

Collaborative instrumentalization of family life

How new learning agendas disrupt care chains in the Danish welfare state

Westerling, Allan; Juhl, Pernille

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Collaborative instrumentalization of family life:

How new learning agendas disrupt care chains in the Danish welfare state

Abstract

This article argues that the latest Danish Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Act has direct implications for the ways in which parents and professionals collaborate about children. The Act introduces a learning agenda that installs an asymmetrical distribution of tasks, which, we argue, may subsequently cause asymmetrical relations between parents and professionals. This asymmetry poses a threat to the shared care arrangement, which has historically characterized the welfare states of Scandinavia. We analyze how the new conditions for collaboration between parents and professionals, stipulated in the recent ECEC Act, are translated and transformed into local policies and everyday practices. In addition to reporting ethnographic research done in two ECEC centers, we analyze how recent policy shifts have implications for the daily collaboration between parents and professionals. We show how the learning agenda marginalizes parents' perspectives in the collaboration between families and ECEC centers. Our discussion of the consequences emphasizes that possibilities for collaborating on shared care are left unused and that this may contribute to an instrumentalization of familial relations.

Introduction

In the Nordic countries children's everyday life involves shared care arrangements across early childhood education and care (ECEC) centers and families (Andenæs, 2011; Ullvik, 2007). This requires extensive collaboration since ECEC professionals and parents only have partial insight into the contexts children move across (Kousholt, 2011). The compound nature of children's everyday life has historically been pivotal in collaboration between parents and professionals in Denmark (Dencik, 2005; Højholt, 2001), but this is currently changing. The latest reform of the Danish ECEC Act stipulates that professionals must now cooperate with parents about their children's learning environment and that parents must support learning programs introduced by local authorities in local ECEC centers.¹ In this way, children's learning and skill

¹ <https://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=201489>, visited October 30, 2019.

development are politically defined as a mandatory focus for ECEC professionals and parents, initiating an institutional learning agenda that positions parents and professionals differently. ECEC professionals are prepositioned as directors, instructors and initiators, while the parents are invited to support, contribute and follow (or adopt) the agenda ECEC centers set. Thus, parents and professionals enter into collaborations from antagonistic positions, i.e., parents as not-knowers (needing to be given specific guidance and tasks) and ECEC professionals as experts (providing parents with knowledge).²

In this article, we will show how this development is problematic since it threatens to install a hierarchy in which other tasks related to children's care and well-being are subordinated the focus on the learning environment (Juhl, 2018a). Moreover, we argue that such a hierarchy blocks a democratic exchange of the different insights across family life and ECEC when parents and professionals collaborate. Our analysis shows that both parents and professionals struggle to collaborate from these positions, but in different ways.

The remainder of this article will be structured as follows. First, we present the relevant research contributions on children's learning and the responsibilities of parents and professionals as a way to outline the historical and institutional context of the focus ECEC professionals have on the learning environment of children. We then describe the study's central concepts and outline the methods and design. Next, we analyze how the new conditions stipulated in the recent Danish ECEC Act on collaboration between parents and children are translated and transformed into local policies and everyday practices. The analysis comprises three steps. In step one, we study the Learning Group Program, which is being developed in response to recent policy shifts, and how it frames daily collaboration between parents and professionals. Step two focuses on the asymmetrical positions of parents and ECEC professionals involved in the collaboration. The third step analyzes how learning indicators and learning objectives become obligatory points of passage for parents to enter into the collaboration and

² The child is positioned as someone lacking competencies. Our study also shows that in activities in the ECEC setting, where adult-initiated learning objectives are in focus, taking the children's perspectives into consideration is difficult, even though the legislation specifically stipulates this, not least because doing so is a profound part of the Danish ECEC tradition. This article, however, does not emphasize the children's perspectives.

develop shared insights with professionals about their children. Finally, in the discussion, we argue that the mandatory focus on the children's learning environment contributes to a marginalization of parents' perspectives in collaboration between families and ECEC centers. In the conclusion, we emphasize two issues: (a) that possibilities for collaborating on shared care are left unused, and (b) that this may contribute to an instrumentalization of familial relations.

