

IRFD Project Description · DFF-projekt beskrivelse

(Re)configuration of parenthood

Pernille Juhl

Conditions for parenthood are currently changing due to Danish welfare policies¹ designating the home as a key arena for learning. These policies stipulate that families and early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions must collaborate on children's learning at home, consequently introducing an institutionalised learning agenda into family life. This agenda reflects a transnational policy trend that identifies the home learning environment (HLE) as a crucial factor in fighting inequality (e.g. OECD, 2017; See & Gorard, 2015). These policy shifts focusing on HLE, and the changing conditions for parenthood they entail, constitute a timely opportunity for studying contemporary parenthood and parental self-understanding.

HLE interventions are not neutral when introduced in family life. Rather, I argue, they (re)configure parenthood. This change is particularly relevant to study in Denmark, where parents historically have engaged in extensive collaboration with various professionals and institutions, making family life a complex nexus of political, institutional and personal interests (Sparmann et al. 2016). When ECEC professionals are assigned the task of supporting HLE, parents are asked to take on educational responsibilities they have not held in the past. Accordingly, the responsibility for children's learning is changing the conditions for parenthood and creating new understandings of parental responsibility. This policy shift calls for renewed insights and updated concepts in the field of parenthood studies that take into account the complexity of parenthood. I aim to answer this call by contributing with theoretical development based on context-sensitive studies exploring the changing relationships between the political, institutional and personal aspects of contemporary parenthood.

Supporting children's early learning at home is one recent example of welfare policies and interventions aimed at reducing inequality (Coba-Rodriguez, Cambray-Engstrom & Jarrett, 2020; See & Gorard, 2015). However, interventions often result in consequences beyond their intended aim and, in some cases, even amplify inequality (Juhl 2016; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). Research focusing on the content of home learning programmes conceptualises family actors as variables and understands family interaction as causal relationships (Melhuish et al., 2001, 2008). Approaches of this nature tend to reduce the complexity of family life. However, since this complexity is precisely what constitutes the context and the conditions for HLE interventions, I argue that the existing research is blind to the situated meanings that the interventions have in the everyday lives of children and their

¹ <https://www.retsinformation.dk/pdfPrint.aspx?id=201526>

parents. Despite considerable research focus on developing the *content* of HLE programmes, little attention is given to what it means for the *family context*. As a result, more detailed knowledge is needed about what the learning agenda currently being introduced in Denmark means for parents in diverse life situations. This is exactly what I propose to do. I will manage a research project that examines the following questions through empirical investigation: *How do learning agendas constitute current conditions for parenthood? And how are these agendas taken up, transformed and negotiated in family life?* The project will address these research questions through an interdisciplinary, mixed method approach.

State of the art Policy studies show that parents are being made responsible for their children's academic success (Menken & Solorza, 2014; Schneider, 2010). Children's academic performance has been linked to parental resources such as social networks and socioeconomic status (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000). Studies assert that parental learning activities with their children during the early years increase the chances of improving their children's later socioeconomic status (Bleses, Jensen, Højen & Dale, 2018; Bradley, 2002; Heckman, 2006; Kelly et al., 2011; Melhuish et al., 2008; Thomsen et al., 2019). Related studies maintain that parental learning activities have a positive effect on children's cognitive development (Love et al., 2005; Lugo-Gill & Tamis-LeMonda, 2008). Nevertheless, the long-lasting effects of many HLE interventions have yet to be documented (Koyama & Menken, 2013; Sullivan et al., 2005). I propose that one key factor limiting the ability to understand the long-term impact of the interventions is that quasi-experimental designs measure the relationship between HLE programmes as an isolated cause and effect (Melhuish et al. 2001, 2008). I maintain that this type of research design silences the subjective orientations of parents and children and ignores the diversity and heterogeneity of family life (Vogler, Crivello & Woodhead, 2008). My project responds to these shortcomings by developing novel theoretical contributions that are also relevant for developing professional practices involving families. Scholars contend that since Danish children live their lives across family and ECEC contexts from an early age, they are treated as active subjects with rights of their own (Dencik et al., 2008). This promotes ideals of equality, which become central features of family life. Such ideals have implications for the relationship between parents and children as they become an interpretative framework for parental self-understanding (Dahl, 2018). The question is how the learning agenda with an HLE focus currently being introduced interweaves with such democratic ideals as the conditions for collaboration between ECEC and families are presently changing (Dannesboe et al., 2018; Schmidt, 2020). In Denmark and the other Nordic welfare states ECEC professionals aim to involve parents in an equal educational partnership (Alatussari & Alatussari, 2012). Studies focusing on care emphasise how parental perspectives and knowledge are considered an essential resource in chains of care (Andenæs, 2011). However, recent

