoeck 2009; Hansteen 2014; De Gioia 2015; Bergersen 2017; Van Laere, Van Houtte, and Vandebroek 2018).

In the parents' conversations, the teachers' perceptions about the child were the main issue of concern (Sand 2014). It seemed that the teachers considered all the parents to be part of a middle-class Norwegian-cultural parenting group, without regard for their

backgrounds. It can be argued that the teachers were not able to familiarise themselves with the parents' habitus and background, but that they took a majority-standpoint regarding how parents should act in this setting, expressing a Norwegian-cultural viewpoint of how the child should develop (Bourdieu 1997; Sand 2014). It is legitimate to question if Maria and Selam felt undervalued, inadequate and misunderstood in a setting where teachers were expected to ensure a feeling of belonging and recognition (Honneth 2008; Guibernau 2013). By merely asking the parents for their opinion and showing them pictures to illustrate and make the child's day understandable to them, one of the teachers helped them to become more active and equal partners in the conversation. This kind of conversation exemplifies the shifting of roles, and the teacher was able to listen, understand and confirm the parents' point of view, meeting them with focused attention (Schibbye 2009, 2013). The parents' views and values appeared to be important for the teacher. Thus, in this case, one can claim that the teacher recognised Mohammed and Shurika as significant stakeholders in their child's life (Honneth 2008).

Result 2: recognition of significant stakeholders' backgrounds

Both institutions showed elements of recognition of significant stakeholders' backgrounds. However, institution 2 did this most explicitly considering their CfD-project, which addressed how to highlight different religious holidays. At the parents' meeting, they showed examples of how they had highlighted a Muslim and a Hindu holiday; however, Christian holidays were not presented. Both institutions attended church services, and asked parents for permission for their children to attend. Several parents mentioned this as a sign of respect of their background. When highlighting non-Christian holidays, parents in institution 2 were not informed. In her interview, Abina, one of the mothers, expressed her negative reaction when she saw pictures of her son in a Hindu outfit, as she was a Christian. She talked to the manager regarding this, who informed her that they just learnt about a Hindu holiday and did not celebrate it. This was an acceptable argument for her. In line with the legislation, the manager expressed in her interview that highlighting different religions should be part of their pedagogical content, whereas attending church service is a special occasion as it celebrates a specific religion. Hence, parental permission was needed.

In general, staff in both institutions expressed that they did not enquire much about parents' backgrounds, at least not in the transition period. They asked about regulations regarding food, for instance, but not much more. The parents confirmed that their backgrounds were not discussed much and they did not know if early childcare should focus on different cultures and religions, nor if it did so (the parents' meeting was held one and a half years after these interviews). Most parents stated that they wanted early childcare to highlight their cultural and religious background. Samuel said, 'Yes, actually, not too much, but a little [...]. For other children also, it is good to know where Sarah is coming from. For example, what Ethiopia is' (Personal communication, Samuel, April 2017). Some parents expressed that early childcare should spend time on other topics. 'No, we have to teach our children about culture. Early childcare cannot teach several children who comes from different countries, and we cannot say that they have to learn about their culture and so on. I think that would be unfair' (Personal communication, Efrah, April 2017).

It appears that the institutions recognised parents' backgrounds on an everyday basis, for example, facilitating for their religious regulations regarding food, informing them and giving them a choice regarding the attendance of a Christian church service, and showing an interest in diversity in general. On the other hand, the parents did not know that early childcare institutions are obliged to highlight diversity and even whether this was done. One would assume that if parents were recognised as significant stakeholders, they would be aware that the legislation for early childcare obliges educators to highlight diversity and variations in values and beliefs (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2017), which they need to be adequately informed about and involved with (Van Laere, Van Houtte, and Vandebroek 2018). Researchers claim that it is important that professional staff is reflexive regarding their own practices, beliefs and value orientations, ensuring that differences are recognised and validated (Vandebroek, Roets, and Snoeck 2009; Hansteen 2014; De Gioia 2015; Bergersen 2017). This can bridge the gap between the cultures of parents and staff, through a mutual dialogue wherein diversity is discussed (Bergersen 2017). Additionally, through social appreciation, parents could be valuable contributors for staff regarding the highlighting of diverse religions and cultures (Honneth 2008; Schibbye 2013; Guibernau 2013; Baquedano-López, Alexander, and Hernandez 2013; Goodall and Montgomery 2014). It appears that institution 2 showed examples of their work by highlighting different religious holidays at the parents' meeting; nevertheless, one can question why Christmas, representing the majority's holiday, was not presented. Perhaps, the staff acted ignorantly in a dominant perspective, taking for granted that all parents were familiar with the majority's holiday (Bourdieu 1997; Hansteen 2014; Sand 2014).