Research on children's learning and the responsibilities of parents and professionals

The emphasis on learning environments in the recent ECEC Act³ represents the culmination of a broader historical development in ECEC policies, with an increased focus on learning (Bach et al., 2020; Juhl, 2018; Schmidt, 2017). Scholars (Bleses et al., 2018; 2015) argue that ECEC is an obvious arena for early childhood interventions emphasizing learning and early skill formation. Consequently, strengthening children's learning environments appears to be the new silver bullet in fighting inequality (Heckman, 2006). Policy documents from Local Government Denmark⁴ (KL) cite language research when recommending that parents read more for their children from an early age, emphasizing that home learning environments "supports working with learning in ECEC, school and further education" (KL, 2017, p. 9). These guidelines rest on the assumption that the actions of parents have a profound, long-lasting effect on children's learning outcome. The emphasis on learning environment is informed by international studies indicating that active parental involvement in learning has a positive effect on children's cognitive development (Love et al., 2005; Lugo-Gill & Tamis-LeMonda, 2008) and that parents' learning activities in the home setting (the home learning environment) prepare children for further education later in life (Bradley, 2002; Heckman, 2006; Heckman & Wax, 2004; Kelly et al., 2011; Lugo-Gill & Tamis-LeMonda, 2008; Melhuish, 2010; Melhuish et al., 2001; 2008a, b). Danish research reflects international research (e.g., Bleses, 2012; Korsgaard, 2015, Thomsen et al., 2019) and serves as a backdrop for the legislative focus on parental involvement in children's learning across ECEC and home settings. This becomes clear in the latest

³ <https://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=201489>, visited October 30, 2019.

⁴ KL, the association and interest organization of all 98 Danish municipalities, supports municipalities in implementing new acts and in clarifying legal issues, while also developing and offering tools and guidelines to these ends.

ECEC reform, which stipulates that professionals must involve parents in actively supporting their children's learning. This includes instructing parents on how to conduct learning activities suitable for stimulating early numeracy and literacy.

International research on parental involvement in ECEC and collaboration between parents and professionals has focused on the difference perceptions and assessments of ECEC quality (Mocan 2007, Harris & Tinning 2012, Barros & Leal 2015) and show that increased parental involvement in ECEC work to bridge these differences (Ansari & Gershooof 2016, Kärby & Giora 1995). Kyger and colleagues argue that effective interaction between ECEC staff and parents is one central feature of high ECEC quality, which leads to a better home learning environment (Kyger, Marcus & Spiess 2019). Finish studies have shown how the National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC promotes collaboration on equal terms between parents and professionals while traditional Finish ECEC practices underline professional expertise. This is reflected in a tension between two interpretative frameworks: a vertical one, which emphasize the role of expert knowledge and asymmetric relations between staff and parents, and a horizontal frame that emphasize parallel expertise and proximity (Alatuusari 2011). This tension is evident in the collaborative practise of everyday life, which is framed by national guidelines, aimed at promoting parental involvement in children's learning in ECEC centres.

Family scholars have argued that parenthood is being professionalized because parents have to safeguard the best interests of their child by providing educational opportunities (Schneider 2010), and critical parenting studies contend that the increased empathizes on parental involvement contributes to intensive parenting, characterized by a child-centered parenting style, where parents are considered pivotal to their children's learning potential (Dannesboe, 2012; Faircloth, 2014; Forsberg, 2009; Furedi, 2002). This is particularly evident in American and British contexts, where parenting experts who market advice on parenting have become a booming private industry (Lee, 2014), but different in Denmark, where welfare professionals share educational tasks and care tasks with parents (Dannesboe et al, 2018).

Extensive collaboration between ECEC centers and parents has a long tradition in Scandinavia, where parenthood involves caring for children collaboratively (Juhl, 2018b; Sparrman, Westerling, Lind & Dannesboe, 2016). Researchers assert that

Scandinavian childcare constitutes a dual socialization model (Dencik 1988), where children, from an early age, move across different, but equally important, socialization arenas. These shared care arrangements (Singer, 1993) involve collaboration on the development of children in chains of care (Andenæs, 2011). Research documents how this contributes to the development of shared insights into the compound everyday lives of children (Højholt, 2001; Kousholt, 2011). Scandinavian childcare means that parents and professionals continuously connect to the contributions other parties give to care, or what Marschall (2014) terms “hooking up”, or meeting from different positions in a concerted effort to reach common ground that collaborative efforts can evolve from (Ulvik, 2007; Westerling et al., 2020). The recent Danish ECEC reform appear to change conditions under which collaboration occurs since professionals are charged with the new task of guiding and supporting parental efforts to cultivate home learning environments. For the first time in Danish ECEC history, day care professionals are required to intervene in the home learning environment and parents are expected to attend to educational tasks.