studies indicate that when parents are assigned with learning tasks the partnership between ECEC and families becomes less equal and parents may be treated as instruments in an institutional learning agenda (Dannesboe et al., 2018; Schmidt, 2020; Westerling & Juhl, 2019). Programmes and learning artefacts promoting such an agenda also always mediate certain ideals of parenthood and family life (Aabroe, Larsen & Pedersen, 2017; Sparrman et al., 2016; Juhl, 2016). Studies show that learning artefacts are appropriated in the everyday lives of people in multiple and unpredictable ways (Bille & Sørensen, 2012), and hence co-constitute family practices (Schadler, 2016; Mason, 2018; Miller, 2008). Until now studies addressing HLE interventions have mainly focused on how to optimise parental support of ECEC agendas and tasks related to learning outcomes (Lin et al., 2019; Oke, Butler & O'Neill, 2020; Plowman, Stephen & McPake, 2010). Studying how learning agendas become part of family life is particularly relevant since parental self-understanding develops through the organisation of everyday family life across contexts in collaboration with other actors (Højholt, Juhl & Kousholt, 2018). Thus there is a need to develop theoretical concepts capable of accounting for the situated contexts of family life through which meanings are co-produced, i.e. concepts that identify parents and children as active subjects co-producing their everyday life conditions and that examine how parenthood develops when political learning agendas intervene in family life.

Theoretical approach My research takes sociocultural and cultural-historical scholarly traditions into account (Chaiklin, Hedegaard & Juul Jensen, 2003; Holland & Lave, 2001; Rogoff, 2003) and emphasises the connection between societal conditions for everyday family life and the various subjective meanings that these conditions have for parents in different life situations, across heterogenous forms of family. Within these theoretical traditions I draw on research approaching parenthood as a practice (McCarthy, 2012; Miller, 2017; Morgan, 2011). This approach permits exploration of the active and everyday nature of family life and understands these social practices as connected to other practices, allowing analysis of the shared care arrangements between parents and ECEC professionals. Using the concept of conduct of everyday life (Holzkamp, 2013) enables in-depth analysis of the subjective dimensions of parenthood as social practice. The concept brings to the fore the exploratory, active and creative processes of daily parental efforts to care for their children in collaboration with others. Hence, the concept of conduct of everyday life permits exploration of how parents develop self-understanding as part of the interactive processes of shared care arrangements (Andenæs, 2011; Højholt, Kousholt & Juhl, 2018; Westerling, 2015). I will draw on my recent theoretical work within the field of psychology on the subjective orientation of persons as related to their conduct of everyday life (e.g. Juhl, 2019), as well as my development of analytical concepts in the field of family studies (e.g. Juhl, 2015; 2016). This includes theorising the relationship between the self-understandings of parents and conditions for parenthood through

empirical exploration of the structural conditions for family life and the various subjective meanings for parents with different socioeconomic resources (e.g. education and family networks). This theoretical contribution will enable a better understanding of how being a parent involves contradictory and changing tasks that are undertaken in cooperation with professionals and children, and through which cultural ideals of parenthood are negotiated. Studying the complex nexus of parenthood in the Danish welfare state includes the study of *policy documents*, *the interfaces between families and ECEC institutions*, and the *subjective orientation* of parents.