Result 3: significant stakeholder's perspective on their cooperation with early childcare staff

When looking at significant stakeholders' perspectives on their cooperation with staff, it appeared that they were overall satisfied. They described staff as smiling, welcoming, and trying their best to make parents understand if their Norwegian language competence were insufficient. Most importantly, the parents voiced that their children enjoyed early childcare; they made friends and learned the Norwegian language and culture. The parents spent little time in the institutions and expressed that they did not need more time, as they were satisfied. However, at times, the staff took their time if necessarily. As Helen mentioned, 'They have time, but I do not have time' (Personal communication, Helen, February 2017).

Considering that parents should be recognised as significant stakeholders in early childcare, they were asked about what they knew regarding the pedagogical content. All of them received a monthly and a yearly plan from the institutions; however, most of them were not sure about its purpose. Norwegian early childcare institutions are obliged to formulate a yearly plan, which should function as a work tool, document the choices made, and a decisive parameter. Additionally, early childcare institutions are required to create a plan for shorter periods; this monthly plan should typically outline what the children do from day to day (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2017). A normal day in Norwegian early childcare consists of informal play, which is not directed by staff, and activities that are more formal that are directed by staff; such as creative

activities, reading, going to the library, taking shorter trips to the surrounding areas and so on. Regarding the monthly plan, Shewit explained: 'It only states "activity". If it is Easter, Christmas and things like that, they have activities on different things, but if it is a normal day, it only mentions activity' (Personal communication, Shewit, April 2017). This means that staff did not inform the parents what they did on a normal day and what the 'activity' was. Shewit also stated that she had to ask in order to receive information about her child's day: 'I always have to ask. If you do not ask, no one gives you any information' (Personal communication, Shewit, April 2017). Through observations, it was clear that the parents in general, regardless of their background, had to ask for information about their child's day. Both institutions shared information regarding their daily routine and the frameworks they should follow at the parents' meeting.

Given the overall satisfaction expressed by parents, this may indicate that they felt sufficiently recognised by the staff. It might be that early childcare functioned as an arena of inclusion for these parents and their children, but in a different way that was expected by the researcher. Perhaps, the two institutions can be defined as arenas of integration. By being able to send their children to childcare, they were able to attend school or work themselves, hence starting their integration process into Norwegian society. Their children made friends, learnt the Norwegian language and culture, started their adaption process into the majority's habitus and got prepared for school and life in Norway. Hence, one reason for the expressed satisfaction might be that they saw that their children were safe, happy, and cared for by the staff, which is in accordance to other parents main concerns (Andenæs 2011; De Gioia 2015; Van Laere, and Vandebroeck 2017; Vuorinen 2018; Sønsthagen 2018). Considering that the parents knew little about what the pedagogical content of early childcare should be, and that they received little information about the child's day, one wonders how they could sufficiently contribute to the early childcare community. When looking at the legislation for early childcare, it becomes clear that providing parents with this information is a significant part of the staff's responsibility. The institutions did not appear to be arenas where parents could feel a sense of belonging and social appreciation in the community or an arena where staff introduced them to Norwegian society, which would be more in accordance to how the researcher of this study would define an arena of inclusion (Honneth 2008; Schibbye 2009, 2013; Guibernau 2013).

Can recognition of significant stakeholders take different forms?

It has become evident that the significant stakeholders in this study expressed that their relationships with staff were good enough. Considering that several parents had little interaction with staff, it is reasonable to assume that they did not need more interactions or recognition from staff during their busy day, as long as their children were properly cared for. Most parents had little or no experience with early childcare institutions from their home country nor in Norway; hence, they probably had little knowledge about what they should expect. The findings suggest that this information was not sufficiently provided either. Early childcare staff are under enormous pressure from different sides (Ministry of Education and Research 2018); thus, it might be possible that they develop survival mechanisms for staying on top of things (Lipsky 1980). Instead of following up with each parent individually by providing them with relevant

information on their rights and responsibilities, it could be that the staff generalises or expects that parents with minority backgrounds have the same knowledge and understanding as parents with majority backgrounds (Lipsky 1980; Bourdieu 1997). It could also be the case that instead of discussing their differing views and having a reflexive distance to their own practices and habitus, the staff exerted their power as professionals in situations where the interests of parents and staff collided (Abbott 1988; Cummins 2009; Baquedano-López, Alexander, and Hernandez 2013; Hansteen 2014; Sand 2014).