Until now, little research is available on what effect this has on the culture of collaboration concerning shared tasks in taking care of children. Finish studies have uncovered different collaborative strategies among ECEC staff ranging from treating parents as recipients of information towards strategies which included parents as resources in the elaboration of learning (Hirsto 2010). Recent studies in Danish settings have shown that ECEC learning priorities blend with other pedagogical tasks, but that they contribute to a curricularization of family life, where professionals become actively engaged in guiding and supervising parents (Bach et al., 2020; Schmidt, 2017). But what does this mean in terms of collaboration, i.e., that the ECEC Act assigns professionals and parents specific positions in terms of collaboration? And what effect does it have on the content of collaboration when supporting learning environments becomes mandatory for professionals? These question will be addressed in this article.

Theoretical framework

Drawing on the concept of *family practices* allows us to analyze collaboration between ECEC professionals and parents as co-constituting parenthood (Morgan, 2011). This

concept turns our attention towards activities and doings, which enables us to understand the active, everyday nature of family life and makes it possible to grasp these social practices as connected to other practices unfolding in complex contemporary societies (Dreier, 2008; Kousholt, 2011; McCarthy, 2012). We understand parenthood as part of family practices, including the way that parents interact with others, for example, with children, professionals and other parents. In addition, we conceptualize the collaboration between parents and ECEC professionals as *shared care* (Singer, 1983), where parents and ECEC professionals comprise two different and interdependent parts of *chains of care* (Andenæs, 2011). These concepts permit us to analyze on how parents and professionals share a responsibility for children, and on how they dependent on each other's contributions and knowledge to be able to take care of children across different contexts in children's compound everyday life.

We understand parenthood as both constituted by and constitutive of cultural, normative ideals about what it means to be a good parent (Lind, Westerling, Sparrman & Dannesboe, 2016). With these perspectives, we can begin to understand how the recent political focus on collaboration in terms of children's learning across families and ECEC centers not only calls on parents to support political strategies but also co-constitutes the conditions for parenthood, which we will show risks colonizing the collaboration between parents and professionals.

Methodology

Our study focuses on the Learning Group Program, which is a local response to the legislative demand requiring a focus on the learning environment of children. Our aim is to understand what the Learning Group Program means for the collaboration between parents and ECEC professionals. In this way, we aim to explore how institutional learning agendas travel and are transformed in local policies and everyday practices. We adopted a participatory research design⁵ comprising approximately 30 days of participant observations of 36 children 0-5 years of age in two ECEC centers in 2018; observations of meetings between parents and professionals; and qualitative interviews

⁵ The project is funded by the Danish Centre for Research in Early Childhood Education and Care, Roskilde University.

with six ECEC professionals and 10 parents from two ECEC centers in a Danish municipality. The ECEC centers are affiliated with the same administrative municipal division. We selected these two ECEC centers because they work proactively with stimulating children's learning and to support home learning.

We participated in the learning group activities, including feedback (evaluation) meetings with parents, and we studied online platforms used for communication and interaction between parents and ECEC professionals.⁶ We also conducted participant observation in the ECEC centers on other occasions (when the learning groups were not in session). The interviews with parents were semi-structured, and the interview guide was informed by the life-form interview focusing on everyday family routines and activities as a framework for unpacking what learning activities meant in this setting (Haavind, 1987). In addition, the interviews always included a focus on collaboration with day care professionals from the parents' perspective. When interviewing professionals, we were particularly interested in their experiences related to supporting parents' learning activities at home. When interviewing parents, we focused on their experiences of the Learning Group Program and its evaluation format. Lastly, we studied how policy documents, such as the Danish ECEC legislation, were translated in local municipal documents, exploring them to learn who was given which responsibilities related to children's early learning.

The changed conditions for collaboration

In the first step of the analysis, we include the governmental guidelines on the Danish ECEC Act to illustrate how collaboration between ECEC professionals and parents focuses on learning. The legislation stipulates that all local ECEC centers must establish a curriculum outlining "how the ECEC center collaborates with parents about children's learning" (Danish ECEC Act, §8, sec. 6).⁷ The guidelines for the act elaborate this point and emphasize that collaboration on well-being and learning across ECEC centers and the home must focus on both the individual child and all the children who attend the ECEC center (i.e., the group of children).⁸ This defines the learning agenda set by the ECEC center as the pivotal feature of the collaborative efforts. Parents are invited to

⁶ Via Children's Intra (*Børneintra*).

⁷ <https://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=201489> visited November 19, 2019.