Design I propose a mixed method design that permits a sociocultural analysis that takes the historic conditions of family life and parental orientation into account. The design comprises four work packages (WP) that will enable exploration of family life across diverse settings and conditions. **WP1** will explore how parental responsibilities have changed in the past two decades based on a *policy study* of ECEC legislation and family policy. Both **WP2** and **WP3** will investigate the *interface* between ECEC institutions and families. **WP2** will employ participant observation and ethnographic interviews in the study of the *collaboration* between ECEC professionals and parents. The key concern is how understandings of parental tasks and responsibilities become topics in daily encounters. By employing participant observation **WP3** will study *everyday transitions* between ECEC institutions and families, with a focus on the children's perspectives. This brings the subject of the collaboration, namely children, into focus. A key concern is how children participate in this collaboration as active agents and thus how children relate to the institutional learning agendas as part of their everyday living. **WP4** will explore how institutional learning agendas interweave with parental priorities and orientation in family life. Parental organisation of family life will be studied using participant observations, while life form interviews will be employed to investigate how parents understand their role in their children's learning and how this task is interwoven with other priorities and parental tasks. The key concern is how parents develop *parental self-understanding* related to their conduct of everyday life in the context of shared care arrangements. Survey methodology will be used to further explore how parents in diverse living conditions involve social networks in their organisation of daily living. Key concerns are who is involved in which activities and to what extent this varies across families with varying socioeconomic resources.

Data The policy study will examine legal documents, such as national ECEC laws and legal notices, curriculum reforms and local municipal guidelines for ECEC centres. The empirical data will be generated in three municipalities, each on the cutting edge of introducing programmes to support HLE. Municipalities will be recruited across the country to ensure geographic diversity, and various centres will be involved to help achieve socioeconomic diversity in the sample of families. Six ECEC

centres will be involved (two from each municipality), and the families will be contacted through the centres. The qualitative aspects of the study will include 24 families. Some families (n=6) will be involved in the participatory observations of family life as well as the daily encounters between parents and ECEC professionals. The children from these families (n=6) will be observed using participatory methods. Parents from all 24 families will be involved in life form interviews. The respondents for the survey (n=600) will be recruited from the participating ECEC centres.

Methodology and synergy

The mixed method design combines document analysis (Levinson & Sutton, 2001), ethnographic, participatory methodologies (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Hastrup, 2002; Spradley, 1979), life form interviews (Haavind, 2019) and survey questionnaires (Westerling, 2018; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2010). Including data produced across these various methodologies, the analysis will explore how political and institutional conditions become interwoven in the subjective orientation of parents in everyday life. The policy analysis will employ a sociocultural approach informed by analytical concepts such as policy transformation, negotiation and domestication (Alasuutari & Alasuutari, 2012; Levinson & Sutton, 2001). Studying policy documents will provide insights about the changes in the political definitions of parental responsibilities and tasks that ECEC and families have collaborated on historically and how this is currently changing. The findings from the policy study will serve as initial cues in the participant observations of parents and children, and in the life form interviews. While exploring the interface between ECEC institutions and families, the analysis will focus on how political ideals and sociocultural understandings of parenthood are mediated and negotiated through collaboration between parents and professionals. In the exploration of parental self-understanding, I will examine if and how the politically defined responsibility for home learning is reflected in the way parents organise their everyday life. Since children's lives are organised across various institutional contexts that need to be connected through parental collaboration, studying the children's perspective on the daily living will enable me to uncover how children relate to learning agendas across ECEC and family contexts. I will use the preliminary ethnographic findings as the basis for developing a survey questionnaire to study how parents are able to involve social networks. I am inspired by Bryman's (2019) notion of embedded design, which integrates qualitative and quantitative data in a shared research focus. Using the project's preliminary qualitative findings I will identify relevant topics, which will serve to qualify the development of survey questions and comprehensive response categories. The analysis of the survey data will allow me to identify relationships and correlations based on a systematic analysis of parental home learning practices, to pinpoint various patterns of social network involvement and, consequently, an assortment of

configurations of parenthood. In this way, the survey will enable an elaboration of the qualitative findings (Westerling, 2018).