To conclude, it might be that in a social community like early childcare, where different interests and views meet and sometimes collide, one has to look for a different understanding of what a good interaction or relationship between professionals and their clients should be. The ideal quality interaction, as expressed earlier, wherein parents and staff are viewed as equal actors in a mutual dialogue, exchanging differing views, might not be possible to achieve in all situations (Honneth 2008; Schibbye 2009; 2013; Hansteen 2014; Bergersen 2017). One might question what a good quality relationship is, which forms it can take and if there can be different ways to achieve it. Perhaps, the professional educator is someone who is aware of possible challenges when meeting different parents with different demands and views; who is aware of the power he or she holds; and who critically reflects about his or her presumptions and practice, thereby realising that in a culturally diverse community, actors have differing views and habitus. In order to recognise all parents as significant stakeholders, regardless of background, staff will have to use professional consideration and understand which interaction strategy will be suitable in different situations, while having the parental mandate in mind (Lipsky 1980; Abbott 1988; Bourdieu 1997; Cummins 2009; Vandenbroeck, Roets, and Snoeck 2009; De Gioia 2015). Eventually, this could contribute to ensuring a safe educational environment for the children.

Implications for policy and practice

The results of this study cannot be generalised; however, the results do have transferrable value. The study found that (1) early childcare staff needs to be aware of their power position as the dominant group and the implications for parents from non-dominant groups, (2) the staff have to take into consideration other types of caring parenting styles than those defined by the dominant group, and (3) when meeting someone strikingly different, staff must have a reflexive distance to their own practices, beliefs, and value orientations (Hansteen 2014, 9). This requires a certain amount of courage (Schibbye 2009); however, it is a necessary process in order to build bridges between different cultures (Bergersen 2017). In order to make the critical reflection process possible, amongst other steps, policymakers need to ensure sufficient and beneficial local professional development processes for staff in accordance with the changes required in society. Additionally, teachers of early childhood education need to be responsible, regarding both the students' cultural sensitivity and self-reflexivity so that they are ready to handle the diverse and ever-changing society that involves early childcare. Finally, yet importantly, researchers have to continue studying the everyday life routine of children, parents and staff in early childcare, and how interactions and understanding between the majority and minority actors can be improved.

Notes

1. Early childcare institutions in Norway are known as kindergartens, which are for children aged 0–5 years. It features learning through play and indoor and outdoor activities, which focus on the child's development and social competence (The Norwegian Government 2014).
2. Parents with refugee backgrounds are mainly referred to as 'parents' in this article.
3. The county governor in each district selected the institutions that should participate in the initiative and the university staff functioned as supervisors for the participating units.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Questions for research-directed diaries

Time of event (date and time): What happened? (Describe the event) Who was involved? (Name, background (country of origin, optionally; religion), approximately how long been in Norway, Norwegian language level, how long had children in the institution, etc.).

What reflections do you make around the meeting afterwards? (For instance: How did you feel after the interaction? Who took initiative? Who lead the conversation? On whose terms? Is there anything you think you could have done differently? Is there anything you want to improve for later interactions? Etc.).

Appendix 2: Extracts of relevant interview questions, parents

- Background information
- Can you tell me about your experiences when your child started kindergarten? (Previous knowledge with kindergartens? Knowledge from home country?)
- Can you tell me about a typical day in kindergarten, when you bring and pick-up your child? How do you experience your interactions with staff? Is there anything that makes you uncertain?
- How was the start-up period?
- Can you say something about the content in the first parent conversation you had with the kindergarten? What is the content in these conversations? What are your experiences?
- How would you describe your relations with staff?
- Can you say something about what you know the children should learn in kindergarten?
- What is the most important for you regarding kindergarten?
- How do you perceive the content of the kindergarten? What kind of information do you get?
- Can you say something about to what extent you feel that yours’ and your child’s background is emphasised in kindergarten? Have the staff talked to you about this?

Appendix 3: Extracts of relevant interview questions, staff

- Background information

- What do you think is important to emphasise regarding inclusion of parents with refugee backgrounds in the kindergarten?
- How do you feel that your competence is in interactions with parents with refugee backgrounds? Strengths and weaknesses.
- What do you emphasise when meeting parents with refugee background? Formal and informal events.
- Can you describe a typical morning/afternoon when parents bring and pick-up their children? Do you feel that you have enough time in these meetings?
- Do you think there is any difference in how parents with different backgrounds are met?

Appendix 4: Extract of relevant interview question, focus group interviews

- What do you think is the most important regarding the kindergarten's work with minority families?
- How are you working with diversity and inclusion now?
- How are you working with cooperation with minority parents now? Has anything changed since you started Competence for Diversity?
- How is the entrance hall situation functioning now? Do you feel that anything has changed? Why, why not?