⁸ <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/ft/201712L00160> visited October 30, 2019.

support and contribute to children's learning as defined or framed by the center. This framework outlines asymmetrical positions for professionals and parents, where the former introduces the agenda and the latter must contribute to it. Due to the structural conditions of the shared care arrangements, the asymmetry is enhanced since only professionals have knowledge about the entire group of children at the ECEC center. The professionals work with all children every day, but the parents only know very few other children, apart from their own. However, parents have unique insight into the life of their own children, yet this is silenced or marginalized in an asymmetrical collaboration about learning and the learning environment. The ECEC Act guidelines⁹ emphasize this quite clearly by stating that parents are also responsible for "keeping informed and supporting" the professional's work in the ECEC center. Consequently, the collaboration becomes asymmetrical, instead of a joint venture being contributed to by both parents and professionals.

The guidelines stress that daily collaboration about children's well-being and learning must be based on a trusting, constructive foundation (Krøjer, 2018). Moreover, they suggest that collaboration about children's learning in the family should comprise educating parents about positive contributions to children's learning and development. This may include instructing parents to do certain activities with their children, such as singing or reading stories. The guidelines also suggest that professionals inform parents about the importance of involving children in daily activities and communicating with their children about them, as this contributes to their children's language development. Lastly, it is recommended that these instructions and parental education take place within the existing forums of collaboration. In this way, learning as a mandatory topic becomes allocated to the forums where ECEC professionals and parents meet and talk about children. The main formal forum for collaboration in Danish ECEC is parent meetings, which take place after hours and are attended by parents, who meet with the professionals and talk about daily routines and activities. Traditionally, these meetings have had plenty of room for debate and discussion about pedagogical priorities. Other forums for collaboration include individual meetings with professionals and social events that include parents and children. However, the primary informal way of collaborating takes place in daily encounters, where parents and professionals hook up

⁹ Ibid.

(Marschall, 2013) when children are being picked up or dropped off at the ECEC center. Due to budget cuts in recent years, the amount of staff at centers has decreased, leaving fewer people at work early in the morning and late in the afternoon, with more resources allocated to peak times when the most children are present. During the early hours (around 7:30 am to 8:30 am) and in the afternoon (around 3:30 pm to 4:30 pm), however, most parents are at the ECEC center dropping off and picking up their children.¹⁰ This means that parents and staff have fewer opportunities to speak about how the child's day went, just as there is less of a chance for both parties to share their knowledge about the child. This is accentuated by the reduced amount of time allocated for parent meetings and individual conferences in recent years. Consequently, the mandatory learning agenda has resulted in less time being spent on other issues than learning, such as topics related to children's well-being and development.

Danish municipalities work with the implementation of the ECEC Act in different ways. Our study focuses on a method used in one particular municipality, the Learning Group Program, which provides one example through which we can gain insight in the general consequences of the current changes of the ECEC system. We are able to analyze how the legal requirement that professionals support children's learning environment has consequences for collaboration between professionals and parents.

Learning Group Program

The Learning Group Program sets up regular learning activities to take place in the ECEC for small groups of children over a period of 4-8 weeks, depending on the age of the children. For children 0 to 3 years of age, the learning group meets twice weekly for four weeks, each session lasting about an hour. Children 3 to 6 years of age meet once weekly for eight weeks for about two hours. Groups comprise four children, who are selected based on staff evaluations and data, such as a language assessment and an analysis of individual children's social skills. See Table 1, step 1.

Table 1.

Preparation	STEP 1	Children selected to participate
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¹⁰ https://www.bureau2000.dk/CustomerData/Files/Folders/7-senestenyheder/1080_b%C3%B8rn-pr-voksen-3008-2019.pdf

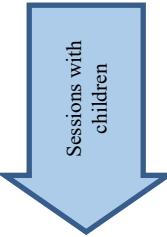
	STEP 2	Staff develops objectives of learning group
Initiation	STEP 3	Staff informs parents about learning group objectives
Execution 	STEP 4	First round of learning group sessions; parents consciously told about their child's progress
	STEP 5	Mid-term evaluation by staff and the manager
	STEP 6	Second round of learning group sessions; parents consciously told about their child's progress
Conclusion	STEP 7	Evaluation with parents

Table 1. The Learning Group Program

The ECEC professional responsible for the learning group is given time to prepare the learning group activities and communication with parents. This involves developing the objectives of the learning group using a pedagogical model called SMTTE in Danish, which involves establishing the context, objectives, initiatives, indicators and evaluations, all of which must be outlined in a one-page document and addressed in the Learning Group Program. The professional submits the document to the local manager to receive feedback (see Table 1, step 2) and also informs the parents about the objectives and activities so they can support the learning objectives the center decided upon (step 3). The learning objectives are the most important aspect of the SMTTE and must be clearly defined. The professional chooses the initiatives or activities the group will work with and also the indicators by which the success (or failure) of the learning group is measured. The objectives, initiatives and indicators are discussed and refined jointly with the local manager, but the ECEC practitioner independently chooses the final focus. The evaluation format is quite fixed, and the agenda, which the ECEC sets, focuses on the objectives developed using the SMTTE model.