Research team and management The project will run from August 2022 to June 2026. As PI, I will lead an interdisciplinary research team that includes one postdoc, two PhD students, a co-investigator and an international research board. The project is anchored in excellent national and international research environments. I will ensure progression of the project and the integration of the research team by facilitating several research seminars and by hosting monthly meetings with all members of the research team. I will utilise my expertise on long-term ethnographic research involving areas that are not easily accessible, such as the everyday lives of marginalised children and parents, to ensure an ethically responsible and sustainable approach. I will utilise these previous experiences to facilitate the project aim of developing theory in close relation to detailed empirical exploration. I will promote synergy in the project by 1) being actively involved in all four WPs, 2) facilitating data sharing across all the WPs, 3) facilitating joint analysis and theory development at meetings and seminars and by 4) editing a jointly authored book. I will ensure the integration of PhD students by involving them in all seminars and meetings while still allowing them to keep a well-defined focus on both PhD projects (WP2 and WP3). Moreover, the PhD students will each publish one of their dissertation papers in the project's jointly authored book. Westerling, co-investigator for WP4, has expertise in embedded mixed method designs and will be responsible for this particular part of WP4. The postdoc (NN in WP1), recruited in an open call, will be an expert in transnational and national policy analysis. The PhD students (WP2 and WP3) will also be recruited through open calls. The quality of the project will be ensured by the establishment of a research board that includes leading national and international experts: Lene Schmidt (University College, Absalon, Denmark), Karen Ida Dannesboe (Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, Denmark), Charlotte Faircloth (University College London, England), Anna Sparrman (Linköping University, Sweden), Agnes Andenæs (Oslo University, Norway) and Claudia Zerle-Elsaßer (Deutsche Jugend Institut, Germany). The international outreach will be ensured by 1) doing research stays in England, Germany and Norway for the PI and PhD students, 2) co-authoring conference papers and journal articles together with research board members, 3) organising several seminars with the research board and by 4) organising conference symposia together with the research board. Each member of the board will contribute specifically to the project's international excellence and relevance. Schmidt has extensive expertise in national and international ECEC policy practice analysis, while Dannesboe is an expert in parental collaboration. Andenæs will contribute with conceptualisations of shared care tasks in a Scandinavian well-fare state context; Sparrman by drawing on her work on artefacts and childhood; Faircloth will

provide an international perspective on parenting culture and Zerle-Elsäßer with her expertise on mixed method studies on family practices.

Outcome WP1: Peer-reviewed paper, authored by postdoc (NN) (*International Journal of Early Years Education*), on the changing (re)configurations of shared responsibilities between ECEC centres and families that analyses the shifting ideals of parenthood. A book chapter, authored by postdoc and PI, about how the focus on HLE is reflected in current national ECEC policies. **WP2:** PhD dissertation (including one book chapter) about parental perspectives on the collaboration between parents and ECEC professionals. **WP3:** PhD dissertation (including one book chapter) exploring children’s perspectives on the everyday transitions between ECEC and home contexts – including their perspectives on learning activities. **WP4:** Journal article co-authored by PI and Andenæs (*Nordic Psychology*) about changes in tasks in shared care arrangement. Peer-reviewed paper, co-authored by PI and Westerling (*Journal of Family Studies*), about how parental self-understanding develops in relation to historic, cultural and political conditions in everyday family life. Two book chapters, one, authored by PI, about what HLE interventions mean for parental priorities in everyday family life practices and the other, authored by Westerling, about how parents in various life situations involve family networks in care and learning tasks. I will present preliminary findings at international conferences and organise a symposium at the *International Society for Theoretical Psychology* (2024) and a symposium at the *European Society of Family Relations* (2025).