The professional, who can decide what to do with the children and which activities to include, has extensive autonomy and plenty of room for spontaneity during the sessions. The various SMTTE documents under study tend to focus on the abilities and skills that the children lack and/or need to develop, just as they often mention skill building as an objective of the learning group. The SMTTE documents always describe which activities are suitable for stimulating the skills in question as well as the parameters to be used to evaluate whether the learning group objectives are met.

The content of the various learning groups differs. Some focus on friendship and motor skills, while others look at fairy tales and language. Regardless of the content of the learning group, the professionals are required to communicate via an electronic platform and to give parents information prior to each learning group session about what happened in the previous session. The information must also provide suggestions for activities in the home or indicate what must be prepared in advance for the next learning group session (steps 4-6). Shortly after the final learning group session, the parents of the participating children are invited to a meeting with the professional and the local manager and asked to evaluate the learning group (step 7). The design of the evaluation is meant to support the progression of the child's learning and skill development. The questions the parents are asked to answer must align with the objectives stated in the SMTTE document.

While the Learning Group allows the professional to plan and develop both objectives and activities independently, doing so always occurs in collaboration with the manager (and other staff members) and always takes the national ECEC curriculum into consideration. Due to a high level of flexibility in steps 4-6, the professionals can adjust activities during sessions to take into account the children's engagements and perspectives. The steps involving the parents, in contrast, are fixed and adhere to standardized procedures. The continuous communication with parents must include suggestions for home learning activities and provide feedforward and feedback for the parents. The evaluation meeting with the parents also follows a fixed structure based on an agenda set by the staff using the objectives stated in the SMTTE. This means that both the content and the mode of communication are fixed.

In the Learning Group Program, the parents' perspectives are not addressed until the end of the process (step 7), and their contribution is summative. The parents do not

share responsibility for the assessment with the professionals. Instead, the procedures stipulated by the format only require that the parents respond to the staff's inputs instead of participating on equal terms.

In this way the Learning Group Program translates the national (and regional) policies aimed to (re)define the demarcations and divisions of responsibility between parents and day care professionals into everyday practices. The policies emphasize the importance of supporting the learning environment, especially language development. This then becomes the focus in the Learning Group evaluation and means that the parents' experiences with their child and knowledge about their child's everyday life must be related to learning before they appear relevant at the meeting.

Collaboration about children – a shared venture?

As stated in the previous section, the Learning Group Program outlines a structure for the cooperation between staff and parents that comprises written communication and the use of electronic communication platforms, in addition to the evaluation meeting in step 7. The primary goal of evaluation meetings is for parents to contribute actively in an open format. But, as we shall see, evaluation meetings are also quite structured, furnishing limited points of entry through which the parents can participate. Our analysis identifies the positions that the format prescribes for parents and professionals (Harré & van Langehove, 1999).

Evaluation meetings, which last approximately 30 minutes, are held either in the morning, immediately after parents drop off their children, or in the afternoon, right before parents pick up their children. The following analysis focuses specifically on one evaluation meeting that shares the same features as all the other meetings and thus illustrates key findings across our empirical data.

At the beginning of the meeting, the manager briefly outlines the general aim of the Danish ECEC Act and frames the Learning Group Program as one way of realizing the aim of the national ECEC curriculum. She emphasizes the importance of parents actively engaging in their children's learning environment, referring both to scientific studies and the content of the ECEC Act. She explains how children's learning environment must be understood across ECEC and home settings. Next, the staff member in charge of the learning group summarizes its activities and objectives, which

serves as a reminder of what parents were already told when the learning group started (step 3). This staff member then proceeds by asking each parent if they have seen any changes in their child's interests or capabilities, referring to the objectives and indicators in the SMTTE. Every parent is given the opportunity to respond individually, though with little room for discussion. Some time is left for brief questions, after which the meeting ends. This format structures and prescribes positions for both parents and staff that are asymmetrical from the outset and defined in relation to the learning agenda, thus constraining the form and content of their collaboration. The following excerpt illustrates one parent's resistance to the position as an educator with responsibilities for home learning activities. In this exchange, the professional emphasizes the importance of parents employing a professional approach to learning:

Day care professional: You parents need to become more involved in your children's learning. We will introduce learning artefacts you can take home and work with in relation to home learning, and we're supposed to guide you ... You know, as day care workers, we have to think carefully about what the purpose is of the different activities, and so do you as parents. In that way, you will be able to support your child's skill formation and plan activities that are suitable for developing your children's abilities.

Mother: Yes ... I understand why *you* would probably think so ... as a trained educator, but I really think it's very important to do something, just because me and [my child] are having a good time without having a specific purpose with what we're doing.

(Evaluation meeting observation notes)

This exchange is not typical for the other evaluation meetings included in our data. At most meetings, parents support and comply with the suggestions and advice the staff provide. The parents appear to accept the learning agenda as important. In this exchange, however, there is resistance from the mother, who insists that family life also involves activities and relationships that are an end in themselves. However, she resists the goal-orientated instrumentalization of family life caused by the learning agenda, which positions her as an educator. She insists that parents different tasks and responsibilities compared to the professionals. Her resistance reflects a shift in the cooperation between staff and parents, as framed by the recent ECEC reform. Historically, parents have not been given responsibility for developing learning environments designed to promote skill formation. Until the recent reform of the Danish ECEC Act, this responsibility has officially fallen upon ECEC staff.

Contrary to the example above, most parents embrace the learning agenda and are supportive and enthusiastic about the Learning Group Program. Data from the evaluation meetings shows that parents emphasize communicating on the intranet as a way of staying updated and informed about the activities their child participates in. Across the interviews, parents experience the learning group as a way for their child to be acknowledged and for their child to develop closer relationships with one specific staff member. The low ratio of children per staff in the learning group provides a rare opportunity for staff to share stories and details about individual children with the parents. In this regard, the evaluation meeting opens a window into the ECEC, which can otherwise be experienced as a black box, from a parental perspective. Parents seek insight and knowledge about their children's time in the ECEC center. Parents use this knowledge when they coordinate and take responsibility for organizing the shared care of their children. This is one important reason why most of the parents we interviewed express genuine appreciation for the learning group. As one mother says:

We assume that “no news is good news”, but we’re never really informed (...) but the evaluation meeting was sort of like a way for us to get an impression of [our child’s] daily life. Suddenly, we learned a lot of specific details and there was enough time [at the meeting] for [the professional] to tell stories and stuff. That was nice. Because ... otherwise we’re like, so what did they actually do during those eight hours, you know?!

The point is that parents rearticulate their interest in everyday life in the ECEC center within the framework of the learning group. Their interest in the well-being of their child can be pursued at a meeting where learning objectives and skill formation are the main focus. As a result, their interest must be expressed with reference to the themes and objectives of the learning group and align with the format of the evaluation meeting. Parents do not experience this as in opposition to their own interests but rather as aligned with them. During interviews, two parents mention that their daughter's participation in the learning group was a pivotal moment: “It’s like there’s a demarcation before and after the learning group”. They also emphasize how the learning group seems to enhance the professional identity of the staff, an aspect they previously felt was lacking:

Dad: “[It was] as if they had forgotten their professional identity.”

Mom: “Of course, they’re professionals, but show me!”

Dad: “They’re the experts.”

Mom: “That’s it! And they have to believe in it and – dammit – be proud of it and show us – who don’t know shit [laughs], who ... I’m not an educator; I don’t know anything about it.”

Dad: “No ... and it’s our first child [...] and, god dammit, every morning we wake up and it’s a new day; we’ve never done it before.”

Mom: “... and it’s also like, I mean, in the same way that [the daughter] attends the ECEC center, so do we – to some degree.”

The learning group became a way for these parents to gain insight into the ECEC and into their daughter’s daily life. This is not just a matter of knowing the details about their child’s activities, but parents need this insight for them to take care of their children in collaboration with the professionals. However, the parents are keenly aware of the balance they have to keep between not being too demanding or pushy in relation to the staff and at the same time asking the staff to contribute with information about their daughter and her day. But it is not solely parents who are aware of this balancing act. So are the professionals. Several of the staff members explain how they are afraid of overstepping boundaries when supporting and guiding parents. One staff member claims that she does “... not want to interfere in the private sphere and put pressure on the parents” in relation to establishing a home learning environment. She finds this part of the learning group format challenging, even difficult. She is particularly nervous about how the parents will react to her suggesting activities they can do at home. Even though both parties support the learning group format, neither the professionals nor the parents seem entirely comfortable in the fixed positions framed by the collaboration format. This will be explored further in the next section.

Learning focus and programs as a double-edged sword

During an interview, one professional, in response to an interview question about what the learning group means for her professional identity, explains:

It emphasizes the expectations toward everyone working in the center. So, we don’t just sit back and do nothing. (...) but I think it’s challenging. It brings my professional skills

into play. That you have to reflect, well, you don't just go to the playground or sit and play in the sandbox, you know, something has to have happened before that.

Her quote mirrors the parents' experiences of a heightened emphasis on the professionalism of the ECEC staff that becomes more apparent due to the Learning Group Program. From the perspective of the professional, this becomes a marker of professional identity, contributing to a sense of having shared aims and a common frame of reference among the staff. She goes on to reflect on how, when planning learning group activities, she has to include all elements of the new curriculum stipulated in the recent ECEC Act. In this way, the Learning Group Program mediates a connection between the ECEC Act and her work with the children: "... and I think it's cool that we're being pushed professionally all the time. Now you have to perform". The learning group format supports her belief in her abilities and creates a sense of pride. Other staff interviewees expound on how the learning group makes it possible to connect and establish a deeper, closer relationship with a small group of 3-5 children. They often contrast the focused, intense relationship in the learning group with the busy days at the centers, which are characterized by multiple, fragmented interactions with children (Juhl, 2017). The learning group then becomes a way for the ECEC professionals to be present with children and focused on their engagements, which is something the staff value and long for in the everyday life of contemporary ECEC.

However, the very same aspect of the learning group that the professionals seem to value also causes stress. Having to perform also means being evaluated and it is:

... a bit intimidating (...) when you're at the evaluation meeting ... It feels a bit like an exam, having to sit there and talk about what we've done during the learning group, and what my main objective was. And now I have to use a lot of professional terms, or what do the parents expect?

In the interview, we explore her experience of being in an exam situation. The professional said that having her manager present at the meeting provided some comfort and a sense of support but, at the same time, strengthened the feeling of being evaluated: "What does she [the manager] expect? What do the parents expect? Where am I in all of this". In this vein, the mandatory aspect of the learning group is emphasized. The ECEC professional explicitly distances herself from the activity by saying, "Well, I have to do it", explaining that she does not look forward to the next

evaluation meeting. The collaboration format of the learning group seems to challenge her, but at the same time she emphasizes how she looks forward to getting closer to other children during future learning groups. We observed feelings of ambiguity across the interviews with the professionals.

Drawing on our empirical participant observation data, we learn how the professionals returned from learning group activities and shared their immediate experiences with other colleagues. They usually mentioned unexpected or amusing instances during interactions. Strikingly, such everyday stories were rarely communicated to the parents or included at the evaluation meetings, even though the professionals initially seemed quite engaged in the situations. Consequently, we argue that the learning objectives and the aim defined in the SMTTE document filters which stories can be included in communication with parents within the framework of the learning group since narratives that do not correspond with the learning objectives and theme are not deemed relevant. The contribution of parents to the collaboration is thus framed by the learning agenda and the SMTTE terminology. This is most evident in the evaluation meetings, when parents are specifically asked about experiences that correspond to the indicators of learning progress in the SMTTE document. As a result, parents are positioned as respondents. This means that they do not share ownership of the agenda with the professionals which, in turn, positions the professionals as directors of the evaluation meeting. Since the SMTTE becomes the obligatory point of passage for relevant contributions in the collaboration between parents and ECEC professionals, and since the ECEC runs the learning group, the professional becomes solely responsible for making the collaboration work. Consequently, an important arena for collaboration is based on asymmetrical positions, which we argue constrains the democratic exchange of insights. Even though the constraints on the agency of the parents is obvious, it also poses an obstacle for the ECEC professionals as they are asked to manage the collaboration alone. In this regard, the learning group format becomes a double-edged sword: the professionals, on the one hand, are positioned as capable experts while, on the other, they feel that they must perform and are being examined.

Discussion

In the article, we analyzed the Learning Group Program as one way to implement the recent Danish ECEC Act. We analyze this program as an example of how Danish municipalities implement the legislative requirement to collaborate with parents about children's learning environments. Other municipalities use similar formats for collaboration on children's development, well-being and learning. These formats also require including an evaluation of the results. However, our analysis of the Learning Group Program illustrates that such formats may reduce the opportunities available for letting the compound nature of children's lives come into focus in the collaboration. Hence, the issues primarily discussed in the collaboration between parents and ECEC professionals relate to learning objectives and the learning environment. When learning objectives and children's learning environments are the focus of the collaboration, other aspects of the children's development and well-being seem to become unclear, or even invisible. An institutionalized focus on the learning agenda reduces the time and resources that can be allocated to other everyday care tasks in families and ECEC. Moreover, children's compound everyday lives move to the background of collaboration. Our analysis shows how the SMTTE document acts as a filter for what is viewed as relevant and irrelevant in the collaboration. The parents are invited into a dialogue, but the fundamental terminology of the SMTTE constitutes the framework for this dialogue. Parents are asked to answer certain questions that correspond with the learning objectives. This evaluation framework limits the content of topics discussed in the assessment meeting, which is problematic since parents and professionals have different experiences with children from different contexts. For this reason, it is necessary for both parties to share their various insights, if the complexity of children's compound everyday lives across ECEC and family life is to be included in the collaboration.

In other words, when the perspectives of parents are marginalized or subsumed by an institutionalized learning agenda, it becomes difficult for parents and ECEC professionals to develop a shared understanding of the child. This leaves the potential for collaboratively arriving at new insights about children's complex everyday lives unused, which is problematic since precisely this complexity constitutes children's developmental conditions (Haavind, 2011). This marginalization of parents' perspectives threatens the Danish traditions of extended collaboration in which a shared

understanding is an important prerequisite for successful shared care and establishing care chains (Andenæs, 2011; Højholt, 2001; Kousholt, 2011). With reference to Alatuusari (2011) such trends can be seen as a move away from democratic professionalism, which recognize multiple perspectives and heterogenous views of the child. Instead a hierarchy of knowledge, where the professionals are at the top, emerges as the framework for collaboration. But, as Alatuusari has shown, such a framework does not enable fruitful collaboration about children between parents and professionals. In order for collaboration to happen in everyday life there is also the need for a horizontal framework, where parents are recognised as experts in matters concerning their own children, and parental knowledge and input is considered important to the education and care provided at the day care centre (2011: 155).

We argue that the mandatory focus on learning, introduced with the latest Danish ECEC reform, may disrupt the care chain. There is the risk not only of missing out on information through the sharing of perspectives but also that the very mode of collaboration creates distance between parents and professionals, instrumentalizing their relationship. Since the collaboration is embedded in an evaluation framework, the two parties are invited to monitor and validate each other's performances rather than collaborate on the child's well-being across contexts.

Our analysis also shows that parents are generally enthusiastic and supportive of the Learning Group Program. However, their support and excitement are articulated from positions as not-knowers (like the parents who say: "show us – we don't know shit"). The evaluation format positions parents as evaluators who must respond to predefined questions that correspond with the SMTTE learning objectives. By virtue of this, parents are never able to establish ownership of the learning agenda as their perspectives are filtered by the SMTTE document in the Learning Group Program, or rather: parents must enter into the collaboration on terms the ECEC center sets. Even though parents are primarily asked to act as evaluators, their positions as validators of the professionals' work seems to circumvent the power in the professionals' expert positions. This constitutes a paradox. The learning group activities with the children in the ECEC center allows the professionals to work with varied aspects of child development. In this way, the learning group creates a base for professional autonomy and also includes support and resources for professional development. Nonetheless, the professionals also experience a loss of autonomy and isolation in the collaboration with

parents. This is partly due to the fixed communication format and evaluation structure but also to the absence of shared responsibility with the parents. The structure contributes to instrumentalizing the relationship between parents and professionals, which may erode the possibility for professional autonomy.

Conclusion

Most participants in our study agreed that the Learning Group Program improves almost every aspect of everyday life in the ECEC center. In our analysis, however, we also identified a dilemma related to the focus on children's learning as the pivotal point of collaboration. We have shown how parents appear to accept the focus on learning as relevant and that they support the learning agenda of the ECEC center. The parents' motivation seems, nonetheless, to be grounded in the fact that they lack and seek information about their own child's daily life. They aim to establish relationships with capable adults who know their child and who can contribute with insights about their child's well-being. The learning group format makes this type of relationship possible. But at the same time, it means that parents and professionals must adopt the learning agenda for their contributions to become relevant. In other words, the learning agenda constitutes an obligatory point of passage for parents and professionals to enter into the collaboration. In some ways, however, it also turns parents into a means to an end in local ECEC practices. In a broader perspective, the risk is that family life becomes instrumentalized when the contribution of parents to children's learning is restrained by the objectives of a learning agenda. On the one hand, the learning agenda installs parents as educators and critical actors in their child's educational performance. On the other, it threatens to treat parent-child relationships as merely a contribution to a learning agenda, marginalizing other dimensions of parenthood. Through this analysis, we can begin to understand how the Danish ECEC Act's mandatory focus on children's learning environment constrains collaboration between parents and professionals in terms of the complexity of children's compound everyday lives across various contexts.

